**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYECHI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayechi tells of the funeral held for Yaakov in Canaan after his death. We read that his sons transported his remains to a place called Goren Ha-atad, where they eulogized him. The Torah relates that the local Canaanite tribes were moved by the sight of the large assembly at Goren Ha-atad, and took note of the fact that the Egyptians were mourning the loss of an important figure (50:11).

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Sota 1:10) comments that the place where this occurred was not really called “Goren Ha-atad.” The Torah refers to this sight as such, the Yerushalmi explains, to indicate that these Canaanite tribes who marveled at the large mourning assembly were evil, and “deserved to be trampled upon with thorns.” The word *atad* refers to a thorn bush, and the Canaanites near the site of Yaakov’s funeral were worthy of being tortured to death with thorns, and thus the site was called “Goren Ha-atad.” God spared these tribesmen, the Yerushalmi adds, because they joined in showing respect to Yaakov. The Yerushalmi cites different views as to how precisely these Canaanites paid respects, but all agree that they made some simple gesture, such as standing upright or motioning with their fingers as they observed the mourning.

The question arises, if, indeed, these Canaanites were so sinful that they were deemed worthy of a painful death, why did God spare them in reward for a small gesture of respect? How could such a simple act outweigh a lifetime of sin?

The Tolna Rebbe suggested that the significance of the Canaanites’ gesture lies in the effort that it took. As the Mishna in Avot (5:23) famously teaches, “*Le-fum tza’ara agra*” – the primary reward earned for a *mitzva* is for the work and effort invested. People mired in sinfulness, who have become habitually evil, can earn great reward through even a simple act of goodness, if they need to work hard to resist their sinful tendencies in order to perform this otherwise unimpressive act. And thus the Canaanites, who were disinclined to show respect to Yaakov, were rewarded for opposing their natural inclination and paying their respects. Although the act might not appear all that impressive or significant, it was highly valued because it entailed the Canaanites’ opposing what had become their natural instincts and tendencies.

We might add that this could perhaps explain the Yerushalmi’s concluding remarks in this passage: “If these, who did not perform kindness with their arms or legs – yet look how the Almighty repaid them, then Yisrael, who perform kindness with their arms and legs for their great people and for their simple people – all the more so.” If the Canaanites’ small gesture of respect rendered them worthy of reward, the Yerushalmi comments, then we can only imagine the reward we earn through concrete acts of kindness that we perform. Curiously, the Yerushalmi emphasizes in this context that *Am Yisrael* performs kindness for both “*gedoleihem*” and “*ketaneihem*” – distinguished people, and ordinary commoners. The contrast drawn between our nation and the ancient Canaanites relates not only to the fact that the Canaanites made just a small gesture while we perform tangible acts of kindness, but also to the fact that we perform kindness for all people, and not merely for people of stature, like Yaakov Avinu. The Yerushalmi’s intent, perhaps, is that performing kindness for simple, ordinary people requires an extra degree of effort and sacrifice. We are naturally enthusiastic about performing favors for people of distinction, because such favors make us feel important. The more difficult challenge is performing kindness for “*ketaneihem*,” for ordinary, simple people whom we are not naturally inclined to respect or hold in high esteem. When we overcome this tendency, and we make the effort to show respect and act kindly towards simple people, then we become worthy of God’s kindness and blessings.

Sunday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayechi, we read of Yosef’s brothers’ plea after their father’s death that Yosef forgive them for what they had done to him. The brothers feared that Yosef had treated them kindly since their arrival in Egypt only out of respect to their father, and now that Yaakov had died, Yosef might seek to avenge their cruelty towards him. The Torah tells that Yosef wept upon hearing his brothers’ plea, and he reassured them that he would continue caring for them and their families (50:17-21).

An intriguing Chassidic reading of this account is proposed by Rav Moshe Ha-levi Sofer of Peshvarsk, in his *Or Penei Moshe*. He suggests that Yosef wept in response to his brothers’ entreaty because they were begging him for forgiveness, instead of begging the Almighty for forgiveness. The Torah writes, “Yosef cried when they spoke to him,” which the Rebbe of Peshvarsk interprets to mean that he wept because the brother spoke to him, rather than speaking to God. Yosef sensed that the brothers’ concern revolved around him, and not around the Almighty, whose forgiveness was no less vitally important than his. The Rebbe of Pevarsk goes so far as to say that if the brothers had appealed to God for forgiveness the way they appealed to Yosef for forgiveness, their sin would have been completely erased. The Jewish Nation would have then been spared the future calamities which *Chazal* attribute to the residual effects of the brothers’ crime against Yosef, such as the execution of the *asara harugei malkhut* (ten martyrs) at the hands of the Romans. Yosef cried in lamenting the fact that his brothers focused too strongly on seeking his mercy and forgiveness, and did not sufficiently petition God for His mercy and forgiveness.

The message conveyed by this classic Chassidic insight is that we must perceive interpersonal offenses as spiritual failures. Securing the victim’s forgiveness is necessary for atonement, but insufficient. Wrongs committed against other people express flaws in our characters that taint our souls no less than the mistakes we make in the realms of *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom* (our obligations towards God). Therefore, being forgiven does not suffice to erase the sin and its effects. Our account after harming somebody is not only with that person, but also with the Almighty. The Rebbe of Peshvarsk reminds us that offenses against people are also offenses against God, and require us to not only make amends with those whom we have hurt, but also undergo a complete and comprehensive process of personal *teshuva*.

Monday

The Torah tells in Parashat Vayechi of Yosef bringing his two sons, Efrayim and Menashe, to his aged father, Yaakov, so he could bless them before his passing. We read that upon seeing the two young men, Yaakov asked Yosef, “Who are these?” to which Yosef replied that they were his sons (48:8-9).

Rashi, based on several Midrashic sources, explains that Yaakov knew that these were Yosef’s sons, but he asked this question because he prophetically foresaw wicked people descending from Efrayim and Menashe. This prophetic vision resulted in the departure of the divine presence from Yaakov’s room, Rashi explains, and so Yaakov asked Yosef about his sons’ origins, to explain why they would beget sinful descendants.

The *Or Ha-chayim* observes that this Midrashic interpretation is unsatisfactory on the level of *peshuto shel mikra* (the plain meaning of the text), and therefore suggests two other explanations of Yaakov’s question. First, and perhaps most simply, he suggests that Yaakov did not recognize his grandsons due to his impaired vision, of which the Torah takes note in the very next verse (48:10), and so he needed Yosef to identify the two people who were with him. Additionally, the *Or Ha-chayim* writes, Yaakov perhaps asked this question in order for Yosef’s love for his children to intensify. Yaakov understood that his blessing for Efrayim and Menashe would be more effective the more their father loved and cherished them. He therefore arranged that Yosef would have to utter the words, “They are my sons,” which would have the effect of strengthening Yosef’s emotional bonds with his sons, and increasing his love and affection for them. The *Or Ha-chayim* mentions in this context God’s famous description in Sefer Yirmiyahu (31:19) of how His emotions are stirred, as it were, every time He speaks of His beloved children, *Am Yisrael*. In a similar vein, Yaakov wanted to arouse Yosef’s emotions by forcing him to announce, “They are my sons,” which would naturally evoke feelings of pride and affection.

Underlying the *Or Ha-chayim*’s comments is the notion that the greatest blessing children can receive is their parents’ unconditional love, support and affection. While all parents love their children, the parent-child relationship is complex and can often be fraught with a degree of tension. The *Or Ha-chayim* reminds us that parents need to regularly step back and proudly declare, “*Banai heim*,” to intensify their love for and emotional connection to their children, and recognize that these feelings are the greatest blessing that their children could possibly receive.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayechi of Yaakov’s final words to his sons before his death, which included harsh condemnation of Shimon and Levi for their violence (49:5-7), presumably referring to their assault on Shekhem to avenge the rape and abduction of their sister, Dina. Yaakov begins his censure of Shimon and Levi by declaring, “Shimon and Levi are brothers.” The *Keli Yakar* explains that Yaakov made this proclamation as an expression of praise before proceeding to condemn his sons’ act of violence, commending Shimon and Levi for their brotherly commitment to their sister. While he sharply criticized their violent reaction, he also made a point of lauding their passionate devotion to Dina which prompted them to resort to extreme measures for the purpose of defending her honor and rescuing her from the clutches of her assailant.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his [*Netivei Chayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=42858&st=&pgnum=432&hilite=), draws from the *Keli Yakar*’s comments the message of expressing praise and compliments before offering criticism. When criticism is warranted, it is likely to be more effective if it is preceded by complimentary words. Yaakov began by lauding Shimon and Levi for their fraternal devotion as an introduction to his harsh condemnation of their violence, so that his criticism would be more readily accepted.

We might add that Yaakov here does not merely give praise to Shimon and Levi, but acknowledges that the wrongful act they committed stemmed, in part, from an inherently admirable quality. He recognizes that Shimon and Levi did not engage in random, wanton violence, but rather acted upon noble and commendable emotions of familial devotion. The act itself was illegitimate, but the mindset and feelings that produced the act were worthy of admiration and emulation. When offering criticism, it is important not only to include complimentary words, but also to acknowledge the positive aspects of the wrongful behavior being criticized. Very often, improper conduct results from a misguided expression of otherwise noble feelings and objectives. As in the case of Shimon and Levi, it is important to recognize those admirable characteristics even when we find it necessary to criticize the actions which they bred.

Wednesday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayechi, we read of the emotional exchange that took place between Yosef and his brothers following their father’s passing. The brothers were concerned that with Yaakov gone, Yosef might avenge their cruel treatment of him many years earlier, and so they approached Yosef to plead for forgiveness. Yosef reassured them that he had no hostile intentions at all. The Torah adds, “He comforted them and spoke to their heart” (50:21).

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains this to mean that Yosef told his brothers that he would be harmed if he harmed them. If he killed them, then the Egyptians – who suspected that he had been born to a slave class – would accuse Yosef of finding a random group of impressive men and presenting them as his brothers, to prove he was born into a distinguished family. Once he no longer needed these men to prove his distinguished pedigree, the Egyptians would suspect, he killed them. The rationale behind this argument, Yosef told his brothers, is, in Rashi’s words, “Is there such a thing as a brother who kills his brothers?” Killing his brothers would confirm the Egyptians’ suspicion that they were not truly his brothers, because after all, people do not kill their brothers. Yosef therefore could not kill his brothers even if he wished to.

A number of writers raised the question of how this line of reasoning would provide comfort and solace to the anxiety-ridden brothers. Yosef’s rhetorical question – “Is there such a thing as a brother who kills his brothers?” – likely stung their ears and made them shudder. Rather than help them achieve comfort, this remark could have only caused the brothers greater humiliation and stronger pangs of guilt for nearly killing Yosef. How can Rashi claim that the Torah’s description of Yosef comforting his brothers included a comment about the horror of fratricide – the very crime which the brothers initially attempted to commit against him?

One possibility that has been suggested is that Yosef made this comment in order to assure the brothers that he did not hold them fully responsible for their crime. Seforno, commenting to the previous verse, writes that Yosef in this exchange acknowledged that his brothers committed their crime against him due to a mistaken impression that they had. Yosef would bring negative reports about them to Yaakov, and the brothers interpreted this practice as a concerted attempt on Yosef’s part to drive them all from the family so he would be Yaakov’s sole heir. They therefore felt it necessary to eliminate Yosef, whom they viewed as posing a dire risk to the family. In essence, according to Seforno, Yosef was telling his brothers that he forgave them because he recognized that they acted on a fundamentally mistaken premise, a mistake which, at least to some degree, mitigated their guilt. If so, then we can perhaps understand Yosef’s intent in rhetorically asking, “Is there such a thing as a brother who kills his brothers?” He was telling his brothers that killing a brother is such a horrific crime that there must have been exceptional circumstances that prompted them to commit this act. This question was, indeed, part of Yosef’s effort to console his brothers and ease their conscience, as he assured them that he recognized the extraordinary set of circumstances which led them to this unspeakable deed.

So often, wrongdoing results from an innocent, or at least somewhat excusable, mistake. Yosef had the wisdom and humility to recognize that although his brothers had committed a despicable crime, it was precipitated by a misimpression. They irresponsibly reached a drastic conclusion based on their assumptions about his motives, but ultimately, it was a mistaken perception that drove them to act as they did. We learn from Yosef to try as much as possible to judge others favorably and understand the innocent, or partially innocent, mistakes that underlie their wrongful conduct. This open-minded approach can go a long way to helping us avoid anger and resentment and ensure that we do not allow excusable mistakes to destroy relationships.

Thursday

In his famous blessing to his grandsons, Menashe and Efrayim, Yaakov prays that “the angel that has redeemed me from all evil” shall bless them and make them fruitful (48:16). In this blessing, Yaakov looks upon his troubled life fondly and gratefully, acknowledging that he had been mercifully spared from “all evil.” He views his life with such appreciation and positivity that he wishes upon his grandchildren the same good fortune that he enjoyed.

We might raise the question of how to reconcile the perspective expressed here with Yaakov’s far gloomier description of his life seventeen years earlier, upon his arrival in Egypt. As we read earlier (47:9), when Yaakov appeared before Pharaoh, who promptly asked him his age, he replied that he was one hundred and thirty years old, and added, “The days of the years of my life have been few and troubled, and have not reached the days of the years of my forefathers…” Here, Yaakov bemoans his difficult life of hardship and adversity, and *Chazal* in fact criticize Yaakov for complaining about his “troubled” life (see *Da’at Zekeinim*). Why did Yaakov speak so negatively about his life in his meeting with Pharaoh, but then gratefully acknowledge the “angel” that had assisted him throughout his life, when blessing Efrayim and Menashe?

One simple answer is that the difference lies in the seventeen-year gap between these two statements. Yaakov appeared before Pharaoh immediately after hearing that Yosef was alive, following twenty-two years of bereavement and grief. At this point, the pain and anguish of his troubles were still fresh in his mind, and the emotional wounds that accumulated over his many years of suffering had yet to heal. So soon after his decades of sorrow, he saw his years as “few and troubled.” But after seventeen years of peace and stability, living near his sons and under the care of Yosef, he was able to look upon his life from a far more positive perspective. Although he had endured a great deal of adversity and anguish, the passage of time allowed him to see the “angel” that held his hand throughout his years of hardship, protecting him and helping him at every step of the way.

Generally, periods and situations of adversity seem far harsher at the time than they do later in retrospect and hindsight. When we face hardship, we need to trust that there is an “angel” protecting us from evil even amidst our distress, and the time will come when we will be able to look back fondly and gratefully upon all that transpired, from a fresh, upbeat and positive perspective.

(Based on [an article](https://www.facebook.com/alexisrael1/posts/10155596597018942?pnref=story) by Rabbi Alex Israel)

Friday

In Yaakov’s deathbed blessing to his son Yissakhar, he compares him to a “strong-boned donkey” (49:14), which *Chazal*, as Rashi cites, is an allegorical reference to the tribe of Yissakhar’s destiny to produce Torah scholars. This interpretation is based upon a verse in Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (12:33) which describes the impressive scholarship of members of Yissakhar.

Following this reading of Yaakov’s blessing to Yissakhar, the *Zohar* develops the comparison implied here between a Torah scholar and a donkey. The *Zohar* begins by noting that such a comparison at first seems offensive, and then proceeds to explain: “A donkey carries its burden without kicking its owner like other animals, it has no arrogance, and does not insist on sleeping in a comfortable place.” These qualities, the *Zohar* comments, were characteristic of the scholars of Yissakhar: “They exert themselves in Torah, they bear the burden of Torah without ‘kicking’ the Almighty, they have no arrogance, like a donkey, which cares not for its own honor, but for the honor of its master.”

The *Zohar* here teaches that a Torah scholar must avoid any sense of entitlement and expectations of comfortable and easy conditions. One who seeks to devote himself to Torah must accept the heavy burden without “kicking” – without complaints or protest, and without expecting the process to be simple. Such a person is driven by a commitment to “the honor of his master,” to bring honor and glory to God, and not out of a desire to bring honor or fame to himself.

While the *Zohar* makes this comment specifically in reference to Torah scholars, it applies on some level to each and every one of us. Living a Torah life means selflessly devoting ourselves to the honor of the Almighty, rather than pursuing self-serving agendas. The *Zohar* calls upon us to follow the example of the donkey, who humbly accepts whatever burden is placed upon its back, and whatever conditions it is given, without protest. Once we recognize that our purpose in this world is to serve our Creator, as a donkey serves its owner, we will humbly accept whatever He gives us and whatever challenges He sends our way, with wholehearted devotion to fulfill His will regardless of what this entails, and without insisting on obtaining all the comforts and luxuries we desire.

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