**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYECHI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayechi tells of the special blessings which Yaakov granted to Yosef’s sons, Menashe and Efrayim, conferring upon them the status of individual tribes – “Efrayim and Menashe shall be for me like Reuven and Shimon” (48:5). Yaakov granted his grandsons these blessings when Yosef took them with him to see Yaakov upon hearing that Yaakov had taken ill. The Torah tells that when Yaakov heard that Yosef was arriving, “Yaakov strengthened himself and sat up on the bed” (48:2). It seems that he had been lying down, as he suffered pain and frailty, but made a special effort to sit up before Yosef entered the room. Rashi explains that Yaakov did this out of respect for Yosef, who was a powerful ruler and had the status of king, who deserved special honor.

However, *Da’at Zekeinim* explains differently, suggesting that Yaakov sat up in order to assure that his proclamation to Yosef would be taken seriously. If he had remained in a lying position when he proclaimed his special blessing upon Efrayim and Menashe, people might have disregarded it, thinking that Yaakov granted the blessing without his mental faculties fully intact. It might have been assumed that he had already lost his ability to think properly, and thus his proclamation was not binding. Yaakov therefore specifically sat upright to make it clear that despite his frail condition, he was fully aware of what he was doing, and he fully understood the significance and import of his proclamation when he granted this special blessing to his grandsons. (A similar explanation is offered by Chizkuni.)

Symbolically, this interpretation perhaps teaches us the importance of appearing and sounding sincere when offering compliments and praise. If we “bless” people in a lethargic, listless fashion, our words are not likely to be taken very seriously, and could easily be disregarded. When we extend a “blessing,” congratulating people for their good fortune or achievements, or offering compliments or good wishes, we should try to follow Yaakov’s example and “strengthen ourselves” to speak with energy and conviction. This will help ensure that our good wishes sound sincere and wholehearted, and genuinely express our true feelings towards the person in question.

Sunday

The Torah tells in Parashat Vayechi of Yaakov’s meeting with Yosef and Yosef’s two sons shortly before his death, during which he pronounced a special blessing upon Yosef’s sons. Before this pronouncement, Yaakov briefly recounted the death of Yosef’s mother, Rachel, as the family traveled after returning to Canaan, and her burial along the roadside on the way to Beit Lechem (48:7).

The commentators offer different possible explanations for why Yaakov mentioned his beloved wife’s death and burial on this occasion. The best-known approach is that of Rashi (which is followed also by the Radak), who explains that Yaakov found it necessary to justify his earlier request that Yosef bring his remains to Chevron for burial in the Makhpeila cave (47:29-30). Yaakov feared that Yosef might resent this request in light of the fact that Yaakov buried Rachel – Yosef’s mother – on the roadside. According to Rashi’s reading of the verse, Yaakov here acknowledged that Rachel died in close proximity to the city of Beit Lechem, and during the summertime, when the weather conditions allowed him to easily travel with her to the city to give her a proper burial. (This is in contrast to the Radak, who explained that to the contrary, Yaakov pointed to the long distance he would have had to travel to bury Rachel in Beit Lechem.) However, Yaakov told Yosef that he buried Rachel along the roadside “*al pi ha-dibbur*” – based on a prophetic instruction he received from God. Rashi cites the famous Midrash tradition that centuries later, when *Benei Yisrael* would be exiled from their land, they would pass Rachel’s gravesite, and her soul would beseech God on their behalf, as God would later describe to Yirmiyahu (31:14). Foreseeing these events, God instructed Yaakov to bury Rachel by the roadside, rather than bringing her to Beit-Lechem for a more respectable burial, so that *Benei Yisrael* would pass by her grave in their way to exile.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz is cited as raising the question as to why, according to Rashi’s understanding of Yaakov’s remarks to Yosef, Yaakov found it necessary to emphasize that there was no practical impediment to bringing Rachel to Beit-Lechem for a proper burial. As we saw, Rashi interpreted the verse to mean that Yaakov acknowledged that Rachel died not far from the city, and that weather conditions allowed him to bring her remains there. Seemingly, Rav Shmuelevitz observed, this was unnecessary. All Yaakov needed to tell Yosef was that he received a clear instruction from God to bury Rachel along the roadside. Why did he first “confess” that the practical conditions allowed for bringing Rachel’s remains to Beit-Lechem?

Rav Shmuelevitz suggested that this information was presented not as a “confession,” but rather to confirm that Rachel’s roadside burial was indeed “*al pi ha-dibbur*.” Very often, Rav Shmuelevitz explained, we deceive ourselves into thinking that something we want to do is “*al pi ha-dibbur*” – what God wants us to do. We conceal our own vest interests behind a veneer of altruism, deluding ourselves into thinking we act idealistically, when in truth we are driven by our own interests. Rav Shmuelevitz thus explains Rashi’s comments to mean that Yaakov affirmed that his prophecy was authentic by recognizing that he had little personal interest in burying Rachel along the road. If he had needed to travel a long distance to bring her to the nearest city, or if the weather conditions were inclement, he might have mistaken his own vested interest in burying Rachel along the roadside as “*dibbur*” – God’s instruction. He therefore emphasized that he had no such vested interest, and thus he could definitively ascertain that he indeed received a prophetic command to bury Rachel along the road.

Rav Shmuelevitz here alerts us to the pitfall of false altruism, how we ourselves can so easily be deceived into thinking we act for the sake of idealistic principles, when in truth we are motivated by our base desires and instincts. Whenever we think we act “*al pi ha-dibbur*,” for the sake of lofty, idealistic goals, we must carefully and honestly scrutinize our motives and to determine whether we are truly sincere.

Monday

Rashi, in his opening comments to Parashat Vayechi, observes that this *parasha* is unique in that its text begins immediately after the conclusion of the previous *parasha*, without any empty space indicating a paragraph break. The first words of every other *parasha* are set apart from the end of the previous *parasha* with an empty space, whereas the beginning of Parashat Vayechi is written in the Torah scroll immediately after the end of Parashat Vayigash, without any empty space.

Citing the Midrash, Rashi offers two explanations for this unusual feature of Parashat Vayechi, both playing off the Hebrew word “*setuma*” (“closed,” or “blocked”), which is used to describe a section which begins without a paragraph break. The first is that Parashat Vayechi tells of the death of Yaakov, which was followed by the enslavement of *Benei Yisrael*, a time of bitter suffering which caused – in Rashi’s words – the people’s hearts and eyes to be “closed” due to the pain and anguish of bondage. Secondly, Rashi writes, the “closed” nature of this *parasha* alludes to the fact that Yaakov had wished to reveal before his death the time when his descendants’ redemption would unfold, but this information was “blocked” from him.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary, offers a much different approach for why this *parasha* is written as a direct continuation of the previous *parasha*, rather than being marked as a new section:

When one considers that the seventeen years which are introduced hereby are really the only ones in which Jacob lived a quiet undisturbed life, so that, in comparison with the previous years of his life, they can be considered as the real flowering of his life, we should have expected all the more to find the relation of them to be brought into prominence by starting with a fresh chapter. But the fact that this is not the case teaches us that through these seventeen years certainly are to be reckoned with the rest of his life… it was…the troubles years of his life, in which the test had to be gone through, in the midst of the bittersweet fate of a Jacob to be worthy of acquiring the name Israel, that were those in which Jacob won his everlasting national importance, to which the seventeen years that follow here form just the happy rewarding conclusion.

According to Rav Hirsch, the absence of blank space before the beginning of Parashat Vayechi is intended to underscore the fact that the period of which this *parasha* tells – the blissful final seventeen years of Yaakov’s life – were integrally connected to the preceding years. We might have expected the Torah to specifically set this section apart from the rest of the narrative of Yaakov’s life, as this period differed so drastically from his previous years in that these final years were years of true tranquility and joy. However, the Torah sought to emphasize that the years of hardship were no less important or significant – and in fact could be considered even more important and significant – than his final seventeen years. The point being expressed is that every period of life is meaningful and precious, even those which are fraught with difficulty. Even the less pleasant times in life should be recognized as valuable opportunities, and should therefore be regarded as no less significant than the more joyous and peaceful periods that life brings us.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayechi tells of Yaakov’s famous proclamation that Yosef’s two sons – Efrayim and Menashe – would have the status of tribes, like Yosef’s brothers (“*Efrayim u-Menashe ki-Reuven ve-Shimon yiheyu li*” – 48:5). What this meant, essentially, is that Yosef received a double share of the Land of Israel, as his descendants constituted two separate tribes, and not just one, like each of his brothers’ descendants did. As explained in Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (5:1), Yaakov transferred the privileges of the firstborn from his oldest son, Reuven, who forfeited these privileges due to his sin with Bilha (Bereishit 35:22), and transferred the privileges to Yosef. As a firstborn receives a double portion of the estate, Yosef received a double portion of *Eretz Yisrael*.

The reason why the privileges were transferred specifically to Yosef, seemingly, is because although he was the second youngest of Yaakov’s sons, he was the oldest child of Rachel. Rachel and Leah were Yaakov’s primary wives – the other two being concubines – and thus once Leah’s firstborn, Reuven, was deemed unworthy of the privileges of the firstborn, they were naturally transferred to Rachel’s firstborn, Yosef.

The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Bava Batra (123a), presents an additional reason, drawing an analogy to a generous man who adopted an orphan child and raised him. As an adult, this orphan became wealthy, and he decided to share his fortune with his generous adopting parents. The Rashbam explains that Yaakov was like a helpless orphan in the sense that he had no access to food due to the famine conditions in Canaan, and he was taken in and supported by Yosef, much like a couple taking in and caring for an orphan child. Therefore, when Yaakov became “wealthy” – meaning, when he needed to decide to whom he would allocate the double share taken away from Reuven – he chose to grant this “wealth” to Yosef.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Mesilot Chayim*, notes that this comparison between Yaakov and an orphan child is striking. When a family adopts an orphan, this is an act of pure kindness and generosity, sharing their material blessings with somebody who has done nothing to deserve it. In Yaakov’s case, however, he was Yosef’s father and raised him for seventeen years. Certainly, he rightfully earned the support which Yosef gave him (for the precise same number of years – seventeen). How, then, could the Gemara compare Yosef’s support of Yaakov during the famine to a family that takes in an orphan child?

The answer, Rav Elazary suggests, is that the Gemara speaks of Yaakov’s perception, how he viewed the support he received from Yosef. Of course, it was natural for Yosef to take on the responsibility of feeding his elderly father who suffered the ravages of drought. But from Yaakov’s perspective, he was just an orphan child generously supported by Yosef. He did not feel any sense of entitlement, that this was something he rightfully deserved. In his humility, he did not expect or demand anything from his son. From his viewpoint, Yosef owed him nothing.

Yaakov’s example teaches us to avoid the tendency to feel entitled to other people’s generosity. We should help and give to others without demanding or expecting favors in return. Rather than focusing on what others ought to be doing for us, we should strive to follow the model of Yaakov, who never felt entitled to Yosef’s graciousness and viewed it as undeserved benevolence.

Wednesday

Parashat Vayechi tells of Yaakov’s blessings to his sons before his death. Addressing his son Yissakhar, Yaakov describes the tribe that would descend from Yissakhar as a strong donkey (49:14). Rashi, based on the Midrash, famously explains that Yaakov here foresees the time when Yissakhar’s descendants would become the nation’s leading scholars, as described in Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (12:33). According to Rashi, Yaakov’s description of a donkey that carries its cargo tirelessly is an allegorical reference to these scholars’ tireless work to master and understand the intricate laws of Torah.

Interestingly, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 99:10) draws an additional association between Yissakhar and the donkey, pointing to the night when Yissakhar was conceived. As we read in Parashat Vayeitzei, Rachel asked Leah to share with her the herbs which Leah’s son had brought for her, and Leah agreed in exchange for a night with Yaakov, who was supposed to have spent that night with Rachel. When Yaakov returned home from the field that evening, the Torah tells (30:16), Leah came out to greet him and informed him that he was to spend the night with her. This union resulted in the birth of Yissakhar. The Midrash, commenting on Yaakov’s analogy comparing Yissakhar to a donkey, tells that Yaakov’s donkey brayed as he made his way home that night, and this is how Leah knew that he had come. She then went out to invite Yaakov into her tent. It thus turns out that the donkey’s bray is the cause of Yissakhar’s conception, and this, the Midrash writes, is the reason why Yaakov compares Yissakhar to a donkey. (A slightly different variation of the Midrash’s account appears in Masekhet Nidda, 31a.)

What might be the significance of this description of Yissakhar’s origins? Why does the Midrash find it important that Leah became aware of Yaakov’s arrival because of his donkey’s bray?

[Rav Pinchas Friedman](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MSNANPRSGT0RlYaIcDRI8UDite16SIwk/view) suggests that the Midrash’s comment hearkens back to the interpretation of Yaakov’s analogy as a reference to Torah scholarship. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (3a) teaches that the nighttime period is divided into three segments, each of which is indicated by a certain sound. The first third of the nighttime period, the Gemara comments, is when donkeys bray. Rav Friedman explains that the Gemara here is teaching something more profound than the nature of donkeys. It is impressing upon us the importance of diligent Torah study – symbolized by the donkey – specifically at nighttime. The Rambam, in Hilkhot Talmud Torah (3:13), famously emphasizes the unique value of learning Torah specifically at nighttime. As people were unable to work during the night due to the lack of proper illumination, it was an opportunity to focus one’s mind on Torah study. This message is conveyed by way of the image of the donkey, an animal which, as Rashi writes here in Parashat Vayechi, bears its burden both day and night. The diligent student of Torah, like a donkey, does not allow himself time to rest, as even when worktime ends, he devotes his attention to intensive toiling in Torah study. And thus the early period of the night is associated with the donkey, as this is the opportunity which ought to be seized for serious engagement in learning, which the donkey symbolizes.

Accordingly, Rav Friedman explains, the Midrash emphasizes the role of the donkey in Yissakhar’s conception – noting the connection between serious scholarship, the quality associated with Yissakhar, and the image of the donkey, the symbol of the kind of tireless work and effort that must be exerted to acquire knowledge and comprehension of Torah.

Thursday

In Yaakov’s blessing to Yosef just before his death, he recalls how “*va-yistemuhu ba’alei chitzim*” – he was despised by “people of arrows,” meaning, those who sought to inflict harm upon him (49:23). A number of commentators, including the Rashbam and the Radak, explain that this refers to Potifar’s wife who falsely accused Yosef of assaulting her, and those who believed her accusation and sentenced Yosef to imprisonment. Seforno suggests that this refers to those who, as a number of sources relate, opposed Yosef’s appointment as Egyptian vizier, and sought to prevent Pharaoh from bringing him to power by disparaging him.

There are two reasons why these commentators did not prefer what would at first appear to be the far simpler interpretation, that Yaakov refers here to Yosef’s brothers, who sold him as a slave. First, as noted by the Rashbam and Seforno, the image of archers is used in Sefer Yirmiyahu (9:7) as an allegorical depiction of slander, likely because arrows harms people from a safe distance, just like slander is spoken at a distance from the victim, but inflicts great harm. The term “*ba’alei chitzim*,” then, is more likely to refer to those who caused Yosef harm through libelous charges, as opposed to his brothers, who caused him harm by first attempting to kill him and then selling him into slavery.

The Radak adds a different consideration, claiming that Yaakov would not have castigated his other sons at this special moment, when all his sons surrounded his bedside at his final moments of his life, and he blessed them. Although it is true that Yaakov spoke harshly to Reuven, Shimon and Levi in addressing them, the Radak notes that this was done solely to clarify why they were denied rulership, despite being the oldest. But Yaakov would not have mentioned the grave sin of the sale of Yosef in this setting.

Nevertheless, others, including Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, indeed interpret “*ba’alei chitzim*” as referring to Yosef’s brothers, who directed their “arrows” of hatred and hostility towards him. Rav Hirsch discusses in this context the etymology of the word “*va-yistemuhu*” which is used here in reference to the brothers’ hatred, and which appears earlier, in Parashat Toldot (27:41), in reference to Esav’s resentment of Yaakov – “*va-yistom*.” According to Rav Hirsch, this word is connected to the verb *s.t.m.* which is often used to mean “blocked” or “closed.” In Eikha (3:8), for example, Yirmiyahu laments that “*satam tefilati*” – his prayer was “blocked,” in the sense that it was rejected by God, as though it never reached its destination. Rav Hirsch thus interprets the word “*va-yistemuhu*” as meaning “to nurse a secret resentment, a deep-lying hate.” He notes the similar connotation of the command, “*lo titor*” (“do not bear a grudge” – Vayikra 19:18), which is derived from the verb *n.t.r.*, a term normally used to mean “guard.” Like *s.t.m.*, this refers to a deep-seated resentment that is kept within a person’s heart.

Extending this notion one step further, we might add that *s.t.m.* refers to animosity which one insists on “blocking,” on keeping inside of him, where it grows and festers, instead of allowing it to naturally leave. Feelings of resentment and anger should, with time, subside – but only if we let them subside and gradually take leave of our minds and hearts. Sometimes, though, we feel inclined to “block” these negative feelings from leaving, and to keep them inside us. This was the case with Esav, who kept hold of his enmity towards Yaakov for seizing his blessing, and with Yosef’s brothers, who insisted on viewing him with suspicion, instead of opening their minds to the possibility of reconciliation.

If so, then Yaakov’s description of his sons’ hostility towards Yosef – “*va-yistemuhu*” – perhaps warns us against this tendency to “block” our feelings of anger and resentment from leaving. The brothers had valid reasons for resenting Yosef, but they were wrong for holding onto those feelings, instead of letting them go and finding other ways to handle the situation. We should try to alleviate, rather than keep hold of, our anger and hostility, so we can look and act towards each other with genuine respect and goodwill, despite our past grievances, legitimate as they may be.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted Yaakov’s deathbed blessing to Yosef, in which he recalled the hatred that had been directed towards Yosef by “*ba’alei chitzim*” – literally, “people of arrows” (49:23). As we saw, different opinions exist as to whether this refers to Yosef’s brothers, who nearly killed him and then sold him as a slave, or to those who spread false accusations about him in Egypt.

*Targum Onkelos* translates the expression “*ba’alei chitzim*” as “*guvrin gibarin ba’alei falgutei*” – literally, “powerful men, people with whom he was divided.” Rashi explains this translation as a reference to the fact that Yosef and his brothers were destined to divide the Land of Israel among themselves. The word “*chitzim*” in this verse, according to Onkelos, means not “arrows,” but rather “division” (as in the word “*mechetza*” – “half,” in Bamidbar 31:36, as Rashi cites). According to Onkelos, then, the expression “*ba’alei chitzim*” describes not the harm inflicted on Yosef by his brothers, but rather to their sharing *Eretz Yisrael* in the future. Intriguingly, in the view of Onkelos, Yaakov here emphasizes the fact that those who despised and conspired against Yosef were those whose descendants would later share the Land of Israel with Yosef’s descendants.

Why, according to *Targum Onkelos*, would Yaakov specifically emphasize this point in recalling the hostility Yosef suffered at the hands of his brothers?

Possibly, this point is emphasized because it, in a sense, lies at the heart of the tragedy of *mekhirat Yosef*. The brothers failed to realize that they were all destined to share *Eretz Yisrael*, the promise of greatness given to their father, grandfather and great-grandfather. The conflict that arose in the family led them to view their situation as one of “either/or,” such that Yosef had to be eliminated from the family, or else they could have no part in it. They did not consider the possibility that they were Yosef’s “*ba’alei chitzim*,” his partners with whom a workable arrangement could be – and would have to be – made. Yaakov, in his blessing to Yosef, laments this failure of his other sons to recognize that Yosef was their partner, not their adversary, with whom they could peacefully share the greatness destined for the nation that was in the process of being built.

When disagreement and tensions arise, whether in a family, a community, or the nation at large, we are well-advised to heed Yaakov’s subtle admonition to his sons – “*va-yistemuhu ba’alei chitzim*.” They allowed their divisions to devolve into hatred, rather than viewing each other as different parts of a single entity. When we look at one another as “*ba’alei chitzim*,” as “pieces” of a single “puzzle” to which we all belong, we are better equipped to handle our differences in a peaceful, amicable manner, without resorting to hostility and strife.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)