

# **"TO REST OR NOT TO REST"**

*by Shlomo Katz*

## **Parshas Vayechi**

### **"To Rest or Not to Rest"**

With this week's parashah, the Torah closes the book on the lives of the Avot / Patriarchs. Among the many lessons that we learn from their lives, one is found in the words we recite in minchah of Shabbat: "A day of rest and holiness You have given Your people--Avraham would rejoice, Yitzchak would exalt, Yaakov and his sons would rest on it."

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808-1888; rabbi in Frankfurt, Germany) explains: Avraham was a "prince of Elokim" (23:6), a great personality among men, gladdened by G-d and ennobled by His closeness. His son Yitzchak was forced to fight against the rebuffs of envy and the hostility of jealousy (see chapter 26). The lot of Yaakov was harsher still; it was his fate to have to earn a living for himself and his family by hard labor and servitude in the household of a crafty master. This account has profound meaning for us today, R' Hirsch continues. Regardless of what one's own life portion may be at the time the Day of Rest enters our midst, Shabbat brings us joy. An "Avraham" blessed with happiness will find the pinnacle of his blessings, the true rejoicing in his gladness only in that awareness of G-d which Shabbat gives him, reminding him that all the good which is his has come from G-d alone. To a "Yitzchak," with not a friend in the world, Shabbat affords ample compensation for the friendship of his fellow man, for Shabbat makes him and the small circle around him aware that G-d is near and present in their midst. On Shabbat, even a family of a "Yaakov," laboring under the weight of distress and oppression, finds both physical rest and spiritual calm and serenity. (The Hirsch Siddur p.395)

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"Please, if I have found favor in your eyes, please place your hand under my thigh and do kindness and truth with me--please do not bury me in Egypt." (47:29)

Midrash Rabbah teaches that Yaakov knew that the soil of Egypt was destined to turn into lice during the Ten Plagues; therefore, he did not want to be buried there.

R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) writes: Yaakov was not worried

that his remains would turn to lice. Rather, he was worried that the holiness of his remains would prevent the soil in which he was buried from turning into lice. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim)

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"Then Yisrael prostrated himself towards the head of the bed." (47:31)

Rashi z"l writes: "He turned towards the Divine Presence. Our Sages infer from this that the Shechinah is above the head of an ill person." Why is the Shechinah found above the head of an ill person? R' Chaim Friedlander z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak; died 1986) explains: The term "Shechinah" refers to Hashem's "presence" in our lower world, which is dependent on whether we make room for Him to be revealed here. Specifically, the degree to which the Shechinah rests upon a person is dependent on the degree to which he humbles himself, as we read (Yeshayah 57:15), "For so says the exalted and uplifted One, Who abides forever and Whose Name is holy, 'I abide in exaltedness and holiness--but I am with the contrite and lowly of spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite'." Since a person who is ill is more likely to feel humble and subdued than is a healthy person, the Shechinah is more likely to be found at a sickbed than elsewhere. (Derech L'Chaim Al Derech Hashem p.241)

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"Yaakov was told, 'Behold! -- your son Yosef has come to you.' So Yisrael exerted himself and sat up on the bed . . ." (48:2-3) "When Yaakov finished instructing his sons, he drew his feet onto the bed . . ." (49:33)

R' Yechiel ben Shlomo Maharich z"l (Poland; 19th century) writes: This teaches that when a person has something important to say, he should adopt a respectable posture. He should not sit haphazardly nor lay on a bed until he has finished what he has to say. (Ha'deot V'hamidot: Sha'ar Ha'dibbur 2)

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"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 Yisrael's exile, but the Shechinah departed from him and he began to speak of other things." Why couldn't Yaakov reveal when the exile would end? R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1784-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) explains: Not knowing when the exile will end gives a person the ability to bear the pain, for he can believe, "Tomorrow we will be redeemed." In turn, this prevents people from losing their faith in Hashem as a result of their suffering.

R' Kluger continues: In this light, we can understand why the Midrash Tanchuma connects our verse

with the verse (Yeshayah 43:22), "You did not call to Me, Yaakov, for you grew weary of Me, Yisrael." It is as if Hashem said to Yaakov, "You are not doing Me a favor by revealing the End of Days to your children. To the contrary, you will cause them to grow weary of Me." (Dimat Ha'ashukim p.6)

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"Yissachar is a chamor gareem / strong-boned donkey; he rests between the boundaries." (49:14)

Why did Yaakov call his son Yissachar, the leading Torah scholar among all of Yaakov's sons, a "donkey"? R' Moshe David Valle z"l (Italy; 1697-1777) explains that the word "chamor" / "donkey" is an allusion to "chomer" / "material" (as in "materialism"). The word "gareem," usually translated "strong-boned," also can mean "breaking." Yissachar, through his Torah study, breaks materialism. Without Torah study, writes R' Valle, there is no way to overcome materialism.

R' Valle continues: The inclination for materialism "rests between the boundaries." This indicates that the moment one leaves Torah study, materialism is ready to grab hold of him; one does not even need to travel a distance from the bet midrash to be ensnared. (Ohr Olam)

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"Yaakov finished instructing his sons, and he drew his feet onto the bed, and he expired and was gathered to his people." (49:33)

R' Menachem ben Meir Tzioni z"l (Speyer, Germany; 15th century) notes that the verse doesn't say that Yaakov died, leading our Sages to say that Yaakov did not die. Rather, Yaakov is clothed in a spiritual form like Adam before the sin and wanders through the world like Eliyahu Ha'Navi doing good for the holy nation.

R' Menachem Tzioni continues: This requires explanation, for Yaakov himself asked to be buried. Moreover, we read (50:15), "Yosef's brothers perceived that their father was dead." Perhaps Yaakov's children did not know the secret that our Sages revealed and even Yaakov himself did not know it. Or, Yaakov simply chose not to reveal what he knew.

R' Menachem Tzioni adds: Most tzaddikim do not take this form after death, though some do. The Gemara (Ketubot 103a) relates that Rabbi Yehuda Ha'nassi would return each Friday night after his death, wearing the same Shabbat clothes he wore in his lifetime, to recite kiddush for his wife. Though the deceased are exempt from mitzvot, since this miracle was done for him, he had the halachic status of a living person in all respects. (Sefer Tzioni)

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## Letters from Our Sages

This letter, printed in Igrot R' Chaim Ozer (Vol. II, p.483), was written by R' Chaim Ozer Grodzenski z"l (1863-1940), unofficial rabbi of Vilna for 55 years and among the foremost leaders of Lithuanian Jewry until the Holocaust. The recipient was the author of the popular mussar work, Michtav M'Eliyahu.

With G-d's help, Wednesday, 12 Tishrei 5696 [1935], Vilna To the son of my brother-in-law, the rabbi and gaon, Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, may his light shine, Your precious letter reached me. For naught you worried about my blood pressure, which I had mentioned to you. I have had this condition for more than 18 years, and in recent years it has improved. However, when I was in Druskininkai [a spa town in southern Lithuania], I had the misfortune to meet a young doctor who frightened me and commanded me to rest and not to write. This caused me to become depressed, for I am from the natives of Mechoza who, if they do not work, become weak [a play on the words of Bava Metzia 77a, describing the porters in that Babylonian town who require constant work to stay fit]. All of my problems come from acting weak when I need to act strong. I have been this way for a long time. If I am busy with my work all day, I forget my ills, which is not the case when I am commanded to rest.

I am sorry that my friend, his honor, had heartache over this. The holy fast day [Yom Kippur] passed in peace, and the fast was easy for me. I wanted to let you know this as soon as possible.

May you celebrate the holidays with joy and a good heart as is your desire and the desire of the one who seeks your well-being. Your friend...

Chaim Ozer Grodzenski

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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 **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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