

THE GOOD LIFE

by Shlomo Katz

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Vayechi

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Today's Learning:

Bava Batra 9:5-6

Orach Chaim 559:6-8

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Metzia 37

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Shevi'it 5

In this week's parashah we read of the last years of Yaakov's life. The Midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah (Ch. 5) sums up Yaakov's life in a way that is, at first glance, startling:

Why, asks the Midrash, did Yaakov merit to live a life free of pain and free of the yetzer hara, a portent of what G-d is destined to give tzaddikim in the world to come? Because he sat in the bet midrash from his youth until his old age and was expert in Mikrah / Bible, Mishnah, Halachah and Aggadah, as it is written (Bereishit 25:27), "Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents" [i.e., the tent of Torah study].

The Midrash continues: When Yaakov left his father's house to go to the house of Lavan, the Shechinah came and "stood" over him, and said, "Yaakov, My son! Lift up your eyes and see the twelve constellations in the heavens, the twelve hours of the day, and the twelve hours of the night. All of these 'twelves' parallel the twelve tribes which I am destined to give you."

When Yaakov came from Lavan's house and Yosef was sold, Yaakov cried for him for 22 years, as it is written (Bereishit 37:35), "All of his sons and daughters arose to comfort him . . . and his father bewailed him." Do you think, asks the Midrash, that he was crying for Yosef? Rather, he was afraid that the covenant that G-d had made with him had been abrogated because he had married two sisters [which the Torah would later prohibit] or because he might have improperly benefitted from Lavan's property. G-d therefore had mercy on him and gave him 17 years in his old age whose goodness was a taste of Olam Haba. Based on this, the Sages say that if someone experienced one year of goodness in his old age, it is a good omen for him. Yaakov enjoyed seventeen good years when he was in Egypt, and G-d viewed it as if all of Yaakov's days were good. [Thus ends the Midrash]

This Midrash requires explanation, for it seems from reading that Torah that Yaakov did not live a life free of pain! Moreover, what is the meaning of the statement, "G-d viewed it as if all of Yaakov's days were good"? What was Yaakov's own opinion?

The answer may be as follows: When the Midrash informs us that Yaakov was not crying for Yosef, but rather for the covenant which Yaakov feared had been abrogated, it is teaching us a tzaddik's outlook on life. Every event is measured and evaluated by the tzaddik in light of question: "What implication does this have for my service of G-d?" It follows, therefore, that when Yaakov experienced 17 years at the end of his life whose goodness was a taste of the World-to-Come, years in which he was able to accomplish every spiritual goal that he had hoped to accomplish in his life - this is the meaning of the fact that G-d viewed all of Yaakov's days as good - all of Yaakov's prior sorrows were simply wiped away. (Based on the commentary Shai La'mora)

"Then Yisrael saw Yosef's sons, and he said, 'Who are these?'

"Yosef said to his father, 'They are my sons whom G-d has given me 'ba-zeh' / with this'." (48:8-9)

R' Yoel Laib Halevi Herzog z"l (1865-1933; Chief Rabbi of Paris; father of Israeli Chief Rabbi, R'Yitzchak Isaac Halevi Herzog z"l) asks, as do many other commentators: Didn't Yaakov know Yosef's sons? He had just declared (in verse 5): "Ephraim and Menashe will be to me like Reuven and Shimon"! Also, what is meant by "ba-zeh"? R' Herzog explains:

Earlier (in verses 3-4), Yaakov had said to Yosef, "El Shakkai had appeared to me in Luz in the land of Canaan and He blessed me. He said to me, 'Behold! I will make you fruitful and numerous; I will make you a congregation of nations'." Rashi explains that Yaakov was telling Yosef the following:

[Hashem] announced to me that there were yet to issue from me an assembly of peoples; Now, it is true that He then said to me, (Bereishit 35:11) "A nation and an assembly of nations [shall be from you]," but when He said "a nation," He intended it to refer to Binyamin who was not yet born. This promise of "a nation" has been fulfilled by the birth of Binyamin, and for that reason I do not mention

it now. However, "An assembly of nations [shall be from you]" presupposes that two more would descend from me besides Binyamin. Consequently, since no other son besides Binyamin was born to me, [I realize that G-d] was really telling me that one of my tribes would be divided so as to constitute at least two tribes, thus giving that son more importance. That privilege I confer upon you.

Yaakov did know that Yosef had entered with his sons, writes R' Herzog. However, the Torah (verse 6) implies that Yosef had other sons besides Menashe and Ephraim, and Yaakov, who could barely see, was not sure which sons Yosef had brought with him. Therefore Yaakov asked, "Who are these? Which sons of yours are these?"

Yosef answered: "They are my sons whom G-d has given me 'ba- zeh'." He meant the following:

The Torah relates regarding the time when Rivka was pregnant with Yaakov and Esav (Bereishit 25:22), "The children agitated within her, and she said, 'If so, why am I zeh / thus?'" Commentaries note that the gematria of "zeh" is twelve, and they explain that Rivka meant, "How can I bear to carry twelve tribes [which Yitzchak, not Yaakov, was destined to father] if pregnancy is so difficult"? [Because of this complaint, she lost the right to be the mother of the Twelve Tribes.]

Yosef was alluding to this same "zeh" when he answered his father. "You wish to know which of my children I brought with me? They are the ones that G-d gave to me to be part of "zeh" - part of the Twelve Tribes." (Imrei Yoel: Vayechi, Drush Bet)

"Yosef saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head and it displeased him; so he supported his father's hand to remove it from upon Ephraim's head to Menashe's head. And Yosef said to his father, 'Not so, Father, for this is the firstborn; place your right hand on his head'." (48:17-18)

R' Eliyahu Capsali z"l (Crete; early 17th century) observes: The Torah does not suggest that Ephraim objected to or resisted his father's attempt to deprive him of Yaakov's primary blessing. Remaining silent would be a challenge for most people. Thus, this demonstrates the extent to which Ephraim excelled in observing the mitzvah of Kibud Av Va'em / honoring parents.

This may be the reason that Ephraim's descendant, Yehoshua bin Nun was chosen to led the war against Amalek. Amalek was a descendant of Esav, who also excelled at honoring his father. Only someone who shared in the merit of honoring parents could overcome the protection that Esav enjoyed because of that mitzvah. (Me'ah She'arim: end of Sha'ar 26)

"Then Yaakov called for his sons and said, 'Assemble yourselves and I will tell you what will befall you in the End of Days.'" (49:1) Rashi comments: "He wished to reveal to them the end of Israel's exile, but the Shechinah departed from him, and he began to speak of other things."

R' Yechezkel Abramsky z"l (prominent scholar from the non- chassidic "school"; died 1976) once

asked R' Yisrael Alter z"l (the "Gerrer Rebbe"; died 1977) why Gerrer chassidim constantly sing joyous tunes, even during the High Holiday prayers. The Rebbe answered by referring to the above comment by Rashi, and explaining it as follows:

Why did the Shechinah have to depart from Yaakov? the Rebbe asked. If G-d did not want the time of the redemption revealed, why didn't He simply command Yaakov not to reveal it?

The answer is that G-d did not remove His Presence from Yaakov. Rather, when Yaakov looked prophetically at the dark days that would precede the final redemption, he became saddened. When one is sad, the Shechinah leaves on its own. And, that being the case, we must sing joyously if we want the Shechinah to remain with us when we pray. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

R' Aharon David Burack z"l

R' Burack is believed to have been the first Orthodox rabbi in American history to receive a lifetime contract from his congregation. Born in Poplon, Shavel County, Lithuania in 1893, he was first taught by his father, and later he studied under R' Baruch Ber Lebowitz (1864-1939) at Yeshivat Knesset Bet Yitzchak in Slobodka, and under R' Yosef Laib Bloch and R' Chaim Rabinowitz in Telz. (The Slobodka yeshiva of R' Lebowitz was a different institution than the famous "Slobodka Yeshiva" of R' Nosson Zvi Finkel. Later, R' Lebowitz would move to Kamenitz.)

When World War I broke out in 1914, R' Burack was drafted into the Russian Army, but he succeeded in fleeing across the border to Memel, Germany. Later, he emigrated to the United States, where he was appointed to the faculty of Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan (RIETS). He also was appointed rabbi of Congregation Ohel Moshe Chevrah Tehilim in Brooklyn, where he served for almost 40 years, until his death.

R' Burack was an active leader of the Agudat Harabbanim / Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, the leading rabbinic organization in North America before World War II. Together with R' Dr. Dov Revel, R' Burack often found himself defending the policies of RIETS and the young Yeshiva College before the Agudat Harabbanim.

R' Burack published Pirchei Aharon, which includes some of his lectures at RIETS and lectures that he delivered when he visited yeshivot in Israel in 1927, 1949 and 1958. A second volume of Pirchei Aharon includes derashot which he delivered in Hebrew, Yiddish and English.

R' Burack died in New York on the second day of Sukkot, 5721 / 1960.

R' Baruch Ber Lebowitz (see above) taught: "The Jewish people's belief in Hashem derives specifically from the Exodus. One who believes in G-d, but not because he acknowledges the

Exodus, is like someone who tries to keep a tree alive while cutting off its roots.

"Even if a person could ascend to the heavens and see G-d's glory with his own eyes, even if a person's belief in G-d were confirmed by an infinite number of miracles, his faith would not be the faith of the Jewish people. The faith of the Jewish people flows specifically through the 'pipeline' of the Exodus. This is what makes a Jew unique - he looks at everything through the lens which reveals the wonders of reward and punishment displayed at the time of the Exodus." (Quoted in L'orach Yesharim on Orchot Chaim)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.
