

STAND AND DELIVER

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week the Book of Braishis ends. Yaakov (Jacob) summoned his son Yoseph (Joseph) and discussed final arrangements with him. He asked to be transported to Chevron and to be interred in the same cave as his father, mother, and grandparents. Yoseph returned home and an unprecedented event occurred. Yaakov took ill. He is the first human that the Torah records as getting sick. Yoseph was informed and quickly hurried to his father's bedside. The Torah tells us that when Yoseph was announced, "Israel (Jacob) exerted himself and sat up on the bed" (Genesis 48:2). Yoseph enters the room and Yaakov proceeded to recount major events of his life to him. Yaakov talked about his divine revelations and the blessings that the Almighty bestowed upon him. He discussed the death of Rachel and explained why he buried her in Bethlehem and not Hebron. Then Yaakov proceeded to bless his beloved son Yoseph's children in a unique manner. He designates Yoseph's children as shevatim (tribes) with equal rights and inheritance as his other sons.

One portion of the episode needs clarification. The Torah is usually short on detail. Why then does the Torah tell us that when Yoseph walked in Yaakov exerted himself and sat up in bed? Why is that significant? Who cares if he sat up or lay down? If he was able to sit, why should he not? And if it was very difficult for him to sit up, why did he? And isn't what Yaakov said more relevant than how he said it?

Rashi explains that the seemingly supplementary detail teaches us a lesson. A father whose son has risen to power must show respect. It may have been quite difficult for Yaakov to sit, however it was important. One must show respect for royalty, even if it is his own child who has risen to power. I'd like to analyze the incident from another angle.

American historian Paul F. Boller Jr. relates the following story: At noon on January 1st 1863, the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation was placed in front of Abraham Lincoln. He stared intensely at it as it lay before him on his desk. He picked up his pen to sign it, and was about to dip the quill into the ink when he hesitated and put his arm down. He paused, closed his eyes, and began the process again. Determinedly he picked up the quill, dipped it in the ink, and put it down. With a grim face he turned to Secretary of State William N. Seward and said, "My hands have been shaking since nine o'clock this morning. My right hand is almost paralyzed. If I am ever to go down into history, it will be for this act. My whole self is in it. However, if my hand trembles when I sign this proclamation, whoever examines it will say hereafter, 'he hesitated'".

With that, the President mustered his strength, dipped the quill into the ink, and slowly but

resolutely signed in perfect form -- Abraham Lincoln.

As he lay on his deathbed, Yaakov Avinu was about to perform an unprecedented act. He was about to bestow the title of shevatim, tribes, to his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe. This was an honor only relegated to his own children. Then he blessed them with words that were destined to become the hallmark of paternal blessings for generations to come. "By you shall (the children of) Israel bless their children - May G-d shall make you like Ephraim and Menashe. Thus shall be your children."

Those were not blessings that could be endowed in a prone position. As weak as Yaakov was, he knew that the future of two young tribes lay in the strength of his blessing. He wouldn't give it lying down. Yaakov Avinu knew that any sign of weakness that he would convey in transferring that most important message would be recognized for eternity. He mustered his strength and sat up to give that blessing that would wax eternal. Execution of great actions needs great strength and fortitude. Our forefather Yaakov knew that just as there are things you can't take lying down, there are also many things, namely greatness and blessing, that you cannot give lying down.

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***Liluly Nishmas Reb Yosef ben Reb Ahron Shmuel O"H 13 Teves
Good Shabbos!***

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