YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

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Mazal tov to Rabbi Yitzchak '83 and Stephanie Etshalom upon the birth of their son, Avraham Uriel. May they be zocheh to raise him le-Torah, le-chuppa, u-le-ma'asim tovim!!

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The Birth of Yocheved

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Confronted by Yehuda's impassioned pleas, Yosef the Viceroy of Egypt could restrain himself no longer. True, he had succeeded in maintaining the painful ruse of being an impassive tyrant during the course of his brothers' two journeys to Egypt, all in order to initiate their teshuva and thus bring about the sincere reconciliation of the family. But now the thought of his father's tragic decline coupled with the sight of his brothers' tearful defense of beloved Binyamin was too much to bear:

…He called out: "remove all people from my presence!" No man stood with him when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers. He raised his voice in cries, and the Egyptians and Pharaoh's household heard. Yosef said to his brothers: "I am Yosef! Is my father yet alive?!" But his brothers could not respond, for they were overwhelmed before him…(45:1-3).

After the initial alarm of Yosef's disclosure dissipates, after he absolves them of guilt by ascribing to Divine intervention the circumstances of his sale and his subsequent meteoric rise to power, the brothers and Binyamin embrace him. Excitedly, he bids them to return to Canaan, to fetch their old and infirm father and their extended household, and to descend to Egypt for the duration of the famine, for "God has sent me before you, to secure for you a remnant on the land, and to sustain you through great deliverance!" (45:7).

Quickly, the brothers return home, borne by a royal retinue and bearing the extraordinary tidings of Yosef's success and Pharaoh's munificent invitation. Aged Ya'acov, his back bent with a lifetime of calamitous cares, his heart numbed by years of misplaced mourning for his beloved child, refuses at first to believe their excited reports. Soon, though, he too is buoyed by the tangible proof of the Pharaonic escort, and "the spirit of Ya'acov their father came alive" (45:27).

DESCENDING TO EGYPT

The hills of Chevron begin to recede on the horizon as the clan makes its slow progress southwest towards Egypt. Ya'acov and his children, their children and their households, pause for a night at Be'er Sheva, where so many episodes of faith in the lives of his parents and grandparents had been lived out. With great ambivalence, the old man lays his head to rest, euphoric with the prospect of finally seeing his long-lost child, but troubled by the distressing thought of leaving Canaan's sacred earth in order to descend into a prolonged period of Egyptian exile.

Many years before, when Ya'acov was yet young and utterly alone, he had embarked from self-same Be'er Sheva heading northeast, towards Charan and his Mesopotamian relatives, in flight of his own brother's venomous wrath. At that time, he arranged the rocks around himself and slept fitfully. But his beating heart was soon calmed by a dream of a ladder of angels, as God Himself appeared to strengthen him with the promise of protection, sustenance, and eventual return. Now, Ya'acov prepares to leave Be'er Sheva once more, the future again uncertain as the anticipation of reunion is clouded by the prospect of displacement. Again, God appears to him in a dream, scattering the nighttime phantoms and providing comfort and encouragement, reassurance and relief:

God said to Yisrael in the visions of the night: "Ya'acov, Ya'acov," and he responded "here I am". He said: "I am the Almighty, the Lord of your father. Be not afraid to descend to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt and I will also bring you back, and Yosef will place his hand upon your eyes" (45:2-4).

Finally, Ya'acov is prepared to take leave of the land that he will never see again, for in Egypt he will die in Yosef's arms. The family continues its halting journey, accompanied by their flocks, their goods and all material reminders of their former lives in Canaan, for nothing has been left behind, not even the memory of their presence.

A TEXTUAL DIFFICULTY AND RASHI'S RESOLUTION

These are the names of Yisrael's children that were going to Egypt, Ya'acov and his sons: the firstborn of Ya'acov was Reuven… (46:8).

What follows is a careful and thorough listing of all of Ya'acov's descendants, the combined offspring of his four wives and their children: Leah and her thirty-three descendants, Zilpa her handmaid with her sixteen, Rachel and her fourteen, and Bilha her handmaiden with her own seven. All told, the household, not including the wives of his children, numbered seventy souls (33 + 16 + 14 + 7 = 70), but in investigating the particulars of the list further, we now encounter a problem.

Though the summary statement at the end of Leah's descendants clearly mentions thirty-three, a careful addition of the individual names yields only thirty-two. Reuven and his four children, Shimon and his six, Levi and his three, Yehuda and his five, Yisachar and his four, Zevulun and his three, as well as daughter Dina only tally to thirty-two (5 + 7 + 4 + 6 +5 + 4 + 1 = 31), but the section concludes that: "these are the descendants of Leah that she bore to Ya'acov in Padan Aram, as well as his daughter Dina. All of the souls of his sons and daughters equaled thirty-three" (46:15). What, then, of the missing one?

The commentaries offer a number of possibilities to explain the discrepancy, with their respective opinions being roughly divided along philosophical lines. Thus, Rashi (11th century, France), never averse to adopting a Midrashic reading even when it may stretch the bounds of reason, says the following:

The text says thirty-three, but counting up the individuals only yields thirty-two. Rather, this is a reference to Yocheved, who was born between the walls as they entered the city. Thus the verse later states that "she was born to Levi in Egypt" (Bemidbar 26:59) to indicate that only her BIRTH was in Egypt, but her GESTATION was not" (commentary to 46:15).

In other words, Rashi indicates that the seeming discrepancy in the text is an allusion to another descendant, namely Yocheved the mother of Moshe, who was not singled out for mention in the tally of the names because she was not yet born at the time of the descent. However, since she was born just as the household reached its Egyptian destination, she must in the end be included among the descendants of Leah, thus constituting the "missing" child who completes the number thirty-three.

IBN EZRA'S REFUTATION

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) is quick to seize upon the serious logical difficulties introduced by Rashi's reading:

…the Midrash explains that this refers to Yocheved who was born between the walls, but this is astonishing. Why would the text not later have mentioned the great miracle that attended the birth of Moshe, namely that Yocheved at that time would have been one hundred and thirty years old!? Did it not mention Sarah's remarkable birth, though she was but ninety (when Yitzchak was born – see Bereishit 17:17)? …Rather, this is meant only as a legendary tale or else constitutes the opinion of an individual. What appears to me is that Ya'acov himself is to be counted in the tally, and in fact it begins with him, as if the text had stated that " these are the descendants of Leah that she bore to Ya'acov in Padan Aram, as well as his daughter Dina. All of the souls of his sons and daughters WITH HIS OWN equaled thirty-three". The proof for this is the fact that the verse begins by mentioning "Ya'acov and his sons," for it says: "These are the names of Yisrael's children that were going to Egypt, YA'ACOV AND HIS SONS: the firstborn of Ya'acov was Reuven… (46:8).

For Ibn Ezra, the most pronounced problem with Rashi's interpretation is that it raises chronological difficulties that make it unreasonable. We know that according to unassailable tradition, the sojourn of the people of Israel in Egypt lasted for a period of two hundred and ten years. We also know that at the time of the Exodus, Moshe was eighty years old (see Shemot 7:7). Thus, if Yocheved his mother had been born at the very commencement of the displacement to Egypt (an exile that was to last two hundred and ten years), and if Moshe her son was but eighty at the time of its completion, then she must have been one hundred and thirty years old at the time of his birth (210 – 80 = 130)! While such a prospect is not beyond the realm of God's capabilities, Ibn Ezra maintains that the text would not have remained silent on the matter, especially in light of the precedent of Sarah. There, the advanced age of the matriarch, only ninety at the time of her son Yitzchak's birth, is cited by the verse to emphasize that the parturition constituted a unique and unparalleled expression of God's omnipotence.

Though Ibn Ezra will occasionally suffer problematic Midrashic readings if these have been incontrovertibly preserved as authentic traditions (see for instance his comments to Bereishit 22:4), here he feels that such a pedigree for Rashi's Midrash is lacking. Somewhat predictably, the mystically-inclined Ramban (13th century, Spain) comes to Rashi's defense while the ultra-rationalist Rashbam (12th century, France) sides with the Ibn Ezra.

RASHI RECONSIDERED

Of course, it is intellectually much easier to dismiss Rashi's reading in favor of that of Ibn Ezra. After all, there is no explicit reference to the birth of Yocheved in the text, and assuming it forces us to assume much more. At the same time, it is eminently reasonable that Ya'acov, the patriarch and head of the household, should be counted among those who descended to Egypt, and in fact ought to be tallied as the chief among them. Surely Rashi was not unaware of the difficulties raised by his interpretation, but chose to propagate it nonetheless. In the opinion of this author, the main issue is not whether Rashi was simply unaware of more reasonable possibilities or else a committed adherent at all costs of dubious Rabbinic traditions. The more important question to be raised is why did Rashi select a Rabbinic opinion to address the text that he himself knew to be problematic in the extreme? And here, we must admit that what motivates an expert teacher and textual expositor is not only factual truth but also pedagogic import. Could it be that Rashi introduces this Midrash because it captures the essence of the text's message, though it may stray mightily from its straightforward and reasonable interpretation?

Recall that the episodes that introduce this genealogical list are the story of Yosef's revelation, the account of the brothers' return to Canaan, and the preparations for the descent of Ya'acov's household to Egypt. Recall also that the text makes it eminently clear that the prospect of descending to Egypt filled Ya'acov with misgivings. Yearning to see Yosef but dreading the thought of interminable exile coupled with estrangement from Canaan, Ya'acov comes to Be'er Sheva and there settles down for a fitful sleep. Returning to that place fills his mind with ancient memories. Years before, he had fled all alone from that very location into the ominous night, leaving behind his beloved mother never to see her again, his aged and blind father still reeling from the ugly shock of Esav's exposure, and the land that he had always called home. But God had reassured him with a nocturnal vision of protection and support, and had lifted the heavy weight of loneliness from upon his aching heart.

Now, Ya'acov stood to repeat the journey, this time to embark into the alluring and dangerous embrace of Egypt's wealth and riches, far from home and light-years removed from the legacy of his father. How would his descendants fare under Yosef's watchful guise? When would they return? Would their future include not only unbounded promise but painful suffering as well? Again, God appears to Ya'acov, no longer full of youthful vigor, now tired and broken by years of disappointment: "Be not afraid to descend to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt and I will also bring you back…"

And this time, the Divine vision is matched by a tangible sign. As the family makes its winding way to Egypt, now approaching the imposing gates of Pharaoh's walled capital, the throaty cries of a newborn infant can be heard. This new child, symbol of the future and life's unbounded promise, a girl who will herself one day bring new life into the world, is born at the precise moment that Ya'acov and his children accept the yoke of Egyptian exile, their wide eyes now squinting from its unaccustomed and garish glow. But this is no ordinary child and no routine birth, for Ya'acov somehow senses that she will one day mother the liberator, the one that God will designate to free His people from Egypt's bonds. Thus, the story of leaving Canaan is completed, by the birth of Yocheved "who was born between the walls as they entered the city". It is this message of hope and expectation, communicated as the exile now unfolds, that constitutes the truest import of Rashi's profound words.

Shabbat Shalom