

# SECRETS OF SURVIVAL - PART I

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

At the beginning of this week's Parsha Yakov was 147 years old. He had lived 17 years in Egypt as Pharaoh's honored guest during which his family of 70 had grown into thousands. Yakov was very concerned about the immediate future of his nation and he knew that his mortal time was running out. It was time to put his worldly affairs in order, arrange for the transition of leadership to his sons, and strengthen the nation's ability to survive their first exile.

The opening verse of Vayichi states that Yakov lived 17 years in Egypt and that his life spanned 147 years. The next verse switches from the name Yakov to the name Yisroel and states that nearing the time of his death he summoned Yoseph to discuss issues related to his burial. In so far as his burial was concerned Yisroel asked to speak only to Yoseph because Yoseph was the only one of his sons in the position to accomplish his request.

The name Yakov reflects upon the mortal man, husband, father, and grand father. The name Yisroel reflects upon the man greater than life who was progenitor of the Jewish nation. In his capacity as Yisroel he acted as a king. In his capacity as Yakov he acted as a father.

Yakov's final 17 years were the crowning Nachas (contentment and joy) of his life. Although away from the land of Avraham and Yitzchak he was nevertheless surrounded by his entire family. All of them had survived the many trials and tribulations and all of them were equally committed to their legacy of choseness. Reflecting back on the entirety of his life, the Torah distilled the accomplishments of Yakov the man into the single word "Vayichi."

The numerical value of Vayichi is 34 equaling the last 17 years of his life in Mitzrayim and the first 17 years of Yoseph's life before being sold into slavery. (heard from Chaim Stepen when he was less than Bar Mitzvah age.) The Torah is telling us that the totality of life's true accomplishments is contained in the continuity of Torah from father to son, from the beginning of life until its eventual closure. It is only those moments before we say Shema for the last time that we will know if we have accomplished what we set out to accomplish. It will not be the books we have written or the buildings we have built. Reputations and accolades will fade to nothingness as our eyes become heavy with age. It is our children who will prove our true worth. If they are Bnai (sons) and Bnos (daughters) Torah, if they are moral and ethical members of society, if they are committed to teaching their children just as they were taught, then we have been successful. Yakov's "living" were the 34 years that spanned his limited time with Yoseph. In the first 17 years he taught him how to be a Jew. For the next 22 years Yoseph survived as a Jew because of what his father had taught him. In

the last 17 years Yakov was able to see for himself that he had succeeded in doing what he had set out to do.

Studied properly, Parshas Vayichi should reveal the basic elements of Jewish survival throughout the long years of exile and challenge. I would like to suggest that there are three basic elements to Jewish survival.

1. Torah
2. Eretz Yisroel
3. Mesorah - transmission of true Torah information from generation to generation.

Yakov conferred his special blessing on Yoseph's two sons, Menashe and Ephrayim. A quick sketch of the event surrounding that blessing is important for seeing the three elements of survival.

As the Torah details, Yakov first hugged his grandsons after which Yoseph extracted them from his embrace. Yoseph and his sons bowed down before Yakov. Yoseph positioned them so that Yakov's right hand would rest upon Menashe and his left hand on Ephrayim. Yakov then deliberately crossed his arms so that his right hand rested upon Ephrayim and his left hand on Menashe. Being that Menashe was older Yoseph felt that it was proper for Yakov's right hand to rest on Menashe and attempted to switch Yakov's hands. Yakov refused and explained that Ephrayim was destined to become greater than Menashe and therefore the right hand would remain on Ephrayim's head.

What was so important about which hand would rest on whose head? It is not as if Yakov gave them separate blessings. Just the opposite! Yakov granted both brothers the same exact blessing at the same time. In essence he was conveying to them the blessing that was Yoseph's. However, because Yoseph's claim on tribedhood was to be divided between his two sons it made perfect sense that the blessing to Yoseph would be conveyed to both halves of the tribe at the same time. The placing of the hands should have been no more than the translated ceremony of Yakov placing both his hands on the head of Yoseph. In this instance the one son had become two people requiring that the two hands otherwise reserved for one head would have to be shared between the two halves. Why the whole switching of the hands scene?

The scene reveals that Yakov and Yoseph approached Menashe and Ephrayim from two opposing perspectives. Menashe had chosen to work with Yoseph in government while Ephrayim had chosen to spend his time learning Torah from Yakov. Because Ephrayim had devoted himself to being with his grandfather, Yoseph felt that he was far more protected than Menashe. Menashe, like Yoseph himself, spent his time interfacing with the non-Jewish world. As such, Yoseph felt that he required more of Yakov's attention than Ephrayim. The placing of the right hand on Menashe's head would have reflected that added attention. In many ways it was similar to when Yitzchak wanted to bless Eisav. Eisav was supposed to have been the component of the Jewish people that interfaced with the non-Jewish world while Yakov devoted himself to the study hall. When it came time to convey blessings on his two sons Yitzchak chose to first bless Eisav before he would bless Yakov. In fact, as

far as the Torah records Yakov was not invited to be blessed at that time at all. We do not know when Yitzchak intended to bless Yakov.

Of course, we know that in the end the blessing was supposed to be Yakov's because he had purchased Eisav's option of being one of the progenitors of the Jewish people. In its stead, Yakov became the sole progenitor of the Jewish nation assuming the responsibilities of both himself and Eisav. We are told by the Navi (prophet) that the essence of Eisav's good qualities were born in the person of Yoseph granting him the special strength to not only survive the non-Jewish world but to influence it to become closer to G-d. Therefore, Yoseph thought that of his two sons, Menashe, his older son, should be the one to receive the "right hand - stronger" portion of the blessing.

The blessing that Yakov conferred on Ephrayim and Menashe is the classic blessing of a father to his son. The blessing contains the essence of Jewish survival as reflected in G-d's special providence over the Bnai Yisroel as it was conveyed to Menashe and Ephrayim by their grandfather Yakov. Why Menashe and Ephraim rather than any or all of the other grandchildren? Because they were the only two grandchildren born and raised in exile away from the powerful embrace of Yakov's presence and family. Therefore, Yakov saw in them the quintessential paradigm of Jewish survival and continuity and granted them as representatives of all his children the special blessing of Jewish survival. However note that the blessing was conveyed to both Menashe and Ephrayim, to the more protected and the less protected of Yoseph's two children.

Yakov understood Yoseph's intentions for Menashe; however, he disagreed with Yoseph's conclusion. It had nothing to do with who needed the yeoman's share of the blessing more than the other. Both the Menashe model and the Ephrayim model needed G-d's special intervention to survive the years of exile. Yakov's intention was to emphasize which of the two occupations was more essential for the survival of the Jewish nation. As important as it is for the worldly Jew to be strong, disciplined and courageous as he interfaced with the non-Jewish powers that be, it was even more important for the Jew to know that his true strength and survival is contained within the walls of the Bais Medresh (study hall) and pages of Torah. Neither should be mutually exclusive of the other; however, as a nation we must always know that our choseness is in having been granted the gift of Torah.

Rashi explains that Ephrayim's greatness would be realized in the person of Yehoshua. Yehoshua was a gifted leader chosen by Moshe to lead the Bnai Yisroel into battle against the forces of Amalek at the beginning of the 40 years in the desert. However, what earned him the position as Moshe's successor was his singular devotion to studying Torah from Moshe. More so than any other person in that generation, Yehoshua embraced the true secret of Jewish survival and continuity. Beyond his talents as a leader and general was his singular commitment to the study of Torah. (This was reinforced before the battle for Yericho.) Rashi explains that it was Ephrayim's singular commitment to Torah that eventually translated into the birth of his great grandson, Yehoshua.

To be continued...

---

Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Aron Tendler and **Torah.org**

The author is the Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA, and Assistant Principal of YULA.