

YAAKOV'S DESCENT TO EGYPT

by Shlomo Katz

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Vayigash
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Today's Learning:
Negaim 9:2-3
O.C. 147:7-148:1
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Menachot 89
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Yevamot

In this week's parashah, we read that Yaakov descended to Egypt with his family, thus beginning the long period of exile, and later, bondage, in Egypt. Our Sages tell us that the famine that was "supposed" to last for seven years ended after only two years because Yaakov's arrival in Egypt brought blessing to that country.

When we read last week's and this week's parashot, G-d's plan seems relatively straightforward. The Jewish people needed to be enslaved in Egypt, so G-d caused a famine that would bring about Yaakov's migration to that country. That is apparently why the famine ended as soon as Yaakov arrived - its purpose had been accomplished.

At the end of this week's parashah, we read that the famine caused nearly all of the wealth of Egypt and the surrounding nations to become concentrated in Pharaoh's hands. Why does the Torah relate this information? Seemingly, the story of the famine has ended with Yaakov's arrival in Egypt!

The Zohar informs us that G-d's plan for history is not as obvious as might appear. In fact, the famine had another purpose other than bringing Bnei Yisrael to Egypt. More than two centuries after the events described in this week's parashah, Bnei Yisrael would leave Egypt carrying fabulous wealth. Where did that wealth come from? The Zohar tells us that a key purpose of the famine was to bring wealth to Egypt in order to fulfill G-d's promise to Avraham (Bereishit 15:14): "Afterwards they shall leave with great wealth." This explains why the Torah adds the additional details about the famine that we find at the end of the parashah. More importantly, perhaps, it teaches us an important lesson about hashgachah pratit / G-d's "hands-on" direction of history. It goes without saying that we often do not perceive G-d's plan as history is developing. However, we sometimes think that we do understand history after the fact. Even this may not be so, the Zohar teaches. We thought we understood the famine when we saw Yaakov descend to Egypt. In fact, a primary purpose of the famine was not revealed until 210 years later. (Based on a lecture by R' Shlomo Naiman shlita)

"Then you will have brought me in my old age in sorrow to she'ol." (44:29)

One meaning of "She'ol" is Gehinom. In the "olden-days," observed R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (mashgiach of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Shanghai in the 1940's), people truly believed in the existence of Gan Eden and Gehinom. Thus, as long as Yaakov thought that Yosef was dead, Yaakov had no doubt at all that he would descend to gehinom. (This was because he believed that he had failed in his mission to create the twelve tribes of Israel.) Similarly, Yosef's intention in acting cruelly to his brothers was, according to Ramban, to lessen the punishment which they would receive at the hands of G-d. He had no question at all that G-d does punish people for their sins and he therefore considered it to be in their best interests to suffer at Yosef's hands in this world.

Today, continued R' Levenstein, we have lost this strong faith. We ignore the fact that death is inevitable and every person will have to answer for his deeds. The Gemara (Berachot 31a) relates that the sage Mar Zutra was once asked to sing at a wedding. He sang, "Woe to us that we will die." Apparently, this was not considered inappropriate by the other guests. Imagine, in contrast, the uproar that would ensue if a rabbi were to give such a speech at a wedding today!

(Mi'mizrach Hashemesh)

"When they related to him all the words that Yosef had spoken to them, and he saw the agalot / wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, then the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived." (45:27)

Why was Yaakov's spirit revived when he saw the wagons that Yosef sent? Rashi explains: As evidence that it was Yosef who was sending a message to Yaakov, the Egyptian viceroy had informed Yaakov's sons of the Torah subject he had been studying with his father Yaakov when he last left him. It was the section of the eglah arufah / the heifer that had its neck broken [when a

corpse was found murdered on the road - see Devarim 21:6]. This is why the Torah says, "He saw the agalot that Yosef had sent," rather than, "that Pharaoh had sent." [Yosef made a play on words, as agalot can mean both wagons and heifers.]

R' Yishayah of Tirani (Italy; 13th century) asks: Why had Yaakov been studying the law of eglah arufah with Yosef when they had parted 22 years before? He explains (based on the Talmud Yerushalmi):

When Yosef left Yaakov's home, Yaakov accompanied him. Yosef said to him, "Father, please go home so I will not be punished for troubling you."

Yaakov answered: "In the future, there will be a law of eglah arufah through which the elders of a town will receive atonement for death of a murdered way-fairer. You might ask: why do those elders need atonement? The answer is that the elders of a town are responsible if a traveler is sent on his way without proper provisions and accompaniment, and he is killed [either by other travelers or while himself trying to rob other travelers]. Therefore, I, too, must accompany you down the road."

(Nimukei Chumash Le'Rabbeinu Yishayah)

"[Yosef] appeared before him, fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck excessively." (46:29)

Rashi comments: Yaakov, however, did not fall upon Yosef's neck, nor did he kiss him. Our Rabbis say that the reason was that Yaakov was reciting the Shema.

Numerous commentaries ask: Why was Yaakov reciting the Shema? If it was the time to recite the Shema, why did Yosef not do so? If, on the other hand, it was not the time for Shema, why did Yaakov recite it? R' Moshe Shick z"l ("Maharam Shick"; Hungary; 1805-1879) answers that it was not the time for reciting the Shema, and Yaakov recited it for a different reason. He explains:

One of the basic lessons of the verse Shema Yisrael is that "Hashem is Elokeinu." By saying Shema, we acknowledge that there is only One G-d, despite the fact that we see various manifestations of Him. For example, Hashem is sometimes merciful and sometimes strict. (The Name "Hashem" represents G-d's Attribute of Mercy, while the Name "Elokim" represents G-d's Attribute of Justice.) Although we rarely understand how this is so, what we perceive as G-d's strictness is ultimately for our own good; in the long-run, it is merciful.

For twenty-two years, the number of years that Yosef was missing, Yaakov saw only the strict side of G-d's actions. But when he saw Yosef's royal entourage, he understood that Yosef's disappearance was part of Hashem's plan for saving Yaakov and his family from famine. Ultimately, everything that had happened was for the best; "Hashem is Elokeinu."

Realizing this, Yaakov recited the Shema. Yosef, however, had already learned this lesson when he was freed from jail and appointed viceroy. He had no reason to recite the Shema at this moment.

(Maharam Shick Al Ha'Torah)

R' Asher Zelig Schwartz z"l (Romania; 1920's) offers another answer to the above question: In verse 28, immediately preceding Yaakov's reunion with Yosef, we read, "[Yaakov] sent Yehuda ahead of him to Yosef, to prepare the way ahead of him in Goshen." (Rashi explains that Yaakov sent Yehuda to establish a yeshiva for the arriving immigrants.) In verse 30, immediately following Yaakov's reunion with Yosef, we read, "Then Yisrael said to Yosef, 'Now I can die, after my having seen your face'." The connection between verses 28 (establishing a yeshiva), 29 (reciting the Shema), and 30 (being willing to die) is as follows:

The Gemara states: "If someone meets the yetzer hara and cannot prevail against it, he should drag it to the bet midrash [where he should study Torah]. If he thus defeats the yetzer hara, good! If not, he should recite the Shema. If he thus defeats the yetzer hara, good! If not, he should imagine the day of death." Says R' Schwartz: Yaakov was afraid that seeing Yosef in all his glory as Prime Minister would make him (Yaakov) feel pride, or would bring out some other improper feeling. Yaakov therefore took all of the steps suggested by the Gemara: he established a bet midrash, he recited the Shema, and he imagined the day of death.

R' Schwartz adds: If imagining the day of death is an effective means of conquering the yetzer hara, why is it only the fall-back strategy? Why does the gemara suggest first learning Torah and reciting Shema? The answer is that we are expected to serve Hashem with joy, something to which the third strategy does not lend itself.

(Bet Asher)

R' Avraham Eliezer Alperstein z"l

R' Alperstein was born in Kobrin, White Russia in 1853. He studied under R' Yaakov David Willowsky (the Ridvaz - rabbi in Kobrin, Slutsk and, later, Chicago) and in yeshivot in Kovno and Vilna, and he received semichah from two leading Lithuanian sages, R' Mordechai Meltzer and R' A.L. Shachnowitz. As a youth, R' Alperstein was known as an unusually capable student and was found to be conversant in both the Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi. (The latter work usually is studied only by accomplished scholars.)

R' Alperstein served briefly as a rabbi in Europe. In approximately 1881, he settled in the United States and was elected to a pulpit in New York. In 1884, he moved to Chicago, where he was rabbi of the Kovner and Suvalker congregations. In 1899, he relocated to St. Paul, Minnesota.

In 1901, R' Alperstein returned to New York. There, he was an early leader of Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan (RIETS), which later evolved into Yeshiva University. The following year, he participated in the organizing convention of the Agudat Harabanim / United Orthodox Rabbis of America and signed its Constitution as one of its 59 charter members. Among the goals of this group

were to strengthen Jewish education by certifying teachers and establishing standards that chadarim / Torah elementary schools had to meet; to promote Shabbat observance by providing employment assistance to Shabbat-observers and encouraging labor unions to include the right to observe Shabbat as one of their contract demands, and by promoting boycotts of Jewish stores that did not close on Shabbat; and to strengthen rabbinical supervision over kashrut and over Jewish marriage and divorce.

R' Alperstein authored a number of Torah works, but published only one -- a commentary on Masechet Bikkurim. That work, published in 1889, bore a *haskamah* / letter of recommendation from R' Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (the Bet Halevi), who referred to the author as "a great light, sharp and with far reaching knowledge, who is destined to be a *gaon*." R' Alperstein died on 5 Shevat 5673 / January 13, 1913. After his death, a hospital for chronic illnesses, Beth Abraham, was founded in his memory by his wife and children. (Sources: *Toldot Anshei Shem* p.3; *The Silver Era* p.315-325)

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