

BAR MITZVAH - KEEPING THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The following Dvar Torah was delivered on the occasion of the Bar Mitzvah of Shraga Feivel Zachai, delivered by Rabbi Peretz Zachai, Mashgiach Ruchani of the Yeshiva Gedola of Milwaukee (Transcribed and submitted by Mordechai Cohen)

In Parshas Vayigash [Bereishis 47:8-9], Pharaoh asks Yaakov how old he is. Yaakov responds, "I am 130 years old; few and bad are the years of my life, and I have not reached the lifespan of my father." All the commentaries jump on this response because it is uncharacteristic from someone of Yaakov's nature (Yaakov is known for his emunah - faith - in Hashem). The Ramban asks what is the purpose in telling Pharaoh this (Pharaoh only asked how old he was, not what his life was like), and further, Yaakov may not have reached his father's age yet but he still had years ahead of him and could reach it? The Ramban answers that Yaakov appeared extremely old, far older than a man of his age should have looked, and Pharaoh was asking why he appeared so aged. Yaakov responded to the question by saying that he was really 130 years old, which are few compared to the years of his father, but that he appeared much older because of all the tzaros (hardships) he had endured. So according to the Ramban, Yaakov was justified in his answer to Pharaoh, even though it sounds like he might be complaining.

The Daas Zekanim MeBaalei Tosfos brings down the same explanation of the Ramban, and then cites a Medrash. The Medrash says that when Yaakov said that his years were, "few and bad," Hashem said, "I saved you from Esav and Lavan, I returned Dinah and Yoseph to you, and you complain about your life that it was few and bad! I will deduct from your life (which was supposed to reach that of his father's, Yitzchak, 180 years old) 33 years, one year for each word from the beginning of passuk (sentence) 8 until the end of passuk 9." Clearly this was a big punishment for such a small comment. But when you look at what Yaakov said, how bad was it really? The Daas Zekanim himself had cited that Yaakov was justified in his response, for he was only explaining why he appeared so much older than his true age. Yaakov was but answering Pharaoh; what did he say that warranted such a harsh punishment?

If you look closely at the Daas Zekanim, you can see the answer in his words. True, Yaakov was justified in answering Pharaoh as to why he looked so much older than he was, but it was the manner which he responded that Hashem took him to task for. Hashem had done so much chesed (kindness) to Yaakov over his lifetime (as previously mentioned) that for Yaakov to characterize his life as ONLY few and bad was a gross misrepresentation of what it really was. Yaakov could have

said that his life was few and bad, but to ignore, leave out, and never mention all the chesed that Hashem had done for him was not proper. We must stress that the punishment and level of judgement may seem harsh, but Yaakov Avinu was on a very high level and Hashem looks at everything tzaddikim (the righteous) do with extreme scrutiny.

So what are we supposed to get from this wonderful dvar Torah? Many times it is easy to look at the misfortune that has befallen us and complain about it. This is alright, for when bad things happen, to not complain would take a person of strong will. But we have to remember all of the good things that Hashem has given us and that we have accomplished. Those items are tremendous and many times much bigger than the bad things which are happening around us. When you look at the entire picture, Hashem has truly blessed us, and the years are not "few and bad," but rather many and good. This is an important lesson for a young man, who now faces the rest of his life as a Bar Mitzvah, to carry with him and to remember.

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