

PARSHAS VAYIGASH - LIFE IMITATES HISTORY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Life Imitates History¹

I will provide for you there - for there will be five more years of famine - so you do not become destitute: you, your household, and all that is yours.

Yosef had already explained in quite some detail what the future would bring. He had told them that the famine was only beginning. Five hard years of further famine were predicted to be ahead of them. Furthermore, the Torah lavished several pesukim on Yosef's attempt to shake his brothers loose of their shame and guilt. He pointed to all the good that ironically resulted from his sale. He went so far as to say that the consequences were so profound, that they should see themselves as instruments of the Divine Will, rather than brood over the guilt of their fratricidal decision.

What more remained to be said? After all the explanation that came earlier, why does Yosef in this pasuk repeat what he has already related to them?

Yosef seized an opportunity to point out the ways of Divine Providence. His story illustrated like no other how Hashem's Will is accomplished. Events and details that seem unrelated, come together to produce whatever it is that He wishes to come about. Most of the time, Man cannot see how the different strands of an unfolding story are present or related. He remains blind and clueless to the intricate story that is woven in front of him. Looking back at the events of the last decades, Yosef points to the intertwining of so many events that eventually bring about the desired result - protecting and sustaining Yaakov's fledgling family. The Torah wishes to make this episode an object lesson to us of the manner in which Hashem's Will works through history.

Shlomo said, "Hashem creates everything; He employs the fool, and employs the transgressors." [2] Humans plan on utilizing the best tools and best personnel for the job. Hashem knows no such limitations. He can and does make use of the most unlikely assistants - the fools, and even those who flout His will. He deftly makes use of unwitting helpers, who play a role in accomplishing His purposes.

As Chazal say, by way of two small measures of silk the fearful prophecies of the bris bein ha-besarim came to be. A chain of events led from that bit of extra ornamentation that Yaakov added to Yosef's garment. That chain ended with the enslavement of the Jewish people. Many circumstances in Yosef's life seemed tragic and senseless when they happened, but turned out to make crucial contribution to his role in life. Such was true on a larger scale with respect to Yosef's family and their

role in going from small group to a proto-nation to a large nation. In truth, the chain did not end there, but repeats itself in more recent times.

In retrospect, staying in Canaan was not an option. Had they developed and thrived there, it would have been inevitable that they would in time have to move away from a central location, and disperse throughout the land. Our early peoplehood, however, required incubation away from any foreign influences. Staying in Canaan would have led to diluting and adulterating their national ethos. Hashem's Providence instead sent them to an Egypt that shunned outsiders, and would therefore reject the Jews as their equals. Yaakov's descendents could develop with a strong, separate, identity.

We would experience the same for hundreds of years during the Middle Ages. The fanatic bigotry of the day would isolate us in ghettos. This was not pleasant - but in retrospect, has to be seen as an effective way of keeping us apart from the primitiveness of the cultural surround of the times. In closed circles, we were able to develop strong senses of family and community, while the world around had little to contribute.

Under Yosef's guidance, the Egyptians weathered the storm of severe famine. Having no more funds with which to buy food, the Egyptians traded their lands for their survival. To consolidate the earnings of his master, Yosef moved all parts of the population to new areas, emphasizing Paroh's ownership of the land. Here, too, Providence was at work. The Jews could not be rejected merely for lacking rootedness in the land; the contemporary Egyptians were strangers in the land as well! In the European experience, while Jews were disdained as "different," that difference was at least tempered by the fact that most of the European landscape was occupied by relatively recent arrivals when the Jews first came. Their new hosts were themselves people who had migrated relatively recently to their new homes. Jews would ultimately be taunted with the words, "Jews get out! Jews to Palestine;" they would be able to point back to their accusers. "Why is there no trace of your ancestors in the land we stand upon?"

Most soberingly, we look back at Yosef's odyssey and note that his pain and suffering came about through jealousy and groundless hatred. Here, too, later history was prepared for by earlier events. Our second beis hamikdosh was destroyed because of the same jealousy and hatred. In Egypt, the Jews would learn the hard way that they could not survive without developing the gifts of brotherhood and equality.

We still wait to acquire the same to rid ourselves of our present Galus.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 45:11
 2. Mishlei 26:10, following Rashi and the first approach of Ibn Ezra

