

DEFEATING DEATH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The time approached for Yisrael to die, so he called for his son Yosef.

Be'er Mayim Chaim - How did Yaakov know that he was nearing the end of his days in this world? Furthermore, we usually associate the end of life with a diminution of power, of slowing down, of weakening. Considering what might be his frailty and mortality, we would have expected that the name "Yaakov" be used in this pasuk, since that is the name associated with him in a more muted or powerless state. Instead, as he readies himself to take leave of this life, he assumes the role of "Yisrael," which is used to designate him in his powerful, triumphant, potentiated state.

Avrohom is described towards the end of his life as "old, having come into days."² The last phrase begs for explanation; the Zohar³ provides one. Every day of his life, says the Zohar, brought new elevation to Avraham. He did not miss a single one; he came into all his days, and emerged with something positive from each one. All of us, continues the Zohar, are put to the same challenge. Each day has its purpose. On the day of our final judgment, we will have to give an accounting for every day that we failed in our private missions, each person according to his level. For some people, failure to accomplish what we were supposed to achieve will mean having to return as a in some reincarnated form.

While each person is different - and each day in every individual's life is different - the growth is still cumulative. By the time a person's sojourn in this world is over, his soul should be sufficiently elevated to join effortlessly with its Divine source. This means, optimally, having achieved excellence in every important measure.

In several places in Shas, Tanaim and Amoraim saw visions before their deaths of great tzadikim. This follows from what we have been saying. Just prior to their passing from this world, these great people had finished their life's work of elevating their souls. Those souls were therefore attuned to great spiritual elevation. The great tzadikim they saw in their visions symbolized the sterling quality of the souls they themselves possessed as they were poised to enter eternity.

This, then, is what happened to Yaakov. As he approached the end of his days, he attained levels of perfection that he had not reached before. Any slight flaws he previously might have possessed were erased or had faded. Freed of any deficiencies, his soul now reigned with full power. He could not accurately be called Yaakov at this moment. Even though his body was about to give out, his

core being rose to its greatest position of power. He could only be called Yisrael - not Yaakov - at such a time of spiritual ascendancy.

(This is what Chazal mean⁴ when they say that the beauty of Yaakov was like that of Adam. The luster of Yaakov's neshamah at the end of his life resembled that of Adam before the first sin, in his state of perfection. This might also explain why Chazal⁵ insist that Yaakov never died. Death became part of our world only after the first sin in the Garden. Yaakov at the end of his life resembled Adam before the first sin - before death had been ordained as part of human existence. How, then, could death possibly relate to him?)

As all this transpired, Yaakov was aware of the significance of the changes he was undergoing. He realized that he was transitioning to a life in the world of the neshamos; his soul was being prepared for taking its eternal place. He knew, in other words, that the time approached for him to die, and it was time to have the conversation with Yosef.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishis 47:29
 2. Bereishis 24:1
 3. Zohar 1:224A
 4. Bava Metzia 84A
 5. Taanis 4B
-