

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayechi)

Mrs. Marlit Wendell is a Holocaust survivor who lives in Jerusalem.

Marlit, her mother, and older sister were able to survive Auschwitz and the war together. Their arms were numbered with three consecutive numbers. (I believe they are the only living family with three consecutive numbers ...) Eventually, they were able to join their brother in America after the war.

In October 1938 in the middle of the night when all the kids were asleep, three Gestapo agents came to their house, and burst into the living room. They were taken to Gestapo headquarters after being told there was no need to take anything with them as they'd come back home; but they never saw their home again. Imagine what that must have been like for a seven-year-old; seventy five years later, Marlit still wishes she could go back to her home to see it and what she left behind, one last time.

The parents were out late; when they came home and saw all the lights on they understood something was wrong, so their mother came in but her father ran away; assuming the Gestapo might be looking for him; they never saw him again.

After the war, they found out he had been caught in a roundup in a shul and sent to Sachsenhausen; in 1942 after Himmler was assassinated, the Nazis lined up all the Jews and shot every tenth man; he happened to be the tenth man in the line-up....

From Gestapo HQ they were taken to the border between Poland & Germany and dumped there with thousands of Jews; Germany expelled them; Poland did not want them; for weeks they were stuck between the borders; no one wanted them; till finally Poland let them in.

Eventually they ended up in the Warsaw Ghetto where they managed to stay together until the summer of 1942 when the Ghetto was liquidated, and they were all sent to Auschwitz. She ended up with her mother and older sister, while her two brothers were obviously sent to the men's camp. Her older brother swore he would stick with their younger brother who was only seven years old

But one day in 1942, the older brother Eddie got really sick and could not get up, so they moved him to the infirmary. Which was good as he did not have to go out to work, but dangerous as there were barely rations, and eventually whoever was there for a week was selected and sent to the gas. After a few days he managed to get some strength back; cut his finger to make his cheeks red with the blood and get back to his bunk; but when he got back his brother was gone; he had been taken in a selection and was murdered.

Eddie survived the Holocaust, but he never got over it; never forgave himself for 'abandoning' his younger brother. After the war he eventually married but refused to have children; he would not bring children into such a cruel world....

For nearly eight years Marlit Wendell had no idea what happened to her father; she never had a chance to say goodbye.... Eddie Wendell never had the chance to say goodbye to his younger brother; to this day he has no idea exactly what happened, how his brother died, or what he was thinking in his last moments. And none of them ever had the chance to say goodbye to their childhood, to let go of their favorite childhood toys, or take one last look at their childhood room....

One of the fascinating questions we are left with when considering the story of Yosef and his brothers is, simply put: did Yaakov know? Did Yaakov ever find out that his own sons had deprived him of his beloved Yosef for twenty two years? Did he know they had thrown him in a pit and that through their hatred, insensitivity and anger, had caused their own brother to be sold as a slave?

If he did know, it becomes equally challenging to understand why he never confronts his sons? Even on his death bed, though he castigates them for other instances of flawed behavior (such as cursing Shimon and Levi's anger, clearly alluding to their killing an entire city when Dena was taken to Shchem....) he does not even allude to, much less mention the most infamous event of his Joseph's being sold as a slave at the tender age of seventeen....

Did Yaakov know?

When Yaakov dies we assume the book of Bereishit (Genesis) will end; the last of our patriarchs, Yaakov blesses his sons and is buried in the cave of Machpela with his father and grandfather Yitzchak and Avraham. And the baton passes to his twelve sons, now in Egypt. But there is one last moment; one last scene: a strange discussion between Yosef and his brothers:

"Yosef's brothers saw that their father had died, and they said, "Perhaps Yosef will hate us and return to us all the evil that we did to him." So they commanded [messengers to go] to Yosef, to say, "Your father commanded [us] before his death, saying: 'So shall you say to Yosef, "Please, forgive now your brothers' transgression ... for they did evil to you. ...Forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Yosef wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also went and fell before him... But Yosef said to them, "Don't be afraid, for am I instead of God? Indeed, you intended evil against me, [but] God designed it for good, in order to bring about what is at present to keep a great populace alive." (Bereishit 50:15-20)

But the Torah does not record Yaakov ever actually saying this to his sons. And the commentaries are actually divided on whether Yaakov actually said this, or the brothers made it up to ensure peace amongst brothers.

If Yaakov did indeed say this (As the **Sforno** suggests) it obviously means he knew the entire story of his sons' conspiracy and crime against their brother Yosef, which would leave us wondering why he never confronts them.

If on the other hand, Yaakov did not actually say this (as **Rashi** suggests), it might mean he never actually knew what the brothers had done, perhaps believing Yosef had indeed somehow been attacked by a wild animal and been sold to Egypt without their brother's knowledge; which would leave us less wondering and more in wonder, that Yosef had succeeded in keeping the story from his father perhaps simply to save his father from the inevitable pain resulting in such a revelation.

Either way, there is a powerful message hidden between the lines of the end of the book of Bereishit. The sons of Yaakov will be the first Jewish brothers who succeed, all of them, in remaining true to their Jewish heritage. Avraham has two sons, but only Yitzchak carries on the Jewish tradition; Yishmael leaves the fold. And Yitzchak also has two sons, but one of them, Esau, also leaves the fold. The sons of Yaakov however, come back together, and it is from this rapprochement that the family of Yaakov will ultimately become the Nation of Israel. We are founded on the idea of coming together.

And this happens either because Yaakov despite knowing what happens, lets go and is able to move on, or because his son Yosef does.

The miracle of the State of Israel and the flourishing of the Jewish people in their land after two thousand years is in no small part due to an incredible generation of Holocaust survivors who somehow, despite their indescribable losses and pain, were able to move on. Despite the lack of closure in their past, they came together to build us all a more certain future.

And just as the brothers came together to honor their father Yaakov's memory and create a united Jewish people, we today owe that incredible generation no less.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman