

THE SPECIAL LEVEL OF YAAKOV

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Special Level of Yaakov, Our Patriarch

The Midrash Tanchuma states, "Reb Shimon Bar Yochai said, "Hashem said to the Klal Yisroel it is important for you to give honor to the mitzvos because the mitzvos themselves are My agents and they represent Me. One's agent is equivalent to the one who sent the agent. If you honor the mitzvos you are honoring Me. If you disgrace the mitzvos then you are disgracing My Honor." There was no person who ever honored mitzvos and kept the Torah more than Yaakov. As it is stated, "Yaakov is the perfect man who dwelt in the tent (of Torah)." It seems from Reb Shimon Bar Yochai that Yaakov's observance of the mitzvos was unequalled by anyone. This statement indicates that even Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the teacher of Klal Yisroel, did not give the same honor to mitzvos as our Patriarch Yaakov. This fact is based on the verse, "Yaakov is the perfect man (ish taam) who dwelt in the tent (of Torah)." How does Reb Shimon Bar Yochai extrapolate from this verse that Yaakov's performance of mitzvos was one of a kind?

Yaakov Avinu, Our Patriarch, possessed an innate purity and wholesomeness that no one else had. The Midrash tells us that when Rivka was pregnant with her twin children, Esav would bolt to exit his mother's womb when she would pass a temple of idolatry. On the other hand, Yaakov would do the same when she passed the Yeshivah of Shem V'Aver. In utero, Yaakov was overwhelmingly inclined to spirituality and holiness, while Esav was inclined to physicality and impurity. The Torah identifies Esav as "the man of the field"- indicating that Esav was the personification of physicality. He was the antithesis of Yaakov, who is referred to as "ish taam - the perfect man". His essence was pure and because of this, Yaakov was able to honor the mitzvos and keep the Torah like no other person.

Moshe Rabbeinu was chosen by Hashem to receive and transmit the Torah to the Jewish people. Being qualified as the conduit for the transmission of something as holy as the Torah, one would think that Moshe would be the one to honor the mitzvos to a greater degree than anyone else would. However, Reb Shimon Bar Yochai understands from Yaakov's appellation of "ish taam" that because of his innate and unique, level of purity, the honor he gave to the mitzvos was also one of a kind. Although the Torah refers to Moshe as the most humble man on the face of the earth, he is not called an "ish taam".

Chazal teach us "Derech Eretz (proper character and qualities) is a prerequisite for Torah." Meaning, one must possess innate qualities and character traits in order to be able to acquire and process

Torah properly. If one does not naturally possess these features, then they must be acquired. In Hilchos Deos (The Laws which pertain to Behavior), the Rambam says that even if one is born with deficient characteristics, he will be able to establish a "second nature" within himself through conditioning.

The Torah states at the end of the Book of Devarim, "Moshe said, "Torah is not in the heavens and not on the other side of the sea..." The Midrash explains that "not in heaven" means that if one possesses a swollen heart and is arrogant, he will not be able to acquire the Torah; an essential quality for the acquisition of Torah is humility. "Not on the other side of the sea," means that if one is engaged in material success such as traveling the high seas for commerce, one is not able to attain the Torah; Torah requires total focus and commitment of time. One cannot achieve both simultaneously.

Yaakov honored the mitzvos and kept the Torah at an unequalled level because he not only possessed purity naturally, but also dedicated his total being to Torah. As the Torah states, "He dwelt in the tent (of Torah)." There are two prerequisites in order to succeed in the observance of mitzvos and keeping the Torah at an advanced level. Firstly, one must have a sterling character and secondly one must be dedicated to the Torah. If one's character is corrupted, or even flawed, it would reflect itself in the Torah that he studies and the observance of his Judaism.

Rabbeinu Bachya asks- if Yaakov's characteristic was "emmes," as it is identified by the Novi (Prophet), why does the Torah refer to Yaakov as "ish taam - the perfect and wholesome person"? He explains that the word "taam" is derived from the word "teumim - twins/synthesis". Yaakov synthesized and brought together the prominent quality of his father Yitzchak, which was Din "perfection - exactness" with that of his grandfather Avraham, which was Chesed "Kindness". He adhered to these two principles in a perfect way - thus becoming the person who personifies them.

2. Relationships are Established only Through One's Worthiness

The parsha begins, "Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and the days of Yaakov - the years of his life were one hundred and forty-seven years." Rashi cites the Midrash, which addresses the paragraph structure of the opening verse of the Portion of Vayechi. It is referred to as a "parsha setumah - a sealed portion". The Midrash offers two interpretations regarding its significance. The first explanation cited by Rashi is that when Yaakov passed away, the eyes and hearts of the Jewish people were sealed (became desensitized) because of the suffering that began with the bondage. In order to appreciate this consequence of Yaakov Avinu's passing, the Portion is "sealed". However, Rashi's explanation seems to contradict a verse in the Portion of Shemos that the bondage began "when Yosef and all his brothers and that entire generation that had come to Egypt had passed away". How do we understand this?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that there were many phases of bondage. The first phase began with the passing of Yaakov Our Patriarch. It started as a spiritual rather than physical bondage,

which manifested itself with some lack of spiritual sensitivity on the part of the Jewish people. As a result, they no longer had the clarity that existed when Yaakov was alive. Since Yosef, the Viceroy of Egypt, was still alive, his family was treated like royalty. They were accorded all the privileges of society. However after Yosef passed away, the Jewish people took on a "second class" status. Ultimately, when the entire generation (and their special spiritual influence) no longer existed, the Egyptian people began the enslavement of the Jews - which evolved into full bondage.

The Torah tells us that Yaakov passed away at the age of 147 years. The Midrash says that initially it was destined that Yaakov should live 180 years as his father Yitzchak had. However, when Yosef presented his father to Pharaoh, Pharaoh was taken aback by the advanced age of Yaakov and asked him "How many are the days of the years of your life?" To that Yaakov responded, "The days of the years of my sojourns have been a hundred and thirty years. Few and bad have been the days of the years..." The Midrash tells us that Yaakov's response was considered inappropriate because rather than being appreciative for all that Hashem had done for him he was complaining about the difficulties that transpired in his life. Hashem had said, "I swear that every word of your expression to Pharaoh which equals 33 words, will cause 33 years to be deducted from your life." Thus, Yaakov lived 147 years.

Every moment of Yaakov's existence had infinite worth. The value of 33 years of Yaakov's life is incalculable. The effect of Yaakov's influence on his family and on all of existence would have eternally brought the Jewish people to another level if it had continued for this period. Thus, the effect of his life being shortened is unfathomable. The destiny of the Jewish people was diminished by Yaakov's passing and its effect was immediate. Instantly, the Jewish people lost their level of spiritual sensitivity. This is what Chazal meant when they said that the slavery began with the passing of Yaakov. It initiated a chain of events that first caused a spiritual bondage of the Jewish people and eventually culminated in the physical one that took effect when the entire generation passed away.

The Midrash tells us that Yosef was meant to live 120 years. However, his life was cut short by 10 years and he passed away at the age of 110. When Yehudah initially presented his case vindicating Binyamin before Yosef, (as the Viceroy - not realizing that it was his brother), Yehudah expressed himself by saying, "my father (Yaakov), your servant". This was repeated ten times. The Midrash tells us that because Yosef remained silent when he heard his father called "his servant," it was considered disrespect. As a result, Yosef's life was shortened by ten years for each of the times that his father was referred to as "his servant".

Yosef was the wisest of all Yaakov's children. He reflected the spiritual characteristics of his father in every way. He was the Viceroy and the provider for all of Egypt and specifically for his family. His passing ten years before his time expedited the bondage.

Hashem only wants what is in the best interest for the Jewish people. He presents opportunities for

us to advance ourselves spiritually. However, He would not allow the failures of Yaakov or Yosef to be overlooked nor permit them to live out their years as if they had not sinned.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos states that a number of times each day a Heavenly Voice (Bas Kol), which emanates from the ruins of Jerusalem, bemoans the state of the Jewish people vis-à-vis Hashem and His relationship with His children - the Jewish people. One could say, if Hashem is so saddened and pained by the exile of the Jewish people, then maybe He should end the exile and rebuild Jerusalem. However, this is not the case because a relationship is two-sided. We must be worthy to be the beneficiary of that special relationship. It is only through correcting our failings that we will merit the Ultimate Redemption and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

3. Understanding the Specialness of Rochel's Burial Location

The Torah states, "And it came to pass after these things that someone said to Yosef, "Behold! - your father is ill." So he took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, with him...Yaakov said, "And now your two sons who were born to you in Egypt before my coming to you in Egypt shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuvain and Shimon..." Yaakov is saying that although Manasseh and Ephraim are only his grandchildren, and were not fathered or raised under his influence and tutelage, nevertheless, they have the same status as his own children, Reuvain and Shimon. Thus, they were established as the "shivtei Ka - the Tribes of Hashem". Yaakov continues to say to Yosef, "But as for me - when I came from Paddan, Rochel died on me in the land of Canaan on the road, while there was still a stretch of land to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem."

Yaakov explained to Yosef that he did not bury his mother Rochel in the Tomb of Machpelah along with the Matriarchs and Patriarchs, but rather "on the road". Rashi cites the Midrash which states that Yaakov said to Yosef, "I did not bring your mother Rochel even into Bethlehem (which is Eretz Yisroel), and I know that you (Yosef) have a claim in your heart against me (for not burying Rochel in the Tomb of Machpelah). However, you should know that it was according to the Word of Hashem that I buried her there, so that she should be a help to her children when Nevuzardan will exile them. When they will pass on that road she will come out of her grave and cry and plead on their behalf for Rachamim (Mercy)... and Hashem will respond - the children will return to their border."

Yosef understood that his father Yaakov was the Patriarch who personified Torah and Emes (Truth). His behavior and decisions were in accordance with the Will of Hashem. Yaakov's actions were the equivalent of dictates given at Sinai. If this is the case, then why did Yosef have "a claim in his heart" against his father? How could he have questioned his father's decision regarding the burial of his mother Rochel "on the road"? If Yaakov buried her on the way to Bethlehem, it is obvious that it was the Will of Hashem.

If Yaakov understood that Yosef harbored this claim in his heart against him since the passing of his mother Rochel, then why is it that Yaakov did not explain his decision to Yosef sooner? Is it that

Yosef did not have the capacity to comprehend the situation at an earlier age? This could not be the case since Yosef is referred to as wisest of all of Yaakov's children. The Midrash explains that all of the Torah knowledge that Yaakov learned in the Yeshivah of Shem V'Aver was transmitted to Yosef. It is evident that Yosef had an unlimited capacity and capability to process the most difficult and advanced concepts. If this is the case, then why did Yaakov withhold this information from Yosef until the time before his passing? How do we understand this?

The Torah tells us that when Rochel, our Matriarch, passed away, Yaakov moved his bed from her tent into the tent of Bilhah, her maidservant. One would think that since Bilhah was only a maidservant and not a Matriarch that Yaakov should have moved his bed into the tent of Leah. In fact, this lack of understanding caused Reuvain to take offense at his father's behavior and thus, he moved his father's bed into the tent of his mother Leah. Reuvain's action was considered a serious transgression that is the equivalent of having cohabited with the concubine of his father. Although Leah was the Matriarch, Yaakov believed that his place was with Bilhah. Evidently, there is spiritual commonality between Rochel her maidservant Bilhah.

Yosef had dreamt that the sun, the moon and eleven stars would bow to him. The sun represents Yaakov, his father, and the moon represents his mother. Yaakov scolded Yosef for telling over this dream to his brothers because it was obvious that since his mother, Rochel, had already passed away, the dream could not have any value. Rashi cites Chazal that the moon bowing to Yosef represented Bilhah, the maidservant of Rochel, who raised him as her own child. Therefore, the dream was accurate. Bilhah had the ability to provide Yosef with what he needed for his development, just as his mother Rochel had done. The representation of Bilhah as a person was similar to that of Rochel. Thus, just as Rochel was the essential element of the home vis-à-vis Yaakov, so too was Bilhah. Therefore, when Rochel passed away, Yaakov moved his bed into the tent of Bilhah because she was a representation of Rochel.

Rochel was the Matriarch who had the ability to subordinate and consecrate the physical. Her essence represented the ultimate in physicality selflessly dedicated to Hashem. When Yaakov initially met Rochel, the Torah tells us that he cried because through Divine Inspiration he saw that she would not be buried with him in the Tomb of Machpelah. Yaakov understood that Rochel was his true soul mate; however, he did not understand why she would not be buried alongside him in the Tomb of Machpelah and he did not share his vision with his children.

The basis for Yosef's claim against his father seems to have legitimacy. If in fact Rochel was the primary Matriarch of the Jewish people because she was the true soul mate of his father, then why was she not buried alongside Yaakov? Rochel is referred to as the "akeres ha'bayis". The Midrash explains this to mean that she was the essential of the household.

Yosef's function vis-à-vis his family was to ensure the spiritual survival of the Jewish people in exile. He had inherited from his mother the ability to subordinate and dominate the physical for the sake of

the spiritual. Just as Yosef ensured the survival of the Jewish people in Egypt, Rochel's function was to ensure the survival of the Jewish people in the Babylonian exile through her prayers. Yaakov was told (by Hashem) to bury her "on the road" so that she could beseech Hashem for His Mercy when her children passed by her grave on their way to exile. It was only because of her special dimension of person and tefillah (prayers) that the Jews would ultimately be able to return to the Land of Israel. As the verse states, "...and the children will return to their border..."

If in fact the reason Yaakov buried Rochel "on the road" was because of her need to beseech Hashem, then why did Yaakov not reveal this fact to Yosef? Why did he allow him to harbor ill feelings all these years against him?

The answer is - as much as Yosef reflected all the qualities of his father and was therefore loved to a greater degree than all of his brothers, he was not the Patriarch of exile (golus). Yaakov is the Patriarch who represents golus. He established within himself (and thus within all of his offspring to the end of time) the ability to survive the influences of exile. As we see, Yaakov authored the Maariv Prayer Service, which is said in the evening. Nighttime, as it is explained throughout the Talmud, is a representation of exile. All of Yaakov's children, except for Binyamin, were born in exile. No other Patriarch experienced exile like Yaakov. Although Yosef was similar to his father in every sense of the word, he could not fully appreciate and internalize the reality of what it takes to survive golus until he took over his father's role.

When Yaakov was about to pass away, he transferred the responsibility as the Patriarch of golus to Yosef. It was only at that time that Yosef could understand and appreciate the reason and need for Rochel to be buried "on the road". Without Rochel's pleading for Hashem's Mercy, the Jews would not be guaranteed the return to their homeland.

4. The Dichotomy In Every Jew's Life

The Torah tells us that when Yosef was informed that his father was ill, he took his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh to receive a blessing from Yaakov. The Torah states, "So he took with him (eemo) his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim." We find that when the Torah wants to say "with him" it expresses itself in one of two ways, "eemo" and "eeto". For example, when the family of Noach accompanied him into the Ark, the Torah states, "Noach, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives with him (eeto), went into the Ark..." The Torah uses the word "eeto - with him" to indicate that the individuals accompanying Noach were secondary to him (they were not entering the Ark based on their own worthiness). The only reason Noach's family was permitted onto the Ark was because of their association with him.

By contrast, the Torah uses the word "eemo" regarding Ephraim and Manasseh to indicate that although they were going to receive a blessing from Yaakov as the sons of Yosef, they were also deserving of a blessing from Yaakov, in their own right.

Yaakov designated Ephraim and Manasseh to establish two of the Tribes of Israel. Although they

were only his grandchildren, the Torah states, "...Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuvain and Shimon..." Thus Yaakov, our Patriarch, designated his children as Tribes.

It is interesting to note that when Yaakov established Ephraim and Manasseh as the equivalents of Reuvain and Shimon, one would think that this was Yaakov's blessing to them; and in fact it would seem that this was the greatest blessing of all - to be considered one of the Tribes of Israel, (the shivtei Ka - Tribes of Hashem). However, it is clear from the text that this is not the case. How do we understand this?

Yaakov continued to address Ephraim and Manasseh to give them his blessing. The Torah states, "Then Yisroel saw Yosef's sons and said, "Who are these?" Rashi cites Chazal who explain that when he was about to bless his grandchildren Yaakov had an interruption in his Divine Inspiration (Ruach HaKadosh) that caused him concern regarding who he was about to bless. This occurred because through Ruach HaKadosh Yaakov saw that Ephraim would have evil decedents (such as Yeravum Ben Nevot and Achov). When Yosef prayed for Yaakov to regain his spiritual connection, he continued and blessed Ephraim and Manasseh. The question is - why is this blessing that Yaakov gave his grandchildren considered greater than the one that established them as Tribes?

Actually, the Torah addresses two issues. The first is "who is the person?" Meaning, what is his status? The second issue is - regardless of whom the person may be, on what level is he deserving? This will determine whether he is worthy of the blessing or not. The Torah addresses the first question: Ephraim and Manasseh are equivalent to Reuvain and Shimon, who are Tribes. Then, Yaakov goes on to bless his grandchildren based on their worthiness. Therefore, when Yaakov had an interruption in his Divine Inspiration, it was an indication of their lack of merit. It was only after Yosef prayed that Yaakov regained his Ruach HaKadosh and blessed his grandchildren.

The Gemara tells us that even if a Jew becomes an apostate he is nevertheless a Jew because there is a question of "who he is". However, regarding how much he deserves is another issue.

Every morning we recite the Psukei D'Zimra (Verses of Praise), followed by the Shema and its blessings, and finally the Amidah (Silent Prayer). The Chofetz Chaim explains in his work Mishna Berurah (Elucidation of the Code of Laws) that the purpose of reciting the Psukei D'Zimra is to make one worthy so that his tefillah should be accepted. Regardless of the level of fervor and intent that one expresses in his prayers, if he is not worthy, then his prayers could be rejected. By reciting the Psukei D'Zimra, one establishes a worthiness, which will cause Hashem to be attentive to his tefillah.

As Jews, we have the privilege of being able to enter into an audience with Hashem when we pray because of who we are. Hashem regards the Jewish people as "My Children". However, after we understand who we are, we need to have the worthiness for Hashem to be attentive and accept our prayers.

The Gemara tells us that Hillel HaZokein (Hillel the Elder) had eighty Talmidim (students). The greatest of them all was Reb Yonason Ben Uziel and the least of them was Reb Yochanon Ben

Zakai. The Gemara states regarding Torah knowledge, there was no difference between Hillel's greatest student and his smallest student. The Gemara asks, if this is the case, what is the difference between them? It answers that when birds would fly over the head of Reb Yonason Ben Uziel as he studied Torah, they would be consumed by fire; this was not the case with Reb Yochanon Ben Zakai, even though he had as much knowledge. The Ramchal explains that the determining factor is one's spiritual dimension. Two individuals can be geniuses and possess the same level of knowledge, yet the ability to impact existence is determined by the person's dimension. Reb Yonason Ben Uziel's Torah study had an effect that was at a different level than that of Reb Yochanan, even though they studied the same words.

Ephraim and Manasseh in terms of their dimension and status were equivalent to Reuvain and Shimon - Tribes of Israel. However, in terms of receiving Yaakov's blessing, that was determined by their own worthiness.

5. The Significance of Knowing the End of Time

The parsha begins, "Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and the days of Yaakov - the years of his life were one hundred and forty-seven years." Rashi cites the Midrash, which addresses the paragraph structure of the opening verse of the Portion of Vayechi. It is referred to as a "parsha setumah - a sealed portion". One of the interpretations regarding the significance of the parsha being "sealed" is that Yaakov wished to reveal the end of time (ha'keiytz) to his sons but it was closed off from him (concealed). The keitz is the end of time when Moshiach will come. One must understand the value of being privy to the time of the keitz. Why would Yaakov want to share this with his children? Secondly, what was the purpose of Hashem communicating the time of the keitz to Yaakov?

Rabbeinu Bachya cites a Midrash, which states that initially Yaakov was about to reveal the keitz to his sons but he hesitated because he thought that they might not be worthy to have this information. Yaakov paused to reflect on his hesitation. The concern he had was that maybe his children were unworthy because they were tainted with sin. However, he concluded that this is not the case because the Hebrew letters "Ches" and "Tes" which spell "Chet" (sin) did not appear in their names. This was a confirmation that they were pure enough to be informed about the keitz - the coming of Moshiach.

The Midrash continues that when Yaakov was about to reveal the keitz (based on his conclusion) he hesitated again because he realized that the letters "kuf" and "tzadi" which spell keitz (indicating to Yaakov that he should be privy to this information) did not appear among the names of his sons. Yaakov concluded that regardless of their purity or spiritual standing the keitz must be concealed.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that if a judge renders a false ruling he deserves to have his life taken. However, if a judge offers a truthful ruling, then he is considered a "partner" with Hashem in creation. The Gemara states that if this is the level of liability that the judge faces, then

one would be afraid to render judgment, being concerned that his decision may not be correct and truthful. The Gemara concludes that if a judge is qualified and his intent is to offer a truthful judgment, then there is no culpability for the ruling because he can only render a decision based on his understanding. A judge cannot perceive situations beyond his capabilities and therefore there is no personal liability. Regarding a *bais din* (rabbinic court), the Gemara tells us that if the judges are men of integrity and are qualified, Hashem will assist them to perceive the case correctly. Since a human being is fallible, the judge will be helped to render a proper judgment because in effect it is "Hashem's judgment".

We ask why is knowing the *keitz* a vital piece of information? If a person was capable of seeing into the future, he could then create and establish strategies to deal with and affect the coming events. Because of his spiritual dimension, Hashem allowed Yaakov to know about the end of time. Yaakov had the capacity to establish the necessary safeguards that would have far-reaching affects on the Jewish people until the end of time. Yaakov's question was - should he reveal the *keitz* to his children so that they could also affect the destiny of the Jewish people. If Yaakov's children became aware of the time for the coming of *Moshiach*, they would have been able to affect and determine the destiny of all future generations. However, any spiritual deficiency or imperfection that they might have possessed, even at a minimal level, would have caused a distorted understanding of what would be necessary to influence the future. Consequently, there would have been a ripple effect throughout the generations that would become increasingly negative with the passage of time.

This is why Yaakov hesitated to share this information with his children. If their names contained "Ches and Tes" spelling "chet - sin," it would have indicated that the children lacked the purity to institute what was necessary for the future generations. However, after realizing that their names did not contain these letters, Yaakov felt that they should be privy to the information. Afterwards, when he understood that the letters "kuf and tzadi," which spell *keitz*, were not contained in their names, it indicated to him that this information should be withheld. After concluding that the *keitz* should not be revealed, Yaakov understood that it was the responsibility of the Torah sages and the leaders of each generation to determine how they should affect the present and the future.

Rev Nechunya Ben Ha'Kaneh authored a prayer that one recites before beginning the study of Torah. It is stated in The Code of Jewish Law that it is proper to recite this tefillah before one begins studying Torah. Upon entering a *Bais Ha'Medrash* (Study Hall) one should say, "It should be Your Will...that I should not stumble in an issue of *Halacha* (law)." Regardless of one's level of genius or proficiency in Torah, one is not infallible. Even the greatest Torah Sage must rely on Heavenly Assistance to be able to have a full grasp of the issues. Therefore, we pray to Hashem to give us the necessary understanding so that we should not fail and render an incorrect ruling.

Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](#), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.