YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT vayechi**

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Sponsored by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family in honor of the *yahrtzeits* of our esteemed grandparents: Neil Fredman (Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, 10 Tevet), Clara Fredman (Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, 15 Tevet), and Walter Rosenthal (Shimon ben Moshe, 16 Tevet).

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Dedicated in loving memory of Richard J. Silvera A”H
by his children Hillel (’91), Albert, and Michelle

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families in memory of
Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, ז״ל, Miriam bat Yitzhak and Rivkah,
whose first *yahrtzeit* is on 9 Tevet.
 יהי זכרה ברוך

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Numbering the Years of Life

Rav Shimon Klein

And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were seven years and forty and a hundred years.

The verse tells us how long Yaakov lived in Egypt and how long he lived in total. There are many personalities in *Tanakh* about whom we are provided information regarding how long they lived, and it is interesting to note that in each instance, the formulation or review is worded differently. In this *shiur*, we will focus on three characters: Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We will examine the summary of their years and reveal a fascinating window onto their respective personalities and life stories. Our study will offer exegetical tools that allow us to approach biblical descriptions that appear to offer dry facts and to expose the world of information that they conceal.

We will begin with the summary of Avraham’s life: “And these are the days of the years of Avraham’s life which he lived…” (25:7). The text speaks of “days” and “years of life.” In the case of Yitzchak, the text tells us, “And the days of Yitzchak…” (35:29) – only “days,” with no mention of “years.” When it comes to Yaakov, we find: “And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life…” - the “days of Yaakov” are presented as a subject, and “the years of his life” are also a subject. Another element that varies is the manner in which the years are counted. Regarding Avraham, we find “a hundred years and seventy years and five years”; regarding Yitzchak, “a hundred years and eighty years.” In both cases, the text mentions first the hundred, then the tens (and then, in Avraham’s case, the units). In Yaakov’s case, the count starts with units, “seven years,” followed by tens, “and forty,” and only at the end “and a hundred years.” What is the meaning of these variations?

“Days” vs. “years”

Before we examine the details of the verses, a more general question arises: What is the significance of a review of the number of years that a person has lived? A stipulation of the years of a person’s life is an indication of the length of time allotted to him. This length of time is significant both quantitatively and qualitatively.[[1]](#footnote-1) The measurement can be given as “days” or as “years.” A measurement in days awards a “day” with a certain status; such a count is appropriate when the person concerned lived with a well-developed awareness of the “day,” with a day-to-day consciousness being important to his existence. In contrast, a lifetime that is measured in “years,” with no mention of days, would appear to point to the larger picture, without a meaningful experience of time in the “day to day.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The combination of both counts – “days” and “years,” alongside each other – can appear in different variations, each of which tells a different story.

Let us now address the forefathers.

The summary of the lifetime of Avraham starts with the words, “And these are the days of the years of the life of Avraham who lived….” The “days” are mentioned first, and in this sense they are important. At the same time, the days appear in the construct state (“*yemei*,” rather than “*yamim*”), making them subordinate, or secondary, to “the years of his life.” It is as though the text is pointing to important days and then immediately attaching them to years. It is interesting to note that the years are also mentioned in the construct state (“*shenei*,” rather than “*shanim*”); they are attached to “the life of Avraham.” Thus, it is his life that is the subject, and first the days and then the years together comprise his life. If the reader is not yet convinced as to how meaningful Avraham’s “life” was, the text then adds, “which he lived” – a further layer that intensifies his movement of life.

In the case of Yitzchak, the text reads, “And the days of Yitzchak….” This seems to point to a man who lived with a consciousness of a day and another day, without weaving them into a number of “years” that would express a broader perspective on reality. In noting Yitzchak’s death, the text once again speaks of “days”: “And Yitzchak expired and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days…” (35:29). Yitzchak is “full of days” (“*seva yamim*,” literally, “satiated with days”), unlike Avraham, who is described as “satiated” (*save’a*) – but with no connection to days.[[3]](#footnote-3) Attention should also be paid to the “life” that is mentioned twice in connection with Avraham (“…the days of the years of the life [*chayei*] of Avraham who lived [*asher chai*]…), but which is not mentioned at all in connection with Yitzchak.

As noted, these formulas serve as a unique window onto the inner world of the characters involved. Avraham lived his everyday activity with each day having its own significance in his eyes; at the same time, his focus was on the greater picture – the “year,” rather than the “day.” However, his vision did not stop even at the “years.” Ultimately, his crowning glory was his choice of “life.” Avraham’s point of departure was the “days” with which he is first characterized – his important and meaningful activity that is pursued day after day.

In a broader sense, Avraham is given a mission. God invites him to undertake a life journey that will entail leaving the three life circles in which he has lived up until now: “And God said to Avram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you’” (12:1). “From your country” – your affiliation to the broad area in which you are located; “from your birthplace” – the concentric circles of extended family, all the way to “your father’s house” – the closest circle, the nuclear family. All of this is for the sake of going “hand in hand” with God, Who offers Avraham from this point onwards a higher, broader, almost superhuman perspective on reality.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the context of our discussion, this perspective is expressed in the secondary status of the “day” in relation to the “year.” With regard to the “life” of Avraham that is emphasized here, suffice it for the time being to note in a general way that Avraham lived a life of innovation, paving a road that no one had ever travelled, full of movement from place to place, encounters, difficult tests and challenges, and more – all best conveyed by the word “life.”

What happens with Yitzchak? “The days of Yitzchak…” – a day and another day and yet another accumulate to make up the picture of his life. His “days” are not strung into “years,” and the text thereby hints to a life that is very different from that of his father. Yitzchak is an heir; he continues a path, rather than blazing or choosing a new one. This binds him to a practical, existential position in relation to the world. That which his father did, he will do, too. In contrast to the consciousness centered around a “year,” which relates to long-term processes, Yitzchak continues the path of his father, following his example step by step. In this sense, his life does not include structured, systemic, comprehensive, long-term processes. And what of the fact that there is no mention of the word “life” at all in relation to his “days”? A comparison of the respective life stories of Avraham and Yitzchak exposes the glaring disparity between the rich life story of the father, characterized by movement and encounters, and the more monotonous life story of the son who continues his path, adhering closely to it, deepening it and turning it into fact in reality. There is much value to all this – but the text refrains from referring to it as a movement of “life.”

“Days” in the Life of Yaakov

Let us now turn our attention to Yaakov. “And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life…” – this description contains two units. “The days of Yaakov” is the subject, the days that belong to him. The next circle is “the years of his life.” Each circle counts in its own right; neither is secondary to the other.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yaakov lives the days; he is present in what is happening and experiences it, on its own merits, not necessarily out of an all-inclusive view and not as subservient to “years.” At the same time, the text mentions “the years of his life.” Unlike Yitzchak, Yaakov experiences many transitions and bridges into the larger picture and the broader perspective.

Where does this find expression? An interesting window is offered by the dialogue between Yaakov and Pharaoh: “And Pharaoh said to Yaakov, ‘How many are the days of the years of your life?’” (47:8). Pharaoh is interested in the relationship between the “days” and the “years,” the connection between the days and the larger picture. Yaakov’s response is:

“The days of the years of my sojournings are thirty and a hundred years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.” (47:9)

Yaakov’s reply adopts a different idiom: “the days of the years of my sojournings…” He makes mention of the days and the fact that they are connected to “years,” but to his view, they are not “years of life,” but rather “years of sojourning” – a matter of contraction and transience.[[6]](#footnote-6) He then continues, “Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life” – as though explaining his previous words: “I speak of ‘the days of the years of my sojourning’ (rather than ‘the days of the years of my life’) because those ‘days of the years’ have been few and evil.” A review of the events of Yaakov’s life testifies to the accuracy of this assessment.[[7]](#footnote-7)

“Years” in the Life of Yaakov

Alongside the difficult “days” of Yaakov, there is also another, larger dimension in which he exists: the “years of his life.” Yaakov is the founder of a family that represents the skeleton of a future nation. With this destiny in mind, he adopts a broader perspective, presents a vision, and works responsibly towards its realization. Expressions of this are to be found in his efforts to obtain the birthright and the blessing, as well as in the preference shown by “Yisrael” for Yosef above all the other brothers. The last two actions of his life – the defining of the status of Yosef’s sons, Ephraim and Menashe, and his blessings to all his sons prior to his death, revealing their destiny at the end of days – are also clear expressions of this outlook. Yaakov’s great dreams are realized to some extent during the seventeen good years that he experiences in Egypt. The special nature of this time in his life is reflected in the wording of the first verse of our *parasha*: “And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years….” The expression “Yaakov lived…” is not a banal indication of physical existence; rather, it points to a psychological and spiritual vitality. The family has been reunited, Yosef has assumed a position of power, fulfilling his father’s aspirations for him; Yehuda has returned to the bosom of the family, and the brothers, too, have found their place.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Years of Avraham and Yitzchak

We now turn our attention to the counting of “years.” We noted above the description of Avraham as living “a hundred years and seventy years and five years,” beginning with the hundreds and followed by tens and units, and the description of Yitzchak as living “a hundred years and eighty years” – first the hundred and then the tens. With regard to Yaakov, in contrast, we read: “The years of his life were seven years and forty and a hundred years” – first the units, then the tens, and then the hundred.

Once again, the discrepancy in the numbering system offers a glimpse into the inner world of the respective characters. Let us first consider Avraham. The text presents three circles in his life. Starting off with a circle of life is tantamount to noting the person’s position as his point of departure. The text first notes his “hundred years,” thereby testifying to a subject whose point of departure is the larger pictures of life. Physically, he has grown distant from the first hundred years of his life, but they still represent a major unit of life that serves as the basis for the two circles that follow. The second circle focuses on the tens of years, and only at the end does the text address the units, the seven most recent years. In the structure of Avraham’s thinking, the broader perspective is the point of departure, with the “here and now” serving as the bottom line of its fulfillment. The direction of movement is from the general picture to the details. It is difficult to avoid seeing a further step here in relation to the first part of the verse, which numbers “the days of the years of his life.” The days are secondary to the years, and the years are secondary to his life as a whole.

What about Yitzchak? Like Avraham, Yitzchak lives the image of the first hundred years before he lives the image of the eighty that follow. Unlike Avraham – concerning whom the Torah introduces the summary with the words, “the years of his life” – the larger picture, the point of departure in Yitzchak’s case is “the days of Yitzchak” – a day and another day. At first glance, there seems to be a contradiction between the two inner movements of Yitzchak. One is towards that which is concrete and local, with the other is towards the broader, larger picture. We might explain this as follows: The “days” and the “years” describe an inner movement, an existential life experience that comes before any number or content. In contrast, the various levels of numbers – single years, decades, a century – relate to content and practical conduct in different senses. Yitzchak essentially continues the path of Avraham; his path is Avraham’s path, along with the vision and the practical actions necessary in order to realize it. As Avraham’s heir, he too pursues the dimension of the “hundred” and only afterwards that of the tens. At the same time, and without contradicting that, his own inner essence contains a more immediate view, and in this sense what he experiences is “the days of Yitzchak” – days, not years.

The Years of Yaakov

Unlike his father and grandfather, Yaakov’s lifetime is described first in terms of single years and then decades; only at the end do we come to the “hundred.” Yaakov follows the same order in his response to Pharaoh, who asks him how old he is:

And Yaakov said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my sojournings are thirty and a hundred years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the lives of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.” (47:9)

Yaakov looks over the picture of his life, and the first image that is reflected back at him is that of the most recent years, the period in which he now finds himself. Then, he looks further back, towards the decades that preceded the present, and finally he relates to the first hundred years, the period that is now furthest removed from him. What does this position tell us?

Yaakov is a person who works within the twists and intricacies of reality. His life is full of ups and downs, and he responds to them, upping and moving, rising and falling along with them. This quality is connected to his name – Yaakov, the one who grasps his brother’s heel (*akev*) at birth, and who reacts and responds to him throughout his life.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yaakov lives in the present and is constantly grappling with the events of reality. As a function of this, his life looks different at each stage.[[10]](#footnote-10) During his earliest years, he is described as growing up alongside Esav; they are described in contrast to one another. This period comes to an end with his flight from Esav. On his way to Charan, God promises to accompany him. He stands helpless before Lavan, who afflicts him and deceives him. Yaakov suffers but survives. His sweet revenge comes in the form of his uniquely selective method for breeding sheep – compensation, as it were, for the difficult years that he has experienced with Lavan. Back in the land of Cana’an, Yaakov and his family must respond to Shekhem’s treatment of Dina. Yaakov leaves the matter to his sons, but he is not happy with their response. He starts anew with his return to Beit El, but when Yosef reaches the age of 17, Yaakov chooses him from among his other sons, and the entire family undergoes tremendous trauma. Assuming Yosef to be dead, Yaakov is ready to descend after his son to Sheol, and the family reaches a new low point. This is another period, very different from what has come before.

As noted, expression is given to Yaakov’s way of going about his life, as someone who exists within time and responds to what is happening, by the noting first of the single years that comprise the recent past; only afterwards, at a second and third stage, does he look backwards towards the past, to the greater picture and to the foundations of all that has happened.

Epilogue

In this *shiur*, we have explored the first verse of the *parasha* – “And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, [were] seven years and forty and a hundred years” (28:28). We compared this formula to the parallel accounts concerning Avraham and Yitzchak, and exposed the discrepancies between them. We focused on two main issues: an understanding of the status of “days,” as opposed to “years,” and the form in which the number of years is formulated. These differences invite the reader into the world of the characters involved and to understand something of the spiritual path and the inner movement of each of them. This offers a different view of lives of the forefathers.

This reading of the verses is a small illustration of the potential contained within a reading of both the language of the Torah and the language of the prophets. The Written Law contains many dimensions. It may be compared to digital storage of pictures and sounds, such that a multi-dimensional reality is converted into the language of signs and symbols. In decoding and unpacking these, the reader is exposed to the inner recesses of the characters, the logic behind the events, and the Torah that deals with life, in all its dimensions. “God’s Torah is perfect, restoring the soul.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. A person who lives 20 years is not like a person who lives 70 years. Even if the life of the former is a meaningful one, there are achievements that require a certain length of time and there are dimensions of life that are attained at a certain age; a person is simply not exposed to them at a different age. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, concerning Yishmael, the text speaks of years and not days: “And these are the years of the life of Yishmael: a hundred years and thirty years and seven years; and he expired and died and was gathered to his people” (25:17). In contrast, concerning all three forefathers there is mention of “days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “And Avraham expired and he died in a good old age, old and satiated, and he was gathered to his people” (25:8). This expresses the idea that Avraham’s days were subjugated to the years of his life; his progress was not in the days, but rather in the years. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At the point of departure, Avraham belongs to three circles of affiliation: land-birthplace-home; he is drawn out of all three and invited to adopt a new position, one of intimacy and a sort of partnership with God. Later on, the inhabitants of Chevron will refer to him as a “*nesi Elokim*” (literally, a “prince of God”) – a representative of God, as it were – and as such, he will be treated as a *Kohen*, who is not supposed to inherit in the land (see our *shiur* on *[Parashat Chayei Sara](http://etzion.org.il/en/%E2%80%9C-people-land%E2%80%9D)*). In relation to mankind, too, he adopts a new position, with the name “Avraham” alluding to his status as an “*av*” (father) who is “*ram*” (elevated). He is, as it were, a father figure in relation to other people, looking further into the distance, as though they were all his children. A father is not meant to occupy the same playing-field as his children, competing with them as though among equals. His broader perspective, along with his responsibility towards them, puts him in a different, higher, more inclusive and embracing place that takes into account factors that are beyond what his children are able to perceive with their “here and now” perspective. This position would seem to offer the key to understanding Avraham’s behavior in different situations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Like Avraham, Yaakov “lives” in both circles, but unlike Avraham, his circle of “days” has independent status and value; it is not subservient to the “years.” Like Yitzchak, Yaakov has “days” that are attributed to him, but unlike Yitzchak, he also has a consciousness of “years”, with its broader perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “I am a sojourner and resident with you,” says Avraham to the children of Chet, defining his status as one who is not a permanent citizen. A “sojourner” (*ger*, also translated as “stranger”) is someone who has left his native land to take up residence in a different land. Accordingly, then, “sojourning” – *megurim* – means a transient, impermanent hold on a certain place. The same idea is reflected in the description that we find in *Sefer Vayikra*: “But the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine, for you are sojourners and residents with Me” (*Vayikra* 25:23). You are not the owners of the land; you live on it temporarily. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In terms of length of life, Yaakov lives less than Avraham (who died at 175) or Yitzchak (who died aged 180). Another 14 years will go by between his present conversation with Pharaoh and his eventual death, but Yaakov apparently feels his end approaching and senses that his life will be significantly shorter than that of his forefathers. Thus, his days are indeed “few.” As for the “evil,” early in his life he struggles for the birthright and the blessings, and in the wake of the theft of the blessings he is forced to flee from Esav to Charan, where he lives for about twenty years (chapters 27-28). His years with Lavan are difficult ones: he labors for 14 years in order to earn his two wives; Lavan exchanges Leah for Rachel; Yaakov describes his work conditions as including the scorching sun by day and freezing cold at night, with no sleep (31:40). During this time, Lavan changes his wages ten times (31:7, 41). Yaakov finally flees Lavan’s home and Lavan pursues him, seeking to harm him. On his journey back to Cana’an, he encounters Esav, who is on the way to meet him in order to wage battle, but Yaakov manages to appease him. An angel wrestles with him (chapter 32). The episode concerning Dina ends with the killing of the men of Shekhem and Yaakov’s rebuke to his sons for this act (chapter 34). Rachel dies on the way (ibid); Yosef disappears, and Yaakov perceives himself as descending after him into Sheol (chapter 37). Yehuda goes down from his brothers (chapter 38) and, with Yosef gone, the family has all but fallen to pieces. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the words of the *midrash*: “‘And Yaakov lived’ – It is written, ‘Better a handful with quietness than both hands full with labor and striving after wind’ (*Kohelet* 4:6). These seventeen years that Yaakov lived in Egypt – as it is written, ‘And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years,’ living in tranquility, with the tribes surrounding him, and his grandchildren multiplying, and his eyes seeing and his heart rejoicing, with no *satan* and no misfortune, with his son Yosef ruling over the country and coming and feeding him – as it is written, ‘And Yosef nourished his father and his brothers and all of his father’s household with bread according to the [number of] children’ (47:12) – [this ‘handful with quietness’ was] better ‘than both hands full with labor and striving after wind’ – that is, the 130 years that were all difficult, as it is written, ‘And Esav hated Yaakov’ (27:41); and it is written, ‘And now, my son, obey my voice; and arise, flee…’ (27:43); and it is written, ‘By day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night’ (31:40); and it is written, ‘My affliction and the labor of my hands’ (31:42); ‘And Yaakov said to Shimon and to Levi, You have brought trouble upon me’ (34:30), ‘And Yaakov tore his garments and placed sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son for many days’ (37:34). All of those years were hard labor and striving after wind; therefore, it is written, ‘Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years’ – during these seventeen years he had a good life. ‘And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were seven years and forty and a hundred years’ – the text adds the seventeen to the hundred and thirty. This accords with the popular idiom – all is well that ends well. Happy are the righteous, to whom God gives suffering in the beginning, and then He has mercy on them at the end and brings them to the grave at a ripe old age. Concerning this it is said, ‘Better is the end of a thing than the beginning of it’ (*Kohelet* 7:8).” (*Pesikta Zutreta, Lekach Tov*, *Bereishit* 47) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Avraham paves a new path as someone who is raised above reality and who causes reality to align itself in accordance with him. He is a father, as it were, who paves the way for his family. Yitzchak lives his life and grappling with reality is a sort of disturbance that he has no choice but to deal with. Yaakov lives in the arena of life; he is the first to take his place on the playing field of reality as an equal among equals. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This in no way detracts from or contradicts his description as “a simple (or ‘wholehearted’) man dwelling in tents” – a description that connects him to the inner world, with a wholeheartedness towards his environment even as he sits “in tents.” The equation is that Yaakov is shaken and impacted by reality; at the same time, his point of departure is an inward one. Esav, in contrast, is “a hunter” (*ish tzayid*), a man who attacks his prey (the opposite of the position of wholeheartedness or innocence). Esav is also a man of the field, a man of the “outdoors” (the opposite of one who “dwells in tents”). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)