

A LIFE UNTO THE NATIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

And Ya'akov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years ... (Bereishis 47:28)

We can be exact in the wording of the verse and say that Ya'akov, for the first time in a long time, "lived" the last seventeen years of his life that he was re-united with his son Yosef, who, incidentally, was taken away from him at the age of seventeen. This is, perhaps, why the next posuk then goes on to say:

The day of Yisroel's death approached ...

Yisroel, that is, opposed to Ya'akov -- the name that denotes overcoming all struggles, be they with angels or men.

Perhaps, the turning point was in Parashas Mikeitz, as Ya'akov prepared to send his sons back before the viceroy of Egypt again, this time with his beloved Binyamin included:

Yisroel their father said to them ... (Bereishis 43:11)

One can feel Ya'akov take back the reigns of leadership from his sons in this posuk, who, anyhow, had usurped them from him. Divine Providence was returning the power back to Ya'akov, and as he emerged from his twenty-two years of mourning, he was coming out on top. He had struggled with angels in the past, and now his struggle with men was about to come to an end as well, and "Yisroel" would be the final name of his life.

Seventeen is also the numerical value of the word "tov," which means "good" in Hebrew (9+6+2), and which is associated with the "Ohr HaGanuz," the "Hidden Light" of creation. This light, in turn, is related to the thirty-six righteous people in every generation, the thirty-six tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, the thirty-six hours of Shabbos (including twelve hours erev Shabbos), and the thirty-six candles of Chanukah.

(As well, in a Sefer Torah, the first letter of the word "tov" is a "tes," and it has four "tagin" (crowns) on it. According to the B'nei Yissachar, the value of the "tes," when multiplied by the number of tagin on it yields the number thirty-six!)

What does this mean? This means that the result of Ya'akov's struggles and his victory over life in

This World allowed him permanent access to this wonderfully supernal and sublime light. This is why the Talmud states after Ya'akov finally died:

In the beginning, before the Egyptians saw the way the entire world honored Yisroel, they did not conduct themselves honorably toward the brothers of Yosef. However, after they saw how they were honored by the entire world, they too paid their due respects. The following posuk indicates this, "And they came to the threshing-floor surrounded by thorns" (Bereishis 50:10). Is a threshing-floor made of thorns? Rav Avahu said: This is to teach you that they [the kings of the entire world] surrounded the coffin of Ya'akov with crowns like a threshing-floor surrounded by thorns ... They went to do war, but when they saw the crown of Yosef on the coffin of Ya'akov, all of them took off their crowns and placed them on Ya'akov's coffin: thirty-six crowns they placed on the coffin. (Sotah 13a)

This is the goal of ANY life: to access the Hidden Light of creation, which, essentially, means to see life as G-d sees it; this is called TRUE living. We learn how to do this from Chanukah itself, which stresses the need to become a "pach shemen" filled with oil, with the seal of the Kohen Gadol intact upon it.

The unbroken seal of the Kohen Gadol on the jar the Chashmonaim found proved the purity of the oil inside it. The Hebrew word for "the oil" is "hashemen" (heh-shin-mem-nun), the same letters as the word for "soul": Neshamah (nun-shin-mem-heh). The soul inside the body is compared to the oil inside the earthenware jar.

Hence, just like the container holding the oil must remain pure to keep the oil pure, so, too, must we maintain a high level of spiritual purity to keep our souls intact, and merit to receive light from Above. This means "cleaning house" or all outside non-spiritual influences, to the best of one's ability. To the extent that one achieves this is the extent to which he or she becomes a fitting "container" for the light of G-d.

This was Ya'akov Avinu, or rather, our father Yisroel. They say of Ya'akov that he never spoke a wasted word, and he never had an impure thought. For this reason, Ya'akov has a special connection to Shabbos, as the prophet brings out:

"If you restrain your feet because of Shabbos, and refrain from taking care of your own needs on My holy day ... Then you shall be granted pleasure with G-d ... and the heritage of your forefather, Ya'akov ..." (Yeshayahu 58:13-14)

We may not be able to struggle with angels as Ya'akov Avinu once did, and even if we could, who says we would prevail. However, everyday we struggle with man, and with men's influences, and we HAVE to prevail. It is the only way to become a true "pach shemen" fitting to contain a holy soul -- and to be the worthy recipient of so holy a light.

Shabbos Day:

As for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan along the way when there was only two-thousand cubits left to go until Efrat, and I buried her there on the way to Efrat, which is Beit Lechem. (Bereishis 48:7)

As Rashi explains, Ya'akov here tried to explain to Yosef why his mother, Rachel, was not given the honor of being buried in a formal city:

" 'I know that in your heart you feel some resentment against me [for this]. Know, however, that I buried her there by the commandment of G-d, so that she might help her children when Nebuzaradan would take them into captivity [later after the first Temple was destroyed] ...' For, when they passed along the road, Rachel came forth onto her tomb and cried and begged for mercy for them ..." (Rashi)

"Kever Rachel," as it is called today, remains to be a place to seek mercy from G-d. Everyday, bus loads of Jews pull up and cry by her tomb, beseeching her to beseech G-d, asking Him to end both our personal and national miseries.

Perhaps, this year more than any other year since that first exile into Babylonia, Rachel's role will have tremendous significance. For, starting a few weeks, hordes of non-Jews have been ascending to Eretz Yisroel, because for so many, Year 2,000 is the year of their "messiah," so they believe. Therefore, a major focal point of their millennium festivities will be centered in Beit Lechem, the place they believe their "messiah" was originally born. Millions of non-Jews are expected to arrive -- in a pilgrimage not witnessed in recent times.

Ironically enough, the place is under the ownership of the Palestinian Authority, whose chairman is none other than you-know-who. True, there is a stone wall that hides Kever Rachel from that side of Beit Lechem, leaving it in Jewish hands and hopefully making it secure from foreign intrusions. However, that does not remove the irony of the situation.

Originally, Rachel had to pray for the Jews who went into exile into Babylonia. But, over the last two thousand years, it has been a Christian-Arab exile that has plagued our nation, and that has drawn millions away from Judaism either through death, forced conversion, or assimilation.

Ironically, as religious Jews sit down on January 1 to a (a)typical Shabbos meal, Christians and Arabs alike will be sitting down to celebrate their new year in typical non-Jewish New Year's fashion. Unfortunately, just as many Jews have joined their ranks in the past, many plan to join their festivities this year as well -- perhaps right next door in Beit Lechem itself.

Perhaps, never before has it been clearer why G-d commanded Ya'akov to bury his beloved Rachel

THERE, where the prophecy of Edom and Yishmael teaming up against the Jewish people at the end of days, is clearly being fulfilled. Perhaps, just like her son Yosef, who will play a major role in paving the way for Moshiach and the Jewish redemption, so, too, does Rachel Imeinu act as an important adversary against the forces of non-Jewish belief and their effects on the Jewish mind.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Shimon and Levi are brothers -- instruments of violence are their weapons. My soul should not come into their secret meetings; my glory should not be united into their assembly, for in their anger they killed a man ... (Bereishis 49:5)

"In their anger they killed a man ... This refers to Chamor and the people of Shechem ..." (Rashi)

There's nothing like a little anger to ruin a perfectly good act of zealousness, Ya'akov indicated to Shimon and Levi on his deathbed. Ya'akov does not curse Shimon and Levi, G-d forbid; he curses their anger, for it is that which caused them to lose perspective, and do what Ya'akov had clearly decided not to do: take physical revenge for the violation of Dinah.

Anger is one of the most negative traits a person can have, and it is a very big blessing when someone is good-natured and patient. However, it is very hard even for such people not to lose their temper, at least a little bit, once in a while. There is even a special prayer that EVERYONE one can say at the end of the Shemonah Esrai:

"It should be Your will, G-d, G-d of our Forefathers, that no person should be jealous of me, and that I should not be jealous of others; that I should not be angry today, nor anger You ..."

How many relationships have been destroyed because of anger? How many wars have been waged and fought in anger -- small and large? Anger, everyone must agree, is, perhaps, the most destructive human trait known to man. And it only gets worse from here:

Someone who tears his clothing in anger, or breaks something in anger, or throws his money in anger, will be in Your eyes like one who worshipped idols, because that is the trade of the yetzer hara ... (Shabbos 105b)

Idol worship? What does that have to do with anger?

The answer is basic: anger is a rejection of one's personal Divine Providence, of the fact that G-d is sending a message through the anger-causing incident; the person is acting as if G-d isn't really behind the act at all. That is a form of idol worship thinking.

The Talmud does make a distinction between DISPLAYING anger for the effect of teaching children and others about the seriousness of a situation, and LOSING one's temper as described above. Most people can detect when criticism has been hurled in a fit of anger, and, when it has been expressed

for educational purposes, and they appreciate the difference as well -- including little children.

I remember hearing a story some time ago about a father who, upon appreciating the damaging effects of punishing his child while FEELING angry, decided to punish his son only when he, the father, wore a specific suit -- which he kept at the back of his closet. If his son misbehaved and warranted a punishment, the father would then schlepp upstairs to change into that special suit.

However, by the time the father changed his clothing and came back down to the child, his temper would have cooled down, making him more able to decide RATIONALLY what was best for the child -- not just what allowed him to vent his own anger. It was the difference between FEELING anger and merely EXPRESSING anger.

Elsewhere, the Talmud warns that anger leads to sin (Brochos 29b), and most people will vouch for the fact that loshon hara, one of the most serious sins a person can commit, is often spoken only out of anger. According to the Talmud, anger can even lead to a loss of wisdom (Pesachim 66b) -- which I believe is scientifically documented now (at least forgetfulness is). And finally, in the Talmud's opinion, one who constantly gets angry and doesn't control his temper is like one who is not alive (Pesachim 113b)!

No wonder, then, that Ya'akov chose to recall the anger of Shimon and Levi so many years later after the incident of Shechem. It turns out that Ya'akov's words weren't just a warning to Shimon and Levi for the future, but for ALL future descendants of Jews.

MELAVE MALKAH:

A psalm of David. Give to G-d, sons of the powerful; give to G-d, honor and might ... (Tehillim 29:1)

This last tehillah of Kabbalos Shabbos (in advance of "Lechah Dodi") is not the next one in line in Tehillim like the previous ones were; for this one, we jump back to number twenty-nine. Why the switch? Because, we are about to enter the special realm of Shabbos -- an other-worldly and supernatural realm. According to the Arizal, the Kabbalistic allusions found within this tehillah, when said with special intention, can cause tremendous spiritual effects in the Heavenly realm, as if to announce our arrival into Shabbos.

The "sons of the powerful" are none other than Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, people, who, all of their lives, gave glory to G-d and His holy Name. At this time in the week, when all of creation is about "bow" to its Creator at the twilight of Shabbos, it is the Avos who are the prime example of how to properly give honor to G-d.

Rashi and the Radak disagree as to exactly which period of time this tehillah refers to: past or future? Rashi is of the former opinion, while the Radak holds that Dovid HaMelech is alluding to Yemos HaMoshiach -- the Days of Moshiach. Certainly the last verses support both Rashi and the Radak's

points of view:

G-d sits enthroned as king forever (past); G-d will give might to His people; G-d will bless His people with peace!

When? In the days of Moshiach.

Some want to say that, since the opening words resemble those David sung when he brought the Holy Ark back to Yerushalayim (I Divrei HaYamim 16:28-29), this tehillah too must have been sung when the Ark returned to Yerushalayim, in preparation for the inauguration of the Temple.

The Talmud asks:

How do we know that the third blessing in the Shemonah Esrai is dedicated to G-d's holiness? Because, the third verse in Tehillah 29 says:

Give glory due to G-d's Name, bow down to G-d in sacred splendor!

They learn other principles as well from this tehillah, such as praying to G-d only when in a serious state of mind (Brochos 30b).

The truth is, this tehillah is a fitting eulogy for Ya'akov Avinu and Yosef HaTzaddik, both of whom die in this week's parshah. They lived to glorify G-d, and through them, the holy Name of G-d was forever sanctified.

Furthermore, it was Ya'akov, at the beginning of the parshah, who tried to reveal to the tribes the redemption of the "End-of-Days," and Yosef, and the end of the parshah, he revealed to the brothers the redemption that would come at the end of the Egyptian exile.

Why was this such a concern of theirs? Because, it pained both Ya'akov and Yosef that the Jewish people would have to suffer throughout history, and thereby, lessen the importance of G-d's glory in the eyes of the world. Therefore, they dreamed of the time when G-d's might would be manifest to all, and hoped for the redemption that would free the Jewish people from all oppression, and reveal G-d's glory to all mankind.

Chazak!

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
