

SEVENTEEN YEARS OF SERENITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Our father Yaakov lived for seventeen years in the Goshen area of the land of Egypt. These were undoubtedly the most peaceful, serene and happiest years of his long and troubled life. He is reunited with his beloved son Yosef who has risen to power and greatness, albeit in a strange land. No Eisav, no Lavan, no Shechem, no Canaanite neighbors are present to disturb his peace and security. And, with his family in all of its many generations surrounding him, at peace with him and, superficially at least, with one another, Yaakov is content.

Yaakov is finally vindicated in his life's work and can enjoy the last years of his life. In effect we can understand why the parsha begins -vayechi Yaakov - for it is in these seventeen years that Yaakov truly lived, finally achieving satisfaction and harmony.

The Talmud records for us that the great Rabi Yehuda HaNassi -Rabi - lived in the city of Zippori for seventeen years and the Talmud explicitly connects Rabi's seventeen year sojourn in Zippori with Yaakov's seventeen years of life in Egypt.

Aside from the apparently magic number of seventeen being involved in both instances, what connection is there if any between these two events, especially since they took place millennia apart? The seeming word games of the Talmud, linking like words that appear in the Torah, always have deeper meaning attached to them. There is an underlying motif and relevant message to all generations in this Talmudic assertion. It certainly should demand our attention and study.

Rabi was the editor and publisher of the Mishna, the one book that guaranteed the survival of the Jewish people throughout the long exile that stretched forth and that he saw in his mind's eye. Rabi saw himself, as did his ancestor Yaakov, ensconced in a rare bubble of serenity and opportunity, freed temporarily from the constant persecution of Rome due to his personal friendship with the Roman emperor.

He grasped the moment and exploited the opportunity to codify the Oral Law of Sinai and preserve it for all eternity amongst the Jewish people. Those seventeen years of serenity in Zippori afforded him the opportunity to do so. Yaakov's seventeen years of family harmony and spiritual strengthening in the land of Goshen enabled him to provide the necessary guidance and insights to his family that would enable them to weather the long night of Egyptian bondage and exile.

The last seventeen years of Yaakov's life were the preparation for the centuries of hardship that would follow. Yaakov's ability to shape and guide his family so that they would remain loyal and true

to God's covenant with them was matched by the seventeen years of the development of the Mishna by Rabi in Zippori many millennia later.

The actions of the forefathers became the instructional template for the later generations. Thus the lives and patterns of behavior and events of Yaakov and Rabi are bound together over the vast passage of time. Just as Yaakov lives so does Rabi live. And this living is not constricted by years or time but is endlessly eternal.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com