

LIFE AFTER DEATH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

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

Back in Parashas Vayaishev, before the episode of Yosef overtook Ya'akov Avinu, the Torah spoke only of Ya'akov "settling down." As Rashi points out back there, it had been Ya'akov's intention to really start "living," to retire, so-to-speak, after many grueling years fending off Eisav his brother and Lavan his father-in-law. But, alas, it was not to be, for, Ya'akov's tests had not come to an end at that point, but, a beginning -- the worst was yet to come.

This week's parshah is after all of that -- some 39 years later, and, the Torah wants us to know that Ya'akov didn't just SETTLE in Egypt, but, he LIVED there. In fact, according to the Pri Tzaddik, the last seventeen years of Ya'akov's life were LIVING in the full sense of the term, already being part of his reward in the World-to-Come (Massei, 1).

Physically, then, Ya'akov lived in This World, in the immoral land of Egypt, of all places. However, spiritually, Ya'akov lived in another spiritual dimension all together, and it is to this, perhaps, which the Talmud refers when it says:

Ya'akov Avinu did not die. (Ta'anis 5b)

But if so, then what do the following words mean:

Ya'akov finished instructing his sons and gathered his feet onto his bed and died, and was gathered to his people. (Bereishis 49:33)

Did Ya'akov die, or didn't he?

The answer is, yes, and no, because, even though in everyday life death seems to be an absolute reality, in Kabbalah, it is a relative one.

We see this in the Arizal on the disagreement in the Talmud about whether Moshe Rabbeinu wrote the last eight lines of the Torah or not (Bava Basra 15a). After all, says the side that holds Yehoshua wrote them, eight verses before the end of the Torah, it says that "Moshe died" -- past tense -- implying that, by that point in the Torah, Moshe had ALREADY died! G-d forbid, this side says, the

Torah should utter a falsehood!

It doesn't, says the Arizal, and it didn't, but not for the reason that you say. Moshe Rabbeinu DID write every word in the Sefer Torah, including the one that says that he had "died" by that point. And he had, but, only relatively-speaking.

for, ever since the mantle of leadership had been taken from Moshe's shoulders and placed upon his loyal disciple's shoulders, Yehoshua bin Nun (Parashas Vayailech), the reality of Moshe Rabbeinu changed. Thus, although conceptually, Moshe ben Amram will also remain "Rabbeinu" -- "Our Teacher" -- physically, he ceased to be so to the Jewish people at that time, as the Midrash portrays. That, says the Arizal, is the "death" to which posuk "Devarim 34:5" refers.

There are many other examples like this elsewhere, including, perhaps, this week's parshah, and, this idea has practical everyday applications as well. For, sometimes, when a person comes so close to death, even though nothing actually physically happens to them, perhaps because of a miracle, then, from Heaven's point of view, it is as if they DID die on a level, and, were re-born again.

In other words, Ya'akov, at that time of his life, was supposed to have died, but, as the Talmud says, he didn't. Did the Torah mislead us by saying that he did when, in fact, he didn't? No, because, spiritually he did on some level, so that he could transition to a higher spiritual reality with the least amount of change, a reward for a life of righteousness. The same thing was true of Moshe Rabbeinu as well.

This is one of the reasons why, often, "close-call experiences" result in spiritual changes. It is not just that the person woke up to reality having faced death in the eyes, although, admittedly, that plays a major role as well. But, it is also because, spiritually, something happened around that time to change the spiritual outlook of the person, and, to return back to "normal" after the fact can only be viewed of a terrible waste of a very valuable gift.

Shabbos Day:

The time for Ya'akov to die drew close and he called his son Yosef. He told him, "If I have found favor in your eyes, please place your hand under my thigh and to a true kindness for me: please do not bury me in Egypt." (Bereishis 47:29)

Since time immemorial, Jews have desired to make Eretz Yisroel their final resting place. So important was this to Ya'akov Avinu that he made his trustworthy son swear an oath that he would carry out this final request of his beloved father, perhaps in anticipation of Paroah's reluctance to let Yosef leave Egypt (see Rashi on 50:5).

So, Rashi explains why Ya'akov was so insistent:

PLEASE DO NOT BURY ME IN EGYPT: Later, the dust would become lice, and, those buried outside of Israel only return to life after the pain of rolling through caverns, and, so the Egyptians do not make me into an idol. (Rashi)

The first and third reasons seem like logical and real concerns. However, the second one needs some kind of explanation, which will be both illumination and cause for concern.

As the Rambam points out in his famous "Thirteen Principles of Faith," a Jew must believe in the concept of Resurrection of the Dead, to take place in a future time, after Moshiach has come, evil has been annihilated, and, free-will will be but a past memory. "Techiyas HaMeisim," as it is called in Hebrew, is an extremely important step toward receiving eternal reward in the World-to-Come, because it allows for the body to be re-created free of any impurities of this world, and therefore, far more spiritual.

Thus a person in this world must die, decompose, and be re-created again, which, of course, is all the work of G-d. However, though it sounds simple, it is not really so, for, there is a threshold one must cross along his way to this spiritual reality and eternal reward.

This is because, even after death, spiritual impurity clings to a person's body and soul, not wanting to relinquish its hold, as the Arizal explains (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, p. 65). But relinquish it must, one way or another, and which way it does, explains the Arizal, is up to the person himself.

"Righteous people distance themselves from their yetzer hara during their lifetimes, humbling themselves, afflicting themselves through the suffering they must undergo, and, by learning Torah and doing mitzvos -- However, evil people do just the opposite: they indulge in the pleasures of this world and greatly strengthen the hold of the spiritual impurity on them, necessitating 'Chavut-HaKever' -- 'Beating in the Grave'." (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, p. 65)

In short, the Arizal explains that the goal of life in This World is to reverse the effect of Adam HaRishon's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, in order to get to the Next World purified -- not an easy process, but, then again, who said life in This World was meant to be easy? Challenging, yes, easy, **NEVER!**

Thus, what we don't do during our lifetimes to separate spiritual impurity from ourselves we will have to do after we die -- in the grave -- which, the Arizal explains, will be less "pleasant" than doing it while still alive. All of us who look at righteous people who minimize their indulgence in the physical pleasures of this physical world will have a very, very envious eye regarding their fate after we die.

However, says the Arizal, being buried in Eretz Yisroel, like being buried Erev Shabbos (from the fifth hour onward in advance of Shabbos), is such a merit and such a spiritualizing factor in creation, that "Chavut-HaKever" is minimal, if at all. And thus, there is great merit for the time-honored tradition of being buried in the holiest of lands, Eretz HaKedoshah -- Eretz Yisroel.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

They came to the threshing floor surrounded by thorns on the other side of the Jordan, where they conducted a very large and heavy eulogy =8A (Bereishis 50:10)

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, "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 make 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)

So, the burial of the last of three Forefathers was a major event, a eulogy of Biblical proportions. And, based on what the Talmud teaches, such a eulogy may have saved the world from disaster, for:

It came to pass after the seven days that the waters of the Flood came upon the earth (Bereishis 7:10). What was the nature of these seven days? Rav said: The seven days of mourning for Mesushelach. From this you learn that the eulogizing of the righteous delays the coming of punishment. (Sanhedrin 108b)

Hence, for all we know, the death of Ya'akov pushed off the Egyptian servitude by 77 years, for, it did not begin until after the death of Levi, in the year 2332, whereas Ya'akov died in the year 2255. Maybe the war the world was about to undergo mentioned in the Talmud was pushed off because of Ya'akov's burial and eulogies.

It seems that this concept holds true even today. For, I have noticed, as have others over the last seven years, how, after a major Torah figure passed away that something major happened historically to the Jewish people, for the negative. In fact, just prior to each concession of land to the Arabs as part of the so-called "peace agreement," there was great mourning for one Torah giant or another. It has been uncanny.

In other words, the concession seemed to be in the process of being executed, but underwent some kind of delay or another. Then the Gadol would die, and there would be a period of eulogization, followed, shortly after, by the actual concession, be it in land or political concession. Perhaps the eulogy held off the consequence that much longer.

for, though we might not appreciate the value of our Torah Giants, just by virtue of their existing, let alone the Torah they expound, G-d does, as the Talmud says:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Every day a voice goes out from Mt. Sinai and says, "The whole world is fed because Rebi Chanina My son, for whom one bushel of carob from Friday to Friday is sufficient." (Brochos 17b)

It is their pursuit of spirituality and forsaking of worldly matters that keeps our world going, in spite of our lack of pursuit of spirituality and our indulgence in worldly matters.

MELAVE MALKAH:

A psalm by Dovid. O G-d, I have called You, hasten to me, listen to my voice when I call to You. Let my prayer stand as incense before You; the lifting of my hands as a Meal-Offering. (Tehillim 141:1-2)

Anyone who prays to G-d wants G-d to listen to him. However, from Dovid HaMelech's words, he wanted his prayers to accomplish a lot more than simply catch G-d's attentions. Regarding the Incense-Offering, the Talmud says the following:

After this, each one of them (the angels) became friends with Moshe, and told him a useful secret =8A Even the Angel of Death revealed something to him, for, it says, "He (Aharon) put on the incense and made atonement for the people," (Bamidbar 17:13), and it says, "He stood between the dead and the living." If the Angel of Death did not disclose this secret to Moshe, how did he know (to teach Aharon to do this)? (Shabbos 89a)

Thus, incense has such a strong mystical ability that it can even stop a plague.

The Meal-Offering was a scooped-up portion of wheat-meal and oil that was burned on the altar as an "appeasing fragrance" before G-d (Vayikra 6:7-11), as a "memorial" to G-d. It is also called "Holy of Holies," and accompanied most of the sacrifices brought in Temple times.

In the words of the Nefesh HaChaim, offering it up was like feeding the universe -- the spiritual universe, that is. Not that the Sefiros eat wheat-meal and oil, especially burned wheat-meal and oil. However, by doing the mitzvah precisely as G-d prescribed, the kohen had the opportunity to rectify blemishes in the spiritual universe, and change the physical situation of the Jewish people.

Thus, Dovid HaMelech was pleading to G-d that He allow his prayers have this type of dramatic effect on the world and the lives of the Jewish people.

Post a sentry for my mouth, G-d, and guard the doors of my lips. (3)

Sometimes it seems as if our mouths have their own independent system of intelligence, by-passing our minds when making decisions about what to say -- much to our detriment and embarrassment. After, the Talmud says, as bad as Murder, Idol Worship, and Illicit Relations really are, still, Loshon Hara is worst. Oops.

Let my heart not incline toward any evil thing, to perform evil acts with men who sin; let me not break bread in their pleasure-feast. (4)

For, ever since Adam HaRishon sinned in the Garden of Eden, a man's heart "is evil from his youth"(Bereishis 8:21). In the words of the Talmud, if G-d doesn't help a person fend off his yetzer hara daily, he's finished -- he becomes an unwitting slave to his passions (Kiddushin 30b). Recognizing this inherent weakness, as Dovid HaMelech did only too well, is the first step to overcoming it, and reaping the benefits of doing so eternally in the World-to-Come.

Let the righteous one strike me with kindness and let him rebuke me, like the finest oil, let my head not refuse it; for, as long as I can pray, it is to avoid their evils. (5)

Criticism hurts. Even when we ask for it, it hurts, especially if we are trying to do well. However, if wheat could talk, it would scream while being cut down after growing so freely, and cry out in pain when being grounded to flour, and beg for mercy when being baked in an oven. Yet, it accomplishes little in life just growing wild in the fields, which is why it is a good thing that food can't speak, or we'd never eat anything healthy.

We are not here to live comfortable lives, lives free of hurting criticism that "cuts us down" and "grinds and refines" our character traits, and "bakes" into perfected beings, at least the best we can be given our strengths and weaknesses. Pleasure-feasts of the wicked are a whole lot more fun, but, the criticism of the righteous is a whole lot more meaningful, and, in the end, it is meaning in life that provides the great pleasure.

Their judges have gone astray through (their hearts of) stone, though they heard my pleasant words. Like one who chops and splinters (wood) on the ground, so have our bones been scattered to the mouth of the pit. (6-7)

At first reading, it sounds like something from the past only. However, upon a closer reading, one can see the relevance of this plea ESPECIALLY in our day-and-age. We, the Jewish people, are being cajoled, no, FORCED into a situation that is 100% good for everyone except for us. If we took away the oil and the fear of wild Arab reprisals, would the world still compel us to give away major sections of Jerusalem, most prominently, the Temple Mount? Is there any moral or historical basis for that?

As a Jew, especially as one living in Eretz Yisroel, it seems to be a no-win situation for the Jewish people. We have watched what ever little world support we once had fall by the wayside over the last few decades. And now, the United States, our best "friend" among the Jewish nations and supporter of decades, is backing us into a historical position we cannot accept. There really is NO WHERE to turn, except.

To You, G-d, my L-rd, are my eyes turned; I have sought refuge in You, do not cause my soul to be poured out. Protect me from the hands of the snare they laid for me, and from the traps of those

who practice sin. (8-9)

Which, of course, is what this exercise has been all about from day one: learning how to turn to G-d and to rely only in Him.

The wicked will fall into its nets, together with me

How true it is becoming before our very eyes

Until I pass through.

Amen. We can't wait, and time is running out, fast.

CHAZAK!

Have a great Shabbos,
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