**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYECHI**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah towards the end of Parashat Vayechi (50:23) tells that Yosef lived to see grandchildren, adding that “the children of Makhir, son of Menashe, were raised on Yosef’s lap.” The plain meaning the text, of course, is that Yosef enjoyed the gratification of seeing great-grandchildren and even taking part in raising them. We might, however, wonder if perhaps there is a deeper, symbolic message being conveyed by the description of Yosef’s great-grandchildren being raised “on his lap.”

The [*Chatam Sofer*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38683&st=&pgnum=53&hilite=) suggests that the Torah here alludes to the fact that Yosef’s great-grandchildren learned from and followed his example. Yosef’s life was a story of dramatic reversal, as he was cruelly driven from his family, sold into slavery, and then cast into prison on false charges, before suddenly becoming the second most powerful person in the most powerful kingdom on Earth. But at every stage, both during his period of suffering and in his years of glory, Yosef remained faithfully obedient to God, following the legacy of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. He was devoted to his religious values and principles when he suffered persecution and when he enjoyed great honor and prestige. This legacy of unshakable consistency, the *Chatam Sofer* writes, was carried by his great-grandchildren, only in reverse sequence. They began their lives in royal conditions of luxury, as part of Yosef’s family. But in adulthood, the tide turned, and the new Pharaoh introduced a program of persecution against *Benei Yisrael*. Like Yosef, his great-grandchildren experienced both a period of royalty and a period of persecution. And having been raised “on his lap,” they followed his example of consistency, remaining faithful to God all throughout, under all circumstances.

Every set of circumstances presents its own unique challenges – whether it’s wealth or poverty; loneliness or fame; success or failure. The *Chatam Sofer*’s comments remind us that we can and must overcome the full range of religious challenges that we confront, and that we must be prepared at every stage of life to meet a new series of challenges that will invariably present themselves.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayechi of Yosef’s brothers’ concerns after Yaakov’s passing that Yosef would now seek to exact revenge for the crime they committed against him. Yosef reassured his brothers that he had no such plans and was committed to continue supporting them in Egypt. The Torah said, “He comforted them and spoke to their heart” (50:21).

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains this to mean that Yosef spoke to them “words which are acceptable to the heart” – that is, words of comfort that would put their worries to rest. Specifically, Rashi writes, Yosef explained to his brothers that he could not kill them, because of the impression this would give the Egyptians. If Yosef would kill his brothers, people would accuse Yosef of having presented a random group of distinguished-looking men as his brothers in order to prove that he was not born into the slave class. Once he no longer needed them, the accusers would charge, he just killed them. After all, Yosef said, “Is there such a thing as a brother who kills his brothers?” If he would kill his brothers, the Egyptians would reach the conclusion that they were not really his brothers, because people do not kill their brothers.

Later writers noted the glaring irony in the Midrash’s comments. As Yosef tries to reassure his brothers that he does not seek to avenge their crime, his concluding remark is, “*Yesh lekha ach she-horeig et echav*” – “Is there such a thing as a brother who kills his brothers?” This statement must have sounded to the brothers as a scathing condemnation of their attempt to kill Yosef. In essence, Yosef here tells his brothers that he could not kill them because a person does not kill his brothers – despite the fact that this is precisely what they nearly did. How could *Chazal* depict Yosef as communicating these words to his brothers, when the Torah explicitly tells that Yosef spoke to them words of comfort and reassurance?

It appears that even as Yosef tried reassuring his brothers, he could not abstain from at least subtly emphasizing the gravity of their crime. Although he wanted them to feel secure and at ease, and to that end he emphasized that God orchestrated the events for the best (50:20), nevertheless, he found it necessary to subtly remind them of what a grievous act they committed against him.

Furthermore, it is possible that *Chazal* here do not mean that Yosef actually spoke these words to his brothers, but were rather expressing their own perspective by placing these words in Yosef’s mouth. This verse marks the final conclusion of the story of *mekhirat Yosef*, as the brothers once and for all experience closure by having their lingering concerns put to rest and resolving their uneasy feelings. It is possible that *Chazal* did not want us to leave this story feeling too satisfied with the “happy ending” of reconciliation. Alongside our respect and admiration for Yosef who managed to forgive his brothers and see the hand of Providence that guided the events, we must also come away from this story asking the painful question, “Is there such a thing as a brother who kills his brothers?” *Chazal* perhaps sought to emphasize that when all is said and done, after the “happy ending” and final reconciliation between Yosef and brothers, something unconscionable occurred. Even as we feel gratified by the brothers’ sincere regret and Yosef’s willingness to forgive, we are to also walk away from this story dismayed and in horror over this terrible tragedy, and wholly committed to learn from our ancestors’ mistakes and ensure that hatred and contempt among brothers would never again repeat itself.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayechi tells of Yaakov’s famous blessing to Yosef’s sons, which concludes with the wish, “*ve-yidgu la-rov*” (48:16). This is commonly understood as a blessing of fertility, that Yosef’s descendants should procreate like fish. The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Berakhot (20a), interpreted this analogy to mean that Yosef’s descendants would be protected from the “*ayin ha-ra*” (“evil eye”). Just as fish live underwater, out of the sight of human beings, and are thus shielded from “*ayin ha-ra*,” Yosef’s descendants similarly enjoy this protection. The Gemara then proceeds to give another reason why Yosef’s descendants are not exposed to the dangers of the “*ayin ha-ra*,” commenting, “The eye which did not wish to take part of that which did not belong to it – the evil eye exerts no control over it.” Yosef’s “eye” refused to be tempted by Potifar’s wife, and thus his offspring is protected from the “evil eye.”

The concept of “*ayin ha-ra*” has often been understood as referring to the negative effects of the feelings of resentment and envy that are aroused when one flaunts his success. Public displays of affluence and other forms of good fortune evoke jealousy and contempt on the part of the less fortunate, and these feelings can have a negative effect on the person whose success is on display. This explains the Gemara’s comment linking Yaakov’s blessing of “*ve-yidgu la-rov*” and protection from “*ayin ha-ra*.” If we want to avoid the harmful effects of the “evil eye,” of envy and resentment, then we should live as “fish,” by keeping our good fortune out of the public view, just as the fish conduct their affairs underwater and are not seen by other creatures.

It seems, however, that this is not the only necessary measure to avoid the “*ayin ha-ra*.” As mentioned, the Gemara adds, “The eye which did not wish to take part of that which did not belong to it – the evil eye exerts no control over it.” Significantly, the Gemara does not point to Yosef’s self-control and discipline. Rather, it notes the fact that he did not look upon that which was not his. Yosef was content with the power and authority that Potifar had given him, and did not desire anything more. Apparently, the Gemara viewed a sense of contentment as a vital component for protecting oneself from the “*ayin ha-ra*.” In addition to living like “fish,” privately and discreetly, without seeking publicity and notoriety, we are also advised to live contentedly, without constantly pursuing that which we do not yet have. Just as we are to avoid the curious eyes of others, by keeping our good fortune private, we must likewise keep our eyes away from others and their belongings. This, too, helps us avoid the resentment and negative feelings of other people, who will see that we live at peace with ourselves and are not peering into the lives of others to see what they have and we don’t.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayechi the famous story of Yaakov’s blessings to Yosef’s sons, Efrayim and Menashe, which he conferred with his hands placed on their heads. The Torah tells that Yaakov intentionally placed his right hand on the head of the younger brother, Efrayim, to symbolize the fact that Efrayim would produce a larger and most prominent tribe than Menashe.

In describing this incident, the Torah relates that Yaakov placed his hand upon the head of Efrayim “*ve-hu ha-tza’ir*” – who was the younger of the two sons (48:14). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 6:4) explains the word “*ha-tza’ir*” in this verse to mean “*she-hitz’ir et asakav*,” which literally means, “he made his affairs small.” According to the Midrash, it was because Efrayim followed this practice, of “making his affairs small,” that he produced a large and powerful tribe.

The expression “*she-hitz’ir et asakav*” is generally understood to mean that Efrayim viewed his accomplishments as “small.” Rather than pride himself for his achievements, he regarded them as “*tza’ir*,” always expecting more of himself and feeling that he could do things even better. And for this reason Efrayim earned a uniquely prominent stature among the tribes of Israel.

If we feel too proud of our accomplishments, we are likely to begin feeling complacent and allow ourselves to underachieve henceforth, figuring that we’ve already reached impressive achievements. *Chazal* here teach us that the proper attitude to have towards our achievements is “*tza’ir*” – to acknowledge what we’ve achieved, but to keep it in perspective, recognizing that we always have room for improvement and can always do more. This way, our achievements will serve us as stepping stones leading us to even greater accomplishments, rather than diminishing from our ambition and drive for greatness in the future.

Wednesday

In Yaakov’s deathbed blessing to his son Yissakhar, he compares the tribe of Yissakhar to a “bony donkey, crouching in between the boundaries” (49:14). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 99:9), as Rashi cites, interprets this analogy as a reference to the fact that Yissakhar would produce descendants who served as the nation’s Torah scholars. The image of a strong donkey bearing heavy loads of cargo depicts the intensity of study required to amass comprehensive Torah scholarship, the “burden” of responsibility that a scholar bears to study, review and process large quantities of information in order to issue accurate rulings. The image of a donkey “crouching between boundaries,” the Midrash explains, refers to the fact that transport donkeys are not given the opportunity to enjoy a proper night’s sleep. At most, they are allowed to crouch and rest for brief periods in between the cities to where they deliver cargo. This symbolizes the scholar’s obligation to learn and analyze without allowing himself rest, the ongoing, lifelong process of scholarship which leaves no time for real vacations.

Rav Shaul Broch of Kashau, in [*Bi-heyot Ha-boker*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20329&st=&pgnum=21&hilite=), offers an additional possible explanation for the image of “*roveitz bein ha-mishpetayim*” – a donkey crouching in between two “boundaries.” One of the most difficult challenges faced by scholars of *Halakha*, he explains, is to decide upon one of two lines of reasoning. Very often, cogent arguments could be made for both sides of an issue, and the scholar is forced to carefully scrutinize the different sides and weigh their strengths and weaknesses, in order to reach a conclusion. And thus scholars often find themselves “crouching in between the boundaries,” situated in between two equally formidable arguments, working diligently to find the compelling reason or reasons to favor one over the other.

If so, then the metaphor of the laboring donkey expresses the hard work and patience needed to carefully weigh all sides of an issue before reaching a decision. Just as a donkey trudges along, progressing slowly, one step at a time, similarly, we need to move slowly and carefully when processing information in order to reach final conclusions. The “burden” of scholarship includes the responsibility to see both “boundaries,” all angles of the question at hand, rather than hastily reaching a conclusion based on impulse and intuition.

Thursday

In his final words to his sons before his death, Yaakov turns to Shimon and Levi and condemns their violence, presumably referring to their attack on the city of Shekhem after the city’s prince abducted and defiled their sister. Yaakov then declares that his “name” and “honor” should not be associated with their “council” and their “assembly” (49:6).

Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 98:5), explains that when Yaakov speaks of “their assembly,” he refers to the group that would later be formed by Korach, a great-grandson of Levi, who led a revolt against Moshe and Aharon in the wilderness. Yaakov’s wish, that he not be associated with this group, was fulfilled through the absence of his name when the Torah introduces the story of Korach’s uprising. As Rashi notes, the Torah (Bamidbar 16:1) introduces Korach as “Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi,” without going one generation further and identifying Levi as the son of Yaakov. By omitting Yaakov’s name when tracing Korach’s lineage, the Torah fulfilled Yaakov’s desire to be dissociated from this sinister plot devised by Levi’s descendant.

Interestingly enough, the Midrash, as cited by Rashi, then proceeds to observe that later in *Tanakh*, Yaakov’s name is, indeed, mentioned in reference to Korach. In Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (6:18-23), we read of Heiman, a grandson of the prophet Shemuel who was among the *Leviyim* assigned by King David to sing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The verses there in Divrei Hayamim trace Heiman’s lineage back to Korach, who is identified as “the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi, **the son of Yisrael**.” Whereas Yaakov’s name is omitted in the context of Korach’s uprising, it is mentioned in reference to Korach’s descendant who sang in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

The lesson that emerges, perhaps, is that the need to condemn wrongful behavior must not blind us to positive behaviors which deserve praise. Although Yaakov wanted to ensure that he would be entirely dissociated from Korach in regard to his revolt, his name was included in reference to Korach’s family’s involvement in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. His prophetic condemnation of Korach’s uprising did not lead him to overlook the positive contributions Korach’s family would make in the future. Too often, we frame people and entities in simplistic, black-and-white terms, writing off those in whom we find something distasteful. The Midrash draws our attention to the fact that Yaakov distanced himself from one aspect of Korach’s family but warmly embraced and identified with another, teaching us that we can and should respect and admire the positive characteristics of those with whom we strongly disagree on certain matters, and identify with and praise their positive aspects even if we find it necessary to condemn their negative aspects.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted Yaakov’s deathbed wish expressed as he condemned the violent tendencies of Shimon and Levi: “*Be-sodam al tavo nafshi bi-k’halam al teichad kevodi* – My soul shall not enter their council, my honor shall not be included in their assembly” (49:6). Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains this as a reference to two future incidents involving descendants of Shimon and Levi. The first is the sin of *Ba’al Pe’or*, when Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon, publicly engaged in relations with a Midyanite woman, and the second was the revolt against Moshe instigated by Korach, a great-grandson of Levi. Yaakov here requests that his name be omitted when the perpetrators of these offenses are identified. Indeed, as Rashi observes, Zimri is identified simply as the leader of Shimon, and Korach is identified as “the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi.” In neither instance is Yaakov named as the offender’s ancestor. Rashi adds that Yaakov’s name is, however, mentioned in a different context – in reference to Korach’s descendants who sang in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. In Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (6:18-23), a descendant of Korach is named as a singer in the Temple, and his lineage is traced through Korach, who is identified there as “the son of Kehat, the son of Levi, **the son of Yisrael**.”

It is worth noting the way Rashi describes Zimri’s sin in this context. Rather than focus on the fact that Zimri had a public illicit relationship with a Midyanite woman, Rashi chooses instead to describe Zimri’s confrontation with Moshe before committing his forbidden act. The Midrash tells that Zimri brazenly brought the Midyanite woman to Moshe and asked whether he was permitted to cohabit with her. When Moshe responded that this was forbidden, Zimri brazenly ridiculed him, noting that he – Moshe – had married Tzippora, a woman from Midyan. This is the aspect of Zimri’s sinful act which Rashi focuses upon in explaining Yaakov’s wish to dissociate himself from it. This point of focus sheds light on the connection which Rashi implicitly makes between this incident and Korach’s revolt. Both situations marked a brazen uprising against Moshe’s authority, the desire to assert autonomy and publicly reject Moshe’s leadership.

It thus appears that according to Rashi, Yaakov here condemns not just Shimon and Levi’s violence, but rather their brazen disregard for authority. Just as they reacted to their sister’s abduction on their own, without consulting their father, their descendants, in these instances, expressed scorn and disdain for the nation’s leadership and insisted on pursuing their own agendas without submitting to authority.

This might also be the reason why the Midrash contrasts these two incidents – the uprisings of Zimri and of Korach – with the *Leviyim*’s singing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The *Mikdash* was a place where different groups had assigned roles and worked together in peace and harmony. Moreover, it marked the place of “assembly” for the entire nation, as opposed to the “assemblies” noted by the Midrash, which were conducted for the sake of promoting the specific interests of particular groups. The Midrash here warns of the dangers of actions similar to Shimon and Levi’s assault on Shekhem, where a small group acts independently without bending to authority and without looking out for the concerns of the nation at large. The “assemblies” that *Chazal* encourage were those of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where people come together and work harmoniously in the service of the Almighty, rather than dividing in small groups with each promoting only its own particular viewpoints.