

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV: TRUE COLORS

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

The Torah introduces the events surrounding the sale of Yosef and his descent to Egypt by noting that Yaakov had a special relationship with him. *"VYisroel ahav es Yosef mecol banav - He loved Yosef [more] than his other children* (Bereishis 37:3), and he provided him with a fine woolen garment, a *âkesones pasim*'. The Torah explains that the reason for this preferential treatment was due to the fact that Yosef was the *âBen Zekunim*' of Yaakov.

These are several interpretations of the words *âBen Zekunim*' offered by our meforshim (commentaries). The simple meaning mentioned by Rashi is that Yosef was born in Yaakov's old age, and as we know, many parents have a soft spot in their hearts for their youngest child. Rashi offers other interpretations to the words *ben zekunim* - perhaps due to the fact that the simple translation is vulnerable to two significant questions. Firstly, Binyomin was eight years younger than Yosef, so why was Yosef referred to as the *ben zekunim* and not Binyomin? Secondly, the first eleven sons of Yaakov were born in close proximity to each other - all were brought to this world in a span of seven years! Why, then, would Yosef be considered *âa child of Yaakov's old age*' more than the others?

To address these issues, Rashi offers two additional, non-literal translations of the words *âben zekunim*.' The first follows Unkelus, who suggests that Yosef was the *âwise child*' (the word *Zakein* is often noted in the gemorah as an acronym for *Zeh sh'KaNa chachmah*, one who acquired wisdom - even in one's youth.) Therefore, the inference is that Yosef was the wisest of Yaakov's children. Rashi, quoting a Midrash (84:8), mentions that Yaakov taught his son Yosef all the he had learned in the Beis Midrash of Shem and Ever. Additionally, Rashi mentions that Yosef's appearance was similar to that of Yaakov - closely linking the two and forming a special bond.

The Lessons of Shem

These explanations, however, pose their own questions as we delve deeper into this matter. Why did Yaakov feel the need to transmit Shem's Torah to Yosef. What exactly was the *âTorah of Shem*'? Why did Yakov teach it only to Yosef and not the other children? And how does this status of *âben zekunim*' correlate to the gift of the special garment - the *kesones pasim*?

Many meforshim address these questions and point out that Yaakov taught all his children the entire Torah that he learned from his father Yitzchak. However, Yaakov felt that his *âben zekunim*' Yosef needed additional Torah lessons - the ones that Yaakov learned from Shem, the son of Noach. Yaakov had studied in the Yeshiva of Shem for fourteen years as he was traveling to the house of

Lavan.

The two rebbeim of Yaakov, Yitzchak and Shem, had very diverse backgrounds. Yitzchak had the luxury of growing up in the protective environment of his father Avraham. He never left the land of Canaan and was not exposed to the immorality of the broader world to the extent that his father and son were. Shem, on the other hand, was raised during the generation of the Flood, where he was witness to the depravity of that era - and the Divine punishment that was administered as a result of that decadence.

As Yaakov was leaving the shelter of his father's house, he felt that he needed 'The Torah of Shem' - lessons on how to retain his spiritual compass - while living in the company of Lavan.

Passing the Torch

Now it was time for Yaakov to transmit these crucial lessons to Yosef, who would soon be forced to spend twenty-two years in the spiritual challenges of Egypt (the same amount of time that his father had lived with Lavan.) Yaakov taught his wise child Yosef all the Torah life-lessons that he had absorbed from Shem. It is interesting to note that there were exactly fourteen years from the time that Yosef was three years old (the classical age for chinuch to begin) until the time that he left his father's home at the age of seventeen.

I would like to suggest that there was powerful symbolism in the garment that Yaakov gave Yosef. Kesones pasim is translated as either 'a woolen garment' or 'a multi-colored garment'.

Perhaps Yaakov was informing his beloved son Yosef that he would need additional protection while spending time in the harsh spiritual climate of Egypt. Cotton may suffice while at home, but the enhanced insulating quality of wool will be required while spending time away from the shelter of one's family.

A similar message may have been delivered in the form of the multi-colored nature of the garment. Yosef would need many skills to survive the experiences that he would endure in Egypt. While his brothers were basking in the glow of their father's presence, Yosef would face slavery, temptation, and perhaps his greatest challenge - power and royalty. Yosef would need many tools in his kit, many colors in his palette, to remain Yosef Hatzadik throughout these varied and diverse phases.

Yaakov's investment and trust in Yosef bore fruit. Yosef was tested in so many ways over the next twenty-two years, but remained steadfast in his Torah values and a humble servant of Hashem - a 'Ben Zekunim' throughout.

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Rabbi Horowitz is the founder and dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam in Monsey, NY, as well as the founder and Program Director of Agudath Israel's Project Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services), which

helps at-risk teens and their parents. He is a popular lecturer on teaching and parenting topics in communities around the world, and is the author of several best-selling parenting tape and CD sets. For more information on Rabbi Horowitz's parenting tapes, visit <http://www.rabbihorowitz.com/> or call 845-352-7100 X 133.