

THE END OF THE BEGINNING, THE BEGINNING OF THE END

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Parashas VaYechi is the last parsha of Sefer Bereishis, and represents the closing of an incredible era that started with the creation of existence, and the fateful first "bite," from the Forbidden Tree. Mankind "Take 1" was a dismal failure and was purged by the Great Flood of 1656 (2104 BCE). Only Noach and his family and the animals they had been commanded to save survived the "Waters of Noach."

Mankind "Take 2" didn't fare much better, scattered to the four corners of the earth when their unity resulted in rebelliousness against G-d, and construction of the Tower of Babel. However, in the 2,000th year, at the age of 52, Avraham ushered in the "Era of Torah Dissemination," and creation took a turn for the better. This is what the midrash means when it says,

G-d said, "Let there be light!" (Bereishis 1:3), and there was Avraham!

Avraham was the light that justified the continued existence of creation. The period of the Avos (Forefathers) sheltered and nurtured the idea of monotheism, and obedience to a Higher Will, which only wanted the best for Its creation. The world, apparently, had little patience or capacity for the notion, and instead, it became a family "thing," something to be cultivated by Yitzchak, and then Ya'akov and his family. Now, even Ya'akov's life was coming to an end, and Yosef's too, and the seed that was planted by these giants had to grow into a nation while exiled in the "Iron Furnace," Egypt.

In the meantime, Ya'akov hurried to complete his mission before leaving this world. According to the midrash, one of the main tools Ya'akov wished to hand over to his descendants before leaving for the Next World was knowledge of the future, particularly of the exiles to come up and the "End-of-Days." This, he knew, would enable the future Jewish people to survive the long, hard exiles, and to hang on until Moshiach would finally come and redeem them once and for all. However, as Rashi points out at the beginning of this week's parsha, Ya'akov's plan was thwarted by G-d Himself, who held back the prophecy.

Ya'akov thought that the brothers had still not done sufficient tshuva for having sold Yosef, and therefore, caused the prophecy to leave him. Upon questioning his sons, they answered him,

"Shema Yisroel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad (Hear Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is One)!"

to which Ya'akov answered,

"Boruch Shem k'vod malchuso l'olam va'ed (Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever." (These are the first two verses of the Shema said twice daily.)

But why these two verses?

The answer lies in the Shema itself. The Shema not only proclaims G-d's Oneness, which is the basis of Jewish faith, but it also states that Elokeinu and Hashem are the same. To make a long class short, this means that all of nature is merely a veil for the hand of G-d, and that even though we can't detect this visually, we accept it intellectually.

This is also why we say the second verse of "Boruch Shem k'vod ..." in a whisper. The hiddenness of G-d in daily life has caused many, Jews included, to turn away from the belief that G-d operates directly in the lives of human beings. This belief of G-d working "underground" has become a well-kept secret for the few who still believe it to be true, in spite of all the "evidence" to the contrary. Whispering this second verse alludes to this.

In fact, the first letter of each of the words of the above verse (bais, shin, chof, mem, lamed, vav), spell the words, "b'Shechem, lamed-vav," or, "in Shechem, thirty-six." Shechem is where, according to the Talmud, the brothers sold Yosef, ignoring the Divine providence that could have vindicated Yosef (See Perceptions, Parashas VaYaishev). The letters "lamed" and "vav" add up to thirty-six, and as we have said before, "36" is the number that alludes to the Hidden Light of creation, which can be accessed through the 36 candles of Chanukah, a holiday that celebrates the revelation of G-d's hidden hand!

Therefore, there was no better way to answer Ya'akov's question, and no better way to show his approval. By reciting the Shema, the brothers verified that they had indeed learned their lesson, and that they now saw little distinction between the hidden and revealed hand of G-d. Ya'akov responded by telling them that it was this very change in their perspective that will one day lead to the revelation of the Hidden Light of creation, and the arrival of Moshiach-at the End-of-Days.

Shabbos Day:

Like Moshe will later do at the end of the Torah, Ya'akov used his final moments of life to bless his children. However, blessings from the Avos were far more than last-minute good wishes; they were prophecies about the futures of the blessees.

Therefore, each of the blessings in this week's parsha requires investigation, and the midrash does

offer some insight into each. For example, there is the blessing of Yosef:

A son of fruitfulness is Yosef, [like] a fruitful branch by the well (alei-ayin) with branches running over the wall. (Bereishis 49:22)

Whatever that's supposed to mean. However, the midrash interprets this verse to mean:

Yosef is a handsome son, a son handsome to the eye (alei-ayin); girls strode out on the wall [to see him]. (Bereishis Rabbah 98)

Apparently that each time Yosef went out as viceroy, the women of Egypt used to vie for the best places to catch a glimpse of Yosef.

The Talmud itself offers another interpretation of the words "alei ayin," taking them to mean "ulei ayin," which means, "above the eye," that is, above the "Evil Eye":

Rav Yochanan used to sit ... so that the women would see him [but he, of course, could never see them], and have children as handsome as he was (somehow seeing his face left a spiritual impression). The rabbis asked him, "Aren't you concerned about the 'Evil Eye' [in others, people becoming jealous of your appearance]?" He answered them, "I descend from Yosef, and the Evil Eye has no effect on me, as the verse says, 'Yosef is a handsome son, a son handsome to the eye (alei-ayin) ...'." (Brochos 20a)

As the mishnah explains in Pirke Avos, an "evil eye" is a jealous eye. Considering that it was the brother's jealousy of Yosef that caused him and his family all their suffering, and even our going down into Egypt, it was a fitting blessing to make Yosef and descendants above such future contention!

This capacity to rise above the jealousy of others was also included in the blessing of Yosef's two sons, Ephraim and Menashe (each Friday night, before sitting down to eat the Shabbos meal, parents bless their sons to become like Ephraim and Menashe), when Ya'akov blessed them to "multiply like fish" (Bereishis 48:16). Says the Talmud:

Just as fish in the sea are covered by water and the Evil Eye can't affect them, so too are Yosef's descendants unaffected by the Evil Eye. (Brochos 20a)

But this hardly seems fair. What about the rest of the brothers-how were they supposed to fend off the Evil Eye and avoid the jealousy of others, and the physical and spiritual ramifications of such jealousy? The answer is that it was only Yosef who excelled to such an extent that his greatness was

apparent to all. Not only this, but in the presence of Yosef, one could feel his own potential and this is one of the main reasons why people clamored to see him (at least the women, because the men instead felt competition, not admiration).

In any case, one thing we can learn from all of this is that it is better to be great in silence, out of the public view. If any revealing of greatness is to occur, G-d will take care of it in the proper way at the proper time, as the Talmud indicates:

Anyone who pushes the moment, the moment will push him off. Anyone who allows himself to be pushed off by the moment, the moment will be pushed off for him. (Brochos 64a)

And if you're going to make a big "noise" and "blow your own horn," know that you are sticking your head in the lion's den, making yourself subject to jealousy and competition, and all the negative ramifications that often follow.

Seudos Shlishi:

Even though the Torah seems to indicate that Ya'akov died in Egypt, and the Talmud recounts his burial in Eretz Canaan in Ma'areh Makpeilah (Sota 13a), the Talmud seems to say that Ya'akov didn't die ... at all!

Rav Nachman and Rav Yitzchak were eating together, and Rav Nachman said to Rav Yitzchak, "Let the master say something." "So said Rebi Yochanan ... Ya'akov, our father, never died!" Rav Nachman, responded, "Was it for nothing that the mourners mourned him, the embalmers embalmed him, and the undertaker buried him?" Rav Yitzchak answered, "I make this assertion from the following passage ..." (Ta'anis 5b)

The truth, Rav Yitzchak's assertion can answer an important question, and that is, if the Forefathers lived according to the Torah, then how could Yosef go ahead and embalm his father when embalming is against halacha (Jewish law)? In fact, according to the midrash, this was one of the reasons why Yosef died before his brothers (Bereishis Rabbah 100:4).

There are various different answers given by many of the commentators on the Chumash, such as, Yosef didn't want to rely upon a miracle to preserve his father's body while it traveled for days back to its burial site (Tifferes Tzion). However, if I can be so bold, and in all humility, I'd like to offer my own explanation.

One of the reasons why Ya'akov insisted on being buried outside of Egypt, according to the midrash,

was that he was afraid that the Egyptians would turn him into a god to be worshipped. They knew that the famine had ended five years earlier on Ya'akov's account, and that the banks of the Nile had swelled as a result of Ya'akov's blessing to Paroah. To the average Egyptian, that was god-material, and the last thing in the world Ya'akov wanted was to be treated like a god!

Therefore, if Ya'akov's life could have transformed his death into an opportunity for idol worship, then how much more so would his transformation from this world to the next without dying give cause to the Egyptians to initiate him as an Egyptian god! Maybe that is what had concerned Ya'akov to make sure than the Egyptians believed that Ya'akov had in fact died, and that his body had been transported to and buried in Eretz Canaan.

In other words, maybe Yosef had not embalmed Ya'akov at all! Maybe the embalming of whatever was embalmed was to give the impression to the Egyptians that Ya'akov had died, when in fact he had not, and what better way could there be to conceal this truth than by not letting his body be visible to anyone? In the meantime, for all we know, Ya'akov ascended heavenward like Eliyahu HaNavi would later do, in a chariot made of fire, unbeknownst to the Egyptians below ...

In any case, the Pri Tzaddik (Parashas Massey, 1) explains that the Forefathers lived in This World, yet were able to begin to enjoy the fruits of The World-to-Come. Every Jew has to complete a certain task within his or her life, and if not, then he or she may have to come back in another lifetime to "finish the job." However, the Avos (Forefathers) were tzaddikim who elevated themselves to levels of perfection before the time for their deaths had arrived. As a result, G-d allowed them to begin enjoying the fruits of their efforts while still remaining in their present bodies.

Hence, while the rest of the world may walk the face of the earth and live immersed within mundane, daily life, the tzaddik may live in a different world altogether. He may walk with his feet on the ground, but his head may reach all the way into heaven; he may live next door, or down the street, but his true address may be somewhere altogether different, one that you won't find listed in the local telephone book!

It's a nice thought, and certainly a goal worthy of striving for.

Melave Malkah:

The Talmud offers another reason why Yosef died before the rest of his brothers, at the ripe age of 110 years:

Why did Yosef die before his brothers? Because he acted with rabbanos (i.e., as a leader). (Brochos 55a)

Interestingly enough, another famous descendant of Yosef's also died at the age of 110 years: Yehoshua bin Nun. And interestingly enough, miracles were common occurrences for both and the numerical value of the word "neis" (miracle) is, actually, 110 (Arizal). Maybe Yosef's early death, on one hand, was a punishment for errors he had made during his lifetime; on the other hand, maybe it was a testimony to the miraculous life he had lived.

Whatever the reason for Yosef's "premature" death, right before he died there was an indication of what had left to be resolved during his lifetime:

After he buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he, his brothers, and all those who had gone up with him to bury his father. Joseph's brothers, because their father had died said, "Maybe Joseph will hate us and repay us for all the evil that we did to him." They ordered [someone] to say to Joseph, "Your father commanded us before his death to say to Joseph, 'Please forgive the crime of your brothers and their guilt, though they have done evil to you.' Please forgive the crime of the servants of your father's God." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also wept, [and] fell before him and said, "We are here to be your slaves." Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in place of God? You decided to do evil to me, but God decided it should be for the good, in order to achieve what has occurred, to keep a large contingent alive. So now, don't be afraid. I will sustain you and your children." He consoled them and spoke to their heart. (Bereishis 50:14)

How could the brothers have suspected Yosef, after all he had proved, and more importantly, after they had come to accept the role of Divine Providence in the whole affair? As Yosef reiterated:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in place of God? You decided to do evil to me, but God decided it should be for the good, in order to achieve what has occurred, to keep a large contingent alive ..."

Perhaps, then, Yosef's tears were not tears of hurt because his brothers had suspected him; he was too big for that. Perhaps his tears were over the revelation that his brothers had yet to fully integrate the lesson of the past 22 years; of "Shema Yisroel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad" (see: Friday Night above). Perhaps his tears were for the suffering the nation would have to endure in Egypt, and throughout the millennia to fix up once-and-for-all what he and his family had left undone.

Yet, here we are, some 3,449 years later, and, according to the Talmud, very close to the end of history as we have known it. Egyptian exile has come and gone; so too has the Babylonian, Median, and Greek exile. We have survived the Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, and the many ruthless pogroms since. We even survived the Holocaust, though, as always, at great costs. And all of it has been just to complete what was left incomplete from the time of the brothers (the truth is, since Adam HaRishon himself after he ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) ... just to get to

the point when the concept of "Boruch Shem k'vod ..." will no longer be only a Jewish secret, but a vision shared by the entire world.

It will be a time, according to the prophet Zechariah, when:

... G-d will be One, and His Name One.

As distant from this reality as we may seem to be, we may not be so distant after all.

Chazak!

P.S. If this week's parsha is about Ya'akov's and Yosef's death, why is it called Parashas VeYechi ("And he lived"), other than the fact that this is the first word of the parsha itself? The answer is, it confirms the well-known dictum of the Talmud that states:

Tzaddikim, even in death are called "living," whereas the evil, even while living are called "dead."
(Brochos 18a)

Have a great Shabbos.

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