**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYIGASH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Today we will continue our discussion of the famous theory proposed by the *Beit Yosef* (O.C. 670) regarding the kindling of the *menorah* with the lone jug of pure oil discovered after the *Chashmonaim*’s triumph over the Greeks. This theory suggests that the *Chashmonaim* filled the oil lamps of the *menorah* each night with just one-eighth the normal amount, realizing that it would take eight days to receive a fresh supply of oil. Miraculously, each of these portions sustained the candles throughout the night. Later writers noted that this would appear to violate the fundamental rule of “*ein somekhin al ha-neis*,” that we are not to anticipate miracles. The *Chashmonaim* should have, seemingly, used the entire supply of oil the first night to properly fulfill the *mitzva*, rather than use an amount of oil that would suffice for the *mitzva* only through a miracle.

Rav Asher Weiss, in his [lengthy treatment of this subject](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%91-%D7%91%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%91%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A3-%D7%A2%D7%9C-%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%9E/), suggests that according to the *Beit Yosef*, there is not actually a minimum quantity of oil that is required to fulfill the obligation to kindle the *menorah*. The Torah commands lighting the *menorah* “from evening till morning” (Shemot 27:21), establishing that the *menorah* is to burn through the night. The requirement introduced here is a duration of time, not a quantity of oil. Quite possibly, Rav Weiss suggests, although the Torah’s command is to have the lights of the *menorah* burn from evening until morning, a *mitzva* is fulfilled each moment the candles burn. Nighttime is the period when the *mitzva* is to be fulfilled, and the *mitzva* is fulfilled at every moment during this period. If so, Rav Weiss explains, then the *Chashmonaim* faced the decision of whether to fulfill the *mitzva* for part of the night for eight nights, or throughout the night the first night, and then not at all the seven subsequent nights. Rav Weiss reasoned that from a strictly halakhically standpoint, there does not appear to be any compelling reason to choose one option over the other. The *Chashmonaim* made the choice (according to the theory proposed by the *Beit Yosef*) to have the *menorah* burn for one-eighth a night each night, which was one of the two acceptable options which they had. In the end, of course, God intervened to miraculously ensure that the *mitzva* was fully observed all eight nights.

Rav Weiss suggests drawing proof to his contention from the Gemara’s ruling in Masekhet Zevachim (88a) concerning hallowed items used in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Certain items (such as *mincha* offerings) become formally consecrated for ritual use only once they are placed in the appropriate *keli shareit* – the special utensil in which they are to be contained before being offered. These items need to be placed in the utensil to be consecrated before they are used for their ritual purpose. One of the conditions for this process to be effective, the Gemara states, is that the utensil must be totally filled (“*melei’in*”). Rashi explains this to mean that the complete required amount of the item in question must be placed together in the *keli shareit*. However, according to the *Beit Yosef*, the oil used for the kindling of the *menorah* at the time of the Chanukah miracle was divided into eight portions – each of which was much smaller than the minimum required amount. One might wonder, then, how this oil became consecrated for use in the *menorah*, if it was not placed in a complete quantity in a *keli shareit*. Evidently, Rav Weiss explains, there is no actual minimum amount of oil required to fulfill the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah*. The requirement is for the *menorah* to burn from evening until morning, not to light the *menorah* with an amount of oil that can sustain the candles from evening until morning. As such, there was no requirement to consecrate the full amount of oil in a *keli shareit*. This perhaps proves the point that the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah* relates to time, not to a quantity of oil, and on this basis, we might explain the *Beit Yosef*’s theory that the *Chashmonaim* from the outset divided the oil into eight small portions.

Sunday

One of the theories proposed by the *Tosafot Ha-Rosh* (Shabbat 21b) in explaining the Chanukah miracle is that one-eighth of the oil was consumed each of the eight nights when the miracle unfolded. According to this theory, the *Chashmonaim* used the entire jug of pure oil which they discovered, anticipating that it would suffice for just one night, but miraculously, they found the next morning that 7/8ths of the oil remained in each lamp, and this miracle occurred each night for the next seven nights. (On this basis, the *Tosafot Ha-Rosh* explained that a miracle occurred even on the first night, and not just on the seven subsequent nights.)

The *Penei Yehoshua*, in his commentary to Masekhet Shabbat (21b), dismisses this possibility, noting the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Menachot (88b) that leftover oil in the *menorah* could not be used and needed to be discarded. The Gemara writes that if, for whatever reason, one of the candles of the *menorah* was extinguished before all its oil was burned, the oil could not be reused, and it was thus discarded and replaced with new oil. This *halakha* is cited by the Rambam, in *Hilkhot Temidin U-musafin* (3:12). Seemingly, then, if just one-eighth of the oil poured into the lamps by the *Chashmonaim* had been consumed the first night, the remaining oil would have had to be thrown away, such that they would have been left without any more oil for the subsequent nights. It thus seems difficult to understand the theory that the *Chashmonaim* poured all the oil into the lamps of the *menorah* on the first night, as any oil left over the next day would not have been suitable for use on the next nights.

In defense of the *Tosafot Ha-Rosh*’s theory,[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%91-%D7%91%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%91%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A3-%D7%A2%D7%9C-%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%9E/) suggested that the case of the *Chashmonaim* differs from a standard case of leftover oil, in that in the case of the *Chashmonaim*, the oil was left over miraculously. Very simply, Rav Weiss explained, if God made a miracle that precisely one-eighth the normal amount of oil was consumed overnight, this should be taken as a clear indication that the remaining oil should be used on subsequent nights. Moreover, Rav Weiss added, the miraculous nature of the remaining oil meant that it was not truly “left over,” as it was quite clearly never supposed to be consumed the previous night. The fact that a miracle preserved that oil reflected its status as oil intended for the next nights, and not for the night that just passed.

Rav Weiss further noted that the *Beit Yosef* (O.C. 670), in his famous discussion of the Chanukah miracle, presents this theory with a slight variation, claiming that all the oil remained intact until the final night. According to the *Beit Yosef*’s version of this theory, the candles miraculously burned the first seven nights without any oil at all, and the oil was all consumed only in the final night. Rav Weiss asserted that according to this version, the oil certainly should not be considered “left over,” as none of it was consumed at all, and thus it did not have to be discarded.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayigash tells the dramatic story of Yosef’s revealing his identity to his brothers, who did not recognize the Egyptian vizier as their brother whom they had sold as a slave over twenty years earlier. After Yosef revealed to them who he was, and instructed them to bring Yaakov and their families to Egypt, he and Binyamin – his only full brother – fell on each other’s shoulders and wept (45:14). The Radak attributes their weeping to the special affection they felt to each other by virtue of their being the only two sons of Yaakov and Rachel. We can easily imagine the overflowing emotions of both joy and pain Yosef and Binyamin must have felt at that moment, both celebrating their reunion and bemoaning the tragic set of circumstances that resulted in twenty-two years of separation.

However, the Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (16b), cited by Rashi, famously views the brothers’ weeping as elicited by their knowledge of future tragedies. Yosef, the Gemara explains, wept upon prophetically seeing the destruction of the two *Batei Mikdash*, which would be built in Binyamin’s territory. And Binyamin wept upon foreseeing the fall of the *Mishkan* that would in the future stand in Shilo, a town in the territory allotted to Yosef’s descendants. Numerous commentators explained the Gemara’s comment as expressing the notion that the Egyptian exile – which was now unfolding, with Yaakov’s family moving to Egypt to join Yosef – as the archetype of future Jewish exiles. Specifically, just as the Egyptian exile unfolded as a result of fraternal strife – the hostility between Yosef and his brothers – so would future exiles occur due to our nation’s inability to remain united and lovingly care for one another. *Chazal* thus noted the subtle tragedy within Yosef and Binyamin’s affectionate embrace – that these feelings of brotherly love among *Am Yisrael* would be temporary, and our nation’s history would be littered with instances of bitter strife and hostility.

Rav Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger, the *Imrei Emet*, is cited as offering an additional insight into the Gemara’s remark. The *Imrei Emet* found it significant that the Gemara depicts Yosef and Binyamin as each weeping specifically for the calamities that would occur in the other’s territory. Rather than bemoan their own tragedies, they each mourned the tragedy that would befall the other. The *Imrei Emet* suggested that the Gemara here subtly conveys the message that we must approach our own difficulties and hardships differently than we approach those of others. We are naturally drawn to bemoan our own troubles far more than we bemoan other people’s troubles, but the Gemara here teaches us to strive to do just the opposite. The *Imrei Emet* taught that when it comes to our own hardships, we must endeavor to overcome them with strength and resilience. Rather than wallow in self-pity, we should work towards recovering and moving forward. We should reserve the bulk of our “weeping,” our pain and compassion, for the hardships of other people, and do all we can to offer assistance and solace, whereas our own difficulties should be confronted with as much strength and fortitude that we can muster.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s famous comment in Masekhet Megilla (16b) regarding Yosef and Binyamin’s emotional embrace and weeping after Yosef revealed to his brothers who he was (Bereishit 45:14). The Gemara ascribes historical significance to the brothers’ weeping, stating that Yosef wept over the future destruction of the two *Batei Mikdash* in the territory of the tribe of Binyamin, and Binyamin wept over the future destruction of the *Mishkan* in Shilo, a town in the territory of Yosef’s descendants.

A number of commentators addressed the question of where *Chazal* found an allusion in the text to the Temples and the *Mishkan*. The simplest explanation, perhaps (as noted by Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*), is that the Torah describes Yosef and Binyamin falling on each other’s necks, and the Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 4:4) interprets the word “*tzavareikh*” (“your neck”) in Shir Hashirim (“Your neck is like the Tower of David” – 4:4) as referring to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Midrash offers several reasons for this analogy, including the fact that the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was *Am Yisrael*’s source of pride, such that when it stood, “Israel’s neck was [proudly] outstretched among the nations of the world.” Additionally, the Midrash comments, just as women hang beautiful jewelry from their necks, similarly, the spiritual “jewels” of *Am Yisrael* – the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* – served in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. In any event, it is likely that the Gemara, in commenting on the account of Yosef and Binyamin weeping on each other’s necks, had in mind this association between the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and the neck.

A different approach is taken by Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro of Piacezna, in his *Eish Kodesh*. He suggests that *Chazal* viewed the “neck” as an allusion to the yoke and burden of religious obligation that rests upon our shoulders (as in the Talmudic expression, “*reichayim al tzavaro*” – “the mill on his neck”). The Gemara saw in Yosef and Binyamin’s weeping on each other’s necks an allusion to the mourning for the broken yoke of Torah obligation that results from exile and oppression. Speaking to his followers in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust, the Rebbe of Piacezna observed that oppression and hardship hinder people from observing the Torah not only in the practical sense, by actually preventing them from performing *mitzvot*, but also by breaking their spirits and sowing despair, making fervent religious commitment nearly impossible to maintain. This, the Rebbe of Piacezna suggested, is the meaning of the association drawn by *Chazal* between the neck and the destruction of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. They noted the tragic spiritual consequences of exile, how it prevents its victims from achieving spiritual fulfillment, breaking the “yoke” of Torah obligation from their “necks.”

The Rebbe of Piacezna applies this concept to explain the Midrash’s famous comment cited by Rashi (46:29) regarding the description of Yaakov’s arrival in Egypt. The Torah tells that when Yaakov and Yosef saw each other for the first time in twenty-two years, Yosef fell on his father’s neck and wept, but there is no mention of Yaakov weeping. Rashi, citing the Midrash, remarks that Yaakov was not weeping – but was instead reciting the *Shema*. The *Eish Kodesh* explained this to mean that the response to the tragedy of the broken “yoke” is the simple faith expressed by the proclamation of “*Shema Yisrael*.” As Yosef wept upon foreseeing the forced removal of the yoke of Torah from his descendants’ shoulders, Yaakov declared, “*Shema Yisrael*,” indicating that even the simple declaration of faith during times of distress is a precious and priceless *mitzva*. Even if, Heaven forbid, we find ourselves unable to perform any *mitzvot*, our “yoke” is not entirely removed. Under all circumstances, we are able, at very least, to affirm our unwavering faith – and this itself is an inestimably valuable act of devotion to the Almighty.

This insight of the *Eish Kodesh* reminds us that all that is ever expected of us is the best we can do under the circumstances. Even an act as simple as proclaiming “*Shema Yisrael*” is deemed precious, particularly during trying times. At no point should we ever feel that our “yoke” is completely broken, that we are entirely incapable of serving God, because our responsibility in any situation is to do the most the situation allows us to. Rather than “weep” and despair over what appears to be our severed connection to God, we must realize that the “harness” that binds us to the Almighty is never completely broken, that there are always *mitzvot* to perform and ways to connect to our Creator, even if circumstances prevent us from reaching the ideal standard to which we should aspire.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayigash tells that Yosef brought his father, Yaakov, to meet Pharaoh after he arrived to live in Egypt to escape the harsh famine conditions in Canaan. When Yaakov came before Pharaoh, the king inquired about his age, and Yaakov replied that he was 130, adding, “The days of the years of my life have been few and bad, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers” (47:9).

A famous comment in the Midrash, cited by the Tosafists in *Da’at Zekeinim*, criticizes Yaakov for lamenting his difficult life. The Midrash relates that God said to Yaakov, “I rescued you from Esav and from Lavan, and I returned Dina to you – and you complain about your life?!” Yaakov was severely punished for this complaint, the Midrash concludes, by living thirty-three years less than his father, Yitzchak.

Before citing this Midrashic passage, *Da’at Zekeinim* offers a different interpretation of this brief exchange between Yaakov and Pharaoh, explaining that Pharaoh asked about Yaakov’s age because he looked exceedingly old. Yaakov therefore informed the king that he was actually not very old (by the standards of that time), but he looked older than his age because of the very difficult life which he had lived. According to this explanation, it seems, Yaakov’s response was perfectly acceptable, as he was simply replying to Pharaoh’s observation about his appearance. It appears that the first approach offered by *Da’at Zekeinim* understood Yaakov’s response as an accurate answer to Pharaoh’s question, whereas the second understood that Yaakov was unnecessarily complaining about his difficult life, instead of simply answering Pharaoh’s question about his age.

However, Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Mesilot Chayim*, suggests that these two approaches presented by *Da’at Zekeinim* should perhaps be read in conjunction with one another. The criticism of Yaakov expressed by the Midrash, Rav Elazary writes, is applicable even if Yaakov legitimately found it necessary to explain to Pharaoh why he looked so frail and worn. When we tell of the hardships and troubles we’ve endured, it is inappropriate to speak only of our hardships and troubles, without noting as well our blessings and good fortune. Yaakov was perhaps at fault not for mentioning to Pharaoh that he’d suffered hardship, but rather for mentioning only that he’d suffered hardship, without mentioning as well that, for example, God saved him from his brother who plotted to kill him, helped him outmaneuver Lavan, and returned Dina to him after her abduction. It is acceptable to feel pained by, and even to bemoan, our challenges and travails, but only if we also make a point of acknowledging and celebrating our many blessings.

This is true not only on a personal, individual level, but also on a national level. The Torah’s command to forever remember Amalek’s cruel, vicious attack on our ancestors (Devarim 25:17-19) is immediately followed by the command of *bikkurim* – bringing one’s first fruits to Jerusalem and expressing gratitude to God for the great blessing of *Eretz Yisrael*. Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, explains this juxtaposition as instructing that we must not limit our historical awareness to the memory of our past suffering and calamity. Our collective somber reflection on the many painful periods in our history must be counterbalanced by our collective celebration of all the good that God has bestowed upon our nation. Like Yaakov standing before Pharaoh, it is perfectly legitimate to bemoan the tragic persecution that we have endured – but only if we also express joy and appreciation for the countless blessings and privileges that God has granted *Am Yisrael* over the centuries.

Thursday

Parashat Vayigash begins with Yehuda’s impassioned plea to Yosef, begging that he allow Binyamin to return to his father in Canaan despite the fact that Yosef’s silver goblet was found in Binyamin’s bag as he and his brothers left Egypt. Yehuda had made a solemn promise to Yaakov to personally guarantee Binyamin’s return from Egypt (43:9), and so now that Binyamin was framed as a thief, and Yosef declared that Binyamin must remain in Egypt as his slave, Yehuda begged Yosef to allow him – Yehuda – to remain in Binyamin’s place.

The Torah introduces Yehuda’s plea with the words “*Va-yigash eilav Yehuda*” – “Yehuda approached him.” The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 93:6), discussing this verse, notes other contexts in which the word “*va-yigash*” is used. Rabbi Yehuda is cited as referencing the verse in Sefer Shemuel II (10:13), “*Va-yigash Yoav…la-milchama*” – describing the general Yoav’s daring and courageous attack on Aram, the nation that had launched an offensive against *Benei Yisrael* as it waged war against Amon. This verse thus implies that the term “*va-yigash*” is used in the context of warfare. Rabbi Nechemya responded that the word “*va-yigash*” is also used in the opposite context – in reference to “*piyus*,” to reconciliation and peacemaking. The prooftext comes from Sefer Yehoshua (14:6), which tells of the men of Yehuda “approaching” (“*Va-yigeshu benei Yehuda*”) Yehoshua to respectfully ask that he fulfill Moshe’s promise that the area of Chevron would be allocated to Kalev, a member of their tribe. The people of Yehuda set out to obtain the land they wanted not through force or intimidation, but rather through a respectful submission of a request to the nation’s leader.

At first glance, it appears that Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemya debate the implication of the word “*va-yigash*” in introducing Yehuda’s plea to Yosef. Rabbi Yehuda, seemingly, believed that Yehuda “approached” Yosef in a confrontational sense, poised to use force to achieve his goal, whereas Rabbi Nechemya understood that “*va-yigash*” here indicates a peaceful, subdued and respectful demeanor.

Upon further reflection, however, it seems very difficult to view Yehuda’s “approach” as anything but peaceful and conciliatory. He explained to Yosef Yaakov’s special love and affection for Binyamin, and that Yaakov would likely die if the brothers returned without Binyamin. And, both in the beginning and at the conclusion of his plea, Yehuda used the word “*na*” (“please”), an expression used when begging, not when threatening.

We might therefore suggest that in truth, both *Tanna’im* agree that Yehuda approached Yosef to plea, not to initiate any sort of aggressive confrontation. However, the Midrash perhaps seeks to instruct that “*piyus*” requires the same investment of energy and passion as warfare. We readily understand that wars are won through vigor and intensity, by focusing intently on the objective and mustering all of one’s physical and emotional energy on subduing the enemy. In order to withstand the rigors and hardships of the battlefield, one must “approach” the battle with unbridled passion and commitment to the goal. The Midrash here teaches that “*piyus*,” endeavoring to obtain what we desire through peaceful, dignified and nonconfrontational means, also demands effort. Remaining courteous and respectful when trying to achieve something very important and dear to use is often difficult and unnatural. The Midrash instructs that just as need to marshal energy and focus when it becomes necessary to wage a difficult struggle, so must we marshal energy and focus under ordinary circumstances to retain our composure and poise. Acting and speaking courteously requires thought and concentration, mustering discipline, patience and humility to conduct ourselves appropriately.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayigash tells of Yaakov’s brief meeting with Pharaoh upon arriving in Egypt. Pharaoh inquired about Yaakov’s age, and Yaakov replied by not only stating his age, but also bemoaning the difficult life he had lived (46:9). The Midrash (cited by *Da’at Zekeinim Mi-Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot*) famously criticizes Yaakov for this lament, going so far as to say that Yaakov’s life was shortened as punishment for bemoaning his hardships.

Nevertheless, a number of commentators sought to explain the reason why Yaakov did not just simply give his age, and instead proceeded to lament his difficult life. Was this simply an expression of negativity and misery, or was there perhaps some purpose to Yaakov’s lament?

One intriguing theory that has been proposed (by Rav Moshe Mordechai Karp, in his *Va-yavinu Ba-mikra*) is that Yaakov feared that Pharaoh would appoint him as a personal advisor. Pharaoh may have heard from Yosef about Yaakov’s wisdom, and may therefore have been inclined to capitalize on Yaakov’s skills in running his kingdom by assigning him to an advisory position. Yaakov therefore emphasized to Pharaoh that he himself had endured a difficult life, such that Pharaoh would be unimpressed and disinclined to appoint him to any sort of government post. Yaakov’s purpose was to make Pharaoh believe that he was unsuccessful in securing his own good fortune over the course of his life, and so he certainly could not be trusted with advising Pharaoh on how to secure his kingdom’s good fortune. Just as Yosef had previously instructed his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they worked as shepherds so that – according to many commentators – Pharaoh would not appoint them to royal posts, given the Egyptians’ aversion to shepherding (46:34), similarly, Yaakov sought to appear unimpressive, to avoid being named to a distinguished advisory position.

Yaakov’s interest in avoiding a position in Pharaoh’s palace was certainly understandable, but his response – according to this theory – perhaps offers us some insight into the common, misguided tendency to excuse ourselves from important roles. Like Yaakov, we sometimes point to our past failures as proof of our inadequacy and our unsuitability for tasks that need to be performed. And, just as Yaakov bemoaned the fact that he would not be living as long as his father and grandfather, we similarly tend to compare ourselves to those far greater than us, and thus conclude that we are unworthy and incapable of filling roles for which we are needed. While Yaakov’s efforts to avoid an appointment were certainly justifiable under the circumstances, very often, our excuses are not justified. Before we conclude that we are unsuited or unqualified for an important task, we must carefully determine whether this is indeed the case, or if perhaps we are convincing ourselves of our unworthiness purely for the sake of convenience.

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