

BALANCED PERSPECTIVE

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

Soon after our forefather Yaakov (Jacob) descended to Egypt to commence the first Jewish national exile, he met the Pharaoh. "And Pharaoh said to Yaakov, 'How many are the days of the years of your life?' And Yaakov said to Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my sojourns have been one hundred and thirty years; few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojourns.'" (Beraishis/Genesis 47:8-9)

The Kli Yakar (1) explains that Pharaoh inquired about Yaakov's age because he had heard that when Yaakov came to the Nile River the waters rose to his feet. Pharaoh hoped that Yaakov's presence could bring an end to the famine they were experiencing. When he saw how old Yaakov appeared he was concerned that Yaakov was nearing the end of his days. Indeed, his appearance was not an accurate indication of his age, since he aged prematurely because of the unusual amount of suffering he had endured.

Despite the legitimacy of Yaakov's point - his life was genuinely difficult - the Midrash says that someone who had forged such an intense relationship with the Divine as had Yaakov should have appreciated the Divine loving kindness demonstrated when G-d saved Yaakov from Esav and Lavan and reunited him with Joseph. For one of Yaakov's righteousness and spiritual stature, complaining was inappropriate. Therefore, concludes the Midrash, he was punished by losing a year of life for each word of their conversation. What is perplexing about this Midrash is its statement that Yaakov was punished for Pharaoh's words. Even if Yaakov was expected not to complain, why should he be punished for being asked a question?

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz (2) explains that Yaakov looked older because he allowed his sorrows in life to affect him. True contentment is not in the fulfillment of what you want, but the realization of how much you already have. Had Yaakov focused to the best of his ability on the great benevolence shown by G-d, despite his travails, he would not have appeared as aged as he did. This fault led to Pharaoh's inquiry and for this he was punished.

A parable is told of a man who discovered that he had won the lottery. As he celebrated he accidentally knocked over and broke a vase. His concern over the broken vase was not so great for he realized he had something much more valuable. We all have gifts from G-d - vision, hearing, health, loved ones. When we stop and appreciate the value of what we have, we maintain the proper perspective to deal with the difficulties we endure.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz; c.1550-1619; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean in Lemberg and Rabbi in Prague; a leader of Polish Jewry

(2) Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of the Mir Yeshiva, who led his students from the ashes of the European Holocaust to the glory of Jerusalem

Copyright © 2003 by [Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig](#) and [Torah.org](#)