

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayechi)

It was finally the day; after over a year of training I was finally about to get my bars and join the very special family of IDF Officers. My parents had flown in from the US for the occasion along with my younger brother and were on their way down for the ceremony, which was a couple of hours away, deep in the desert on the Shizaphon Armored Corps base.

We were being inspected by the base sergeant-major an hour before the ceremony when we would be receiving our officer's bars at long last. The Army Chief of Staff (Moshe Levy) would be attending so everything had to be perfect. He stopped in front of me and, looking down, saw my Tzitzit (religious fringes) hanging down to my knees and snapped an order: "tuck those in immediately! I had better not see those hanging out during the ceremony!"

To be honest, I don't normally wear my tzitzit out; they have been wrapped around my belt for many years, but in the army the extremely challenging environment had made me realize I needed to take an extreme position so I started wearing my tzitzit out as a reminder that I wanted to be careful not to cross any red lines, as well as an easy way to send the message to those around me that I was religious....

So his harsh command took me by surprise, especially coming as it did on the last day of our course when the bars were already on my shoulders waiting to be uncovered. Realizing I could easily be detained and prevented from standing on the parade ground if the Sergeant-Major so decided, it would have been a simple thing to just tuck them in for a couple of hours. But there was a principle at stake here much larger than whether I wore my tzitzit out: was I an Israeli soldier who happened to be Jewish? It was precisely this reasoning that stood behind my decision to join the Israeli Army as opposed to the American army despite having grown up in America until the age of eighteen. After two thousand years of dreaming, I wanted to serve as a Jew, in the first Jewish army since the fall of bar Kochba in 135 C.E.

It was a chance to decide whether I was an Israeli Jew or a Jewish Israeli: which was really my priority?

This week's portion, *Vayechi*, provides us with a good example of this idea. At the beginning of the portion Yaakov takes ill and realizes his death is near. It is interesting to note that this is the first instance in the Torah of a person actually becoming ill; until this point in history it seems people just reached the end of their days, and simply died. So a person did not ordinarily have any advance warning of the fact that his end was near. As such, it is valuable to take note of how Yaakov reacts to this knowledge.

It seems that one of the things one does at the end of his or her life, is to bless one's children:

“And it was, after these things that someone said to Yosef: ‘Behold! Your father is ill. (Hineh’ Avichah’ Choleh’), so he took his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, with him.” (Genesis 48:1)

Immediately upon hearing that his father’s life was nearing its end, Yosef takes his sons for a blessing, which ends up being one of the strangest interactions in the entire Torah (48:1-22):

*“And Yaakov said to Yosef **E-I Sha-dai** (G-d) appeared to me in Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me. And He said to me: I will make you fruitful and numerous; I will make you a congregation of nations, and I will give this land to your offspring after you as an eternal possession.*

And now, your two sons born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Re’uven and Shimon.” (48:5)

This is the introduction to the famous blessing of Menashe and Ephraim, which we recall every Friday night, invoking their names as we bless our children.

It is strange that when Yosef brings his sons for a blessing, Yaakov at first seems to ignore them. And one wonders about the significance of Yaakov reminding Yosef of his own blessings, received from G-d so long ago, upon leaving the house of his parents when running away from Esav. Why is this so important, right now, as Yaakov is about to give these grandsons, sons of Yosef, ruler of Egypt, their last blessing?

And then comes the strangest part of the entire story: after describing to Yosef the fact that both *“Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Re’uven and Shimon”* (48:5), he ‘suddenly’ sees the two boys:

*“Then Yisrael (Yaakov) saw Yosef’s sons and he said: ‘Who are these?’ (**Mi Eleh’?**)*

“And Yosef said to his father: ‘They are my sons whom G-d has given me here’,

“And he (Yaakov) said: ‘Take them to me, and I will bless them.” (48:8-10)

What is going on here? How could Yaakov not recognize his grandsons? Especially given that he just finished discussing with Yosef the fact that they were like sons to him!

Note the obvious switch between the name Yaakov, and the name Yisrael. When Yaakov is describing to Yosef his blessing from G-d all those years ago, he is called Yaakov. But when he prepares to bless the next generation, he is called Yisrael (the name given him after his struggle in the night with... himself? an angel of Esau?) Why the change of names?

And what is the meaning of Yosef’s response to his father’s puzzling question? What is Yosef trying to communicate by saying that *“They are my sons whom G-d has given me here”* (48:9) what other sons does Yosef have? Why the need to remind Yaakov that these two boys are Egyptian born? And why re-iterate that ‘they are my sons’? Why not just say: ‘This is Menashe, and this is Ephraim’?

What inner struggle is hidden here beneath the surface?

Rashi, who normally helps us make sense of precisely these types of questions in the text, elicits here (48:8) a rather puzzling comment, quoting the *Midrash Tanchumah*, which suggests that Yaakov temporarily lost his prophetic vision “*Because in the future **Yeravam** and **Achav** would descend from the tribe of Ephraim, and **Yehu** and his sons from Menashe.*”

These three individuals (Yeravam, Achav, and Yehu) were all kings of Israel who led the Jewish people astray by spreading idol worship throughout the kingdom. Which of course, leaves us wondering what these sorry periods in Jewish history have to do with Yaakov’s blessing of Menashe and Ephraim some five hundred years earlier?

The story of Yeravam, the son of Nevat, is particularly fascinating, and may help to shed some light on what lies behind this puzzling *Midrash* (rabbinic legend).

When King Solomon, the son and heir of King David, died, his son **Rechavam**, inherited the throne. Unfortunately, Rechavam seems not to have been a chip off the old block. Choosing not to listen to his father’s older advisors, he heeded the advice of a younger group of his own confidants, committing a classic error in raising taxes.

Coming so soon after the completion of the first Temple, which involved heavy taxes levied on the Jewish people, this ultimately allowed Yeravam to mount a rebellion resulting in the cessation of ten tribes, creating a Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Yeravam crowned himself King of the new Northern Kingdom of ten tribes, (as opposed to the Southern tribes of Yehudah, Binyamin, and the Levites who remained loyal to the rightful King from the house of David.) Jerusalem and the Holy Temple (*Beit HaMikdash*) remained under the control of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

In the first year of his reign, Yeravam was faced with an interesting dilemma: at each of the three festivals, (*Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkoth*) the Jewish people would all come up to Jerusalem to share in the festival, based on the Biblical command to visit the Temple three times a year on the festivals.

Now, no one save a rightful King from the House of David could sit in the courtyard of the Temple; everyone else had to stand. This would mean that while Rechavam, the grandson of King David, would sit on a throne, Yeravam, who was from the tribe of Ephraim, would have to stand like everyone else.

Realizing that this would be a reminder that he was not the rightful King, he had golden calves (idols) placed at all the border crossings, causing the people to fall back to their idolatrous ways and prevent them from ever reaching Jerusalem at all. (Indeed many years later the fifteenth day of Av would become a Jewish holiday during the First temple period, as it was the day these idols were finally removed, and Jews could go up again to Jerusalem....)

Yeravam has come to represent in Jewish history the epitome of the good idea gone bad. More than the ends justifying the means, the story of Yeravam Ben Nevat is the case of the ends and the means becoming all mixed up.

Indeed, this is the essence of the pagan idolatry of ancient Egypt.

Paganism is the worship of nature, in all of its power and beauty, and the pagan, more than anything else, immerses himself in the physical world of nature; of the here and now, and survival of the fittest. In the end, in the world of nature, might makes right, everything inevitably dies, and there is no purpose beyond the here and now.

Judaism, however, suggests that there is a world of difference between one who eats to live, and one who just lives to eat. Ultimately, nature is not the goal; it is simply a vehicle to a higher purpose.

Ancient Egypt was all about the worship of nature, which is why its gods were all powerful symbols in nature, as well as being the background to how an entire country became immersed in power, and the here and now. And it was this surrounding which formed the basis of Yaakov's question to Yosef.

After twenty-two years in Egypt, Yaakov's real question was who Yosef had become. Was he still the dreamer of dreams? Could he still see the creator of the sun, moon, and stars, even from the darkness of the pit, or was he now the ruler of Egypt immersed in the here and now?

Perhaps this is why Yaakov was addressing himself first to Yosef, and not to Binyamin: because before blessing the next generation, he was wondering where this generation (Yosef) really was. Was he a Jewish Egyptian, or an Egyptian Jew? Had he become so immersed in the land of the Nile as to forget that all of this was simply a vehicle to something greater? The more powerful one becomes, the more challenging it is to recall that power in this world is simply a tool of the source of all power: Hashem.

And this as well is why Yaakov recalls the original blessing he received from Hashem when running from Esav all those years ago. After all, for the first time, Yaakov had just confronted the world of Esav, the world of the field and the hunt, of cruelty and nature. In so doing he had of necessity taken on 'the hands of Esav', leaving him struggling with just who **he** had become.

Indeed, it is at this point, on his way down to the house of *Lavan*, that Yaakov makes a pact with G-d:

"And Yaakov swore an oath saying: 'If G-d will be with me and watch over me on this journey, and He will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I will return in peace to the house of my father, then Hashem will be for me a G-d (Elokim).'"(28:22-21)

Essentially, now that Yaakov was leaving the tents of study, he recognized that his challenge was to remember, even when immersed in the flocks of Lavan, (which on a certain level represented the world of the field and of nature), that the bread really comes from G-d, and that everything in this physical world is really just a means to achieve a higher purpose.

And perhaps this was, as well, Yaakov's question regarding Menashe and Ephraim: who are these two young men? Are they Jews growing up in the palace, ever aware of their roles as vehicles for some great and wonderful destiny, or had they become princes of Egypt, focused only on the here and now?

Indeed, this was the great tragedy of Yeravam (as well as Achav and Yehu); Kings of Israel, placed uniquely, with the potential to change the course of history, and yet becoming so immersed in the trappings of being Kings, that they lost sight of the purpose behind it all.

Yaakov was concerned here with building a family into a nation that would change the course of human history and fulfill the mission of the Jewish people, imbedded into the fabric of creation itself: to bring G-d into the world, by making the world a place that is full of all that G-d represents.

This as well, is what we are doing when we bless our children on Friday night by invoking the names of the very same Menashe and Ephraim. We run through the week, so immersed in the world of Esav, and making sure that the Nile River overflows its banks... We tend to forget what it is really all about. So on Shabbat, beginning with Friday night, we get back in touch with what is really going on in the world. We try to reconnect with the purpose of it all.

What do we think of while we are blessing our children? Perhaps the greatest challenge in raising children is whether they become vehicles for increasing G-d's presence in the world. And of course, we cannot expect our children to get this message if we ourselves do not live it. Which may well have been Yaakov's challenge to Yosef: Living in the palace as ruler of Egypt, have you succeeded in remaining the role model to your children of who really rules the world? Who indeed, are these children? Are they princes of Egypt, or sons of Yaakov?

And this, indeed, is Yosef's response: *"They are my sons whom G-d has given me here"*, even here in Egypt, in the palaces of Egypt, they are still my sons, and they, as am I, are still aware that all of this, comes from Hashem as a gift with a higher purpose than just filling the storehouses of Egypt. And this is the greatest aspiration we may have for ourselves, and especially for our children: Have we succeeded in teaching them that life is more than the here and now, and that all the things we as a generation are so privileged to have and even to take for granted, are simply vehicles to create that better world we all so long for?

Perhaps this week, as we bless our children around the Shabbat table, or use the moment to think about where we are headed and whether our 'children': the ideas we have and the accomplishments we achieve, are really contributing to a better world.

Shabbat Shalom,

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