

PARSHAS VAYECHI

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Vayechi. 5631

The Sfas Emes begins by focusing on the parsha's first four words: "Vayechi Ya'akov be'Eretz Mitzrayim..." ("Ya'akov lived in Egypt..."). The Sfas Emes sees special significance in the Torah's decision to start the parsha with the word 'Vayechi'. Why? Because the word "Vayechi" comes from the same Hebrew root as the words "chiyus" and "chayim". Those words resonate with a unique importance for the Sfas Emes. They signify 'truly' living; that is, living connected to one's Shoresh (root), i.e., to HaShem.

A basic question. How was Ya'akov Avinu able to experience chiyus (vibrancy; vitality) in Mitzrayim, a country well known to be a cesspool of tum'a (spiritual impurity)? This question -- and the Sfas Emes's answer to it -- are of great practical interest to us. For, as we know, "ma'aseh avos siman lebanim". That is, the lives of our Patriarchs provide a paradigm for us, their descendants, to follow in our own lives.

The Sfas Emes answers: Ya'akov Avinu was able to live in the mode of chiyus -- i.e., to flourish spiritually -- even in Egypt because his identifying quality was Emes (truthfulness). That is, we know that Avraham Avinu's identifying trait was chessed -- loving kindness. Likewise, Yitzchok Avinu had a signature trait -- gevura (discipline). Ya'akov Avinu's special trait -- the feature that he lived with special intensity -- was Emes. In that vein, the pasuk (Micha, 7,20) tells us: 'Titein Emes leYa'akov' ('Grant truthfulness to Ya'akov'). That quality of truthfulness enabled him to live with chiyus -- even in Mitzrayim.

How did this work? The Sfas Emes does not elaborate, presumably because he considers the answer to this question to be self-evident. I suggest that what he has in mind is the following. First, through his strict adherence to truth, Ya'akov Avinu was able to recognize that the ideas concerning metaphysics that were then current in Mitzrayim were falsehoods. We should not underestimate the attractiveness of those ideas. At that time, Egypt was the world's intellectual center. For this reason, the ideas circulating within that country's intellectual elite came with great persuasive power. But Ya'akov Avinu's firm grip on truth enabled him to know that those superficially plausible ideas were in fact intellectual booby traps.

I suggest that another way through which his quality of Emes enabled our forefather to live with chiyus even in Mitzrayim was his truthfulness to himself. To understand what I mean when I say that

Ya'akov was truthful to himself, consider the opposite situation wherein we do not acknowledge to ourselves that we are doing wrong. Such intellectual dishonesty precludes the possibility of Teshuva. Indeed, the person may continue doing wrong, and do so with an air of self-satisfaction -- thus adding ga'ava (haughtiness) to his/her portfolio of aveiros.

Continuing his discussion, the Sfas Emes notes another condition that enabled Ya'akov Avinu to succeed: Simcha (joy). (I have the impression that the kind of Simcha that the Sfas Emes has in mind here is not ordinary, garden variety joy, but rather "transcendental simcha". I use this term to describe joy that transcends the particular circumstances or conditions that a person is experiencing. In transcendental simcha, the person simply glows, perhaps because he/she feels at one with the Cosmos).

As the Sfas Emes recounts Ya'akov Avinu's experience in Egypt, Emes brought chiyus -- a closer connection with HaShem. Chiyus, in turn, brought Simcha. On this key point, the Sfas Emes cites the pasuk (Bereishis, 45: 27): "Vatechi ruach Ya'akov avihem." ('The spirit of their father, Ya'akov, took on new life.') The Sfas Emes introduces the explanation of the Zohar, which focuses on the word 'Vatechi' in that pasuk. The Zohar corroborates the Sfas Emes's interpretation that with chiyus -- to which the pasuk's word "Vatechi" refers -- Simcha also came to Ya'akov Avinu.

Simcha, in turn, had a marvelous effect. Because Ya'akov had been despondent over the loss of Yosef, he had lost the capacity for ruach hakodesh. For joy is one of the conditions necessary for a person to achieve that close contact with HaShem. With the advent of joy, Ya'akov was able to reconnect with ruach hakodesh. Further, as this account indicates, Chiyus and Simcha can be mutually-reinforcing. Starting with Emes, a person may generate a self-sustaining upward spiral. Thus, adherence to truth can help a person live his/her life with joy. And unburdened of negative feelings to life, the person can come still closer to an awareness of reality; that is, to recognition that the entire Cosmos draws its existence from HaShem.

Now the Sfas Emes moves on to a new topic. And since we are still in the first paragraph of the ma'amar of the year 5631, we will follow him to see what he says.

Rashi, following Medrash Rabba, comments on our parsha's first pasuk, and tells us: Ya'akov Avinu wanted to be megaleh (to reveal) 'the keitz' (the time of Moshiach's coming, and the end of golus) to his sons. But HaShem did not want him to do so; and blocked Ya'kov Avinu's access to the necessary information.

The Sfas Emes quotes his Grandfather -- the Chidushei HaRim -- who, in turn, quoted the Rav of Parshischa -- a great Tzaddik of the previous generation -- who asked a basic question: why did Ya'akov Avinu want to reveal the keitz to his sons? What good would it have done to Ya'akov Avinu's descendants if he had revealed the keitz to them?

To which question these three Tzaddikim respond with the following answer. In standard usage, the phrase 'to be megaleh the keitz' means: to reveal when Moshiach will come and the golus will end.

By contrast, the Sfas Emes and his illustrious predecessors read this phrase as meaning: to reveal the fact that a keitz exists.

Now we know why Ya'akov Avinu's descendants would have benefitted if he had revealed the keitz to them. For, the Sfas Emes explains, knowing that the golus will end makes it easy ('be'nakeil') to experience the whole golus period -- regardless of how long it will last and when it will end. Indeed, says the Sfas Emes, if the fact of the keitz had been revealed, 'lo haya golus klal' (it would not even have been golus.) Why not? Because knowing that there is a keitz will give meaning to history, removing the impression that history is nothing but a sequence of random, painful events. Thus, knowing that there is a keitz would make it readily apparent that what we have been experiencing is only Hester, behind which HaShem is truly there.

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