

## *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

### **(Portion of Vayeshev)**

*Reb Moshe Chaim Tiefenbrun was one of the personalities I grew up with, and one of the two people who first introduced me to nusach (the beautiful melodies of our liturgy and prayer). He was a Holocaust survivor who always had a tractate of the Talmud under his arm; and I recall hearing the story of his terrible loss.*

*When the war broke out and the Nazis were approaching his village in Poland, fearing he might be taken to the German army or a labor battalion (as had been the Russians' way for generations) he, along with most of the other young men of his village, escaped into the forest. He eventually made his way to Shanghai where he waited out the war. Six years later, on the day the Allies declared victory over the Germans, Reb Moshe Chaim found out what had happened to his young wife and two little children. The day after he escaped, they had all been taken out to the forest and murdered along with the rest of his village. It had never occurred to him, or any of them, that a civilized nation would or even could do such a thing.*

*He eventually moved to the United States and remarried and they had two children with whom I grew up on Manhattan's West Side. Many years later he and his wife both made Aliyah to Efrat where I eventually made my home as well.*

*One year I happened to arrive for Efrat's annual Holocaust Memorial day ceremony exactly on time (which in Israel means early) and he was the only other person there so I struck up a conversation. I can still recall the look he gave me when trying to be sensitive I imagined how difficult the evening of Yom Hashoah ( Holocaust memorial day) must be for him as it must bring back so many painful memories.*

*He was incredulous at the suggestion, and shared that he had not slept a good night's sleep since the Holocaust, for there was nothing that could comfort him.... Nearly twenty years later I am still thinking about that conversation.*

What prevents a person from being comforted? Is there a lesson to be learned as to how one can find comfort in difficult situations? A week after the horrendous events that took Rav Yaakov Don and Ezra Schwartz from us, how can we find comfort, as individuals and as a people, especially given the fact that there does not seem to be an end in sight to the conflict with terror and Muslim fundamentalism in which we seem to find ourselves embroiled?

In this week's portion, no less than Yaakov himself seems to undergo a similar struggle as he refuses to be comforted when learning of what he presumably assumes is his beloved son Joseph's death. When the brothers show Yaakov the famous Technicolor coat of Joseph, dipped in blood, he refuses to be comforted (*Bereishit* 37: 35). It is actually rare in the Torah for a person to be beyond consolation. When Avraham loses his beloved wife Sarah, he eventually rises from his mourning (*ibid.* 23:3) and seems to move on, burying his dead and then setting in motion the plan to find a wife for his son

Yitzchak. And we do not find Yitzchak, or for that matter Moshe or Aaron, mourning without consolation. So what is it about the story of Yaakov and Joseph that eludes comfort?

Yonah Baumel, whose son Zach has been missing in action since the battle of Sultan Yaakub in 1982, once shared with me his opinion that Yaakov could not be comforted because he had no closure. Deep down, Yaakov was not sure if his son Joseph was dead or alive, and the lack of closure, of a proper goodbye, of knowing he has been buried, prevents a person from being able to move on.

This would seem to be supported by the Midrash (rabbinic legend) quoted by *Rashi* (34:35) that says human nature allows us to forget (meaning the pain will abate somewhat) those who die, but not those who are alive, (even if we think they are dead) perhaps because we still hope for their return having not seen conclusive evidence they are actually dead.

And yet, there is no inability to be comforted after Eliahu (Elijah) the prophet's ascension to heaven, despite his never being buried. Nor for that matter do we find this in the case of Chanoch (ibid. 5:24), one of the descendants of Adam, who seems to simply 'disappear'. And when King David loses his baby son (Shmuel II 12) he mourns, and is able to not only be comforted but comfort his wife Batsheva as well. And then he is able to move on; why the disparity between these cases?

Why can Yaakov find no comfort in his remaining 11 children?

Interestingly, there is another biblical character who cannot be comforted, and that is Rachel, Yaakov's beloved wife. The prophet Jeremiah shares (31; 15:17) that a voice is heard from on high, the sound of Rachel, who cannot (or refuses to be) comforted as she is weeping for her children who are gone; the temple has been destroyed and the Jewish nation is gone; sold into Babylonian slavery.... So what is the connection between the story of Yaakov's lost son Joseph, and the exiled Jewish people?

Yaakov cannot be comforted because he senses he is not getting the full story; he knows something is wrong; [perhaps he suspects the brothers' hand in the matter], or, not seeing Joseph's body is left wondering whether he might be alive. But then why is Rachel not comforted as the Jewish people are sent into exile? Does she not know they will one day return? And why is Yaakov's faith not enough to sustain him? Does he not know Hashem plans all things and somehow there is a plan even if its meaning eludes us?

Perhaps what Yaakov was struggling with was the same thing Reb Moshe Chaim Tiefenbrun struggled with four thousand years later; not so much G-d's plan as his own. His question was not 'where was G-d' but rather where was I? Sixty years later he struggled with how he could have run off into the forest leaving his wife and children to be murdered. This was not a logical struggle; after all, who could possibly have imagined? It was an emotional, and even theological struggle. Yaakov's question, in confronting the loss of his beloved Joseph was not where is Joseph, or even where is G-d; but rather 'where was I'?

Sensing there was more to the story than a wild animal's attack, and understanding the conflict the brothers had with Joseph, perhaps Yaakov was struggling with his own complicity and responsibility; had he been the father he was meant to be? Could he perhaps have done a better job at teaching his sons to love each other? Yaakov cannot be comforted because he senses his son's anger towards Joseph the favorite; son of his beloved favorite wife Rachel. Yaakov cannot be comforted because Joseph's disappearance means there is much work to do before the Jewish people, meant to be an ethical role model, can be born. And Yaakov knows deep down: some of that work to be done, is his.

Perhaps it behooves us to struggle with this same question today; as innocent Jewish teens and children are being stabbed and murdered in Israel's streets and terror has reared its ugly head all over the world: in Paris and Kenya, Brussels and Mali. Can we be comforted? Are we too comfortable? The prophet *Yirmiyahu* suggests Rachel cannot be comforted because we still have a lot of work to do.

What that work is and how we can come closer to the world of peace for which we all yearn is at the very least something with which we should struggle. And in this struggle, we should indeed not be comforted.

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom and a wonderful Chanukah, from Jerusalem,

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