

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The drama of younger and older brothers, which haunts the book of Bereishit from Cain and Abel onwards, reaches a strange climax in the story of Joseph's children. Jacob/Israel is nearing the end of his life. Joseph visits him, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. It is the only scene of grandfather and grandchildren in the book. Jacob asks Joseph to bring them near so that he can bless them. What follows next is described in painstaking detail:

"Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel's right, and brought them near him. But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn..... When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to him, 'No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.' But his father refused and said, 'I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.' He blessed them that day, saying: 'In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh." (48:13-14,17-20).

It is not difficult to understand the care Joseph took to ensure that Jacob would bless the firstborn first. Three times his father had set the younger before the elder, and each time it had resulted in tragedy. He, the younger, had sought to supplant his elder brother Esau. He favoured the younger sister Rachel over Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Joseph and Benjamin, over the elder Reuben, Shimon and Levi. The consequences were catastrophic: estrangement from Esau, tension between the two sisters, and hostility among his sons. Joseph himself bore the scars: thrown into a well by his brothers, who initially planned to kill him and eventually sold him into Egypt as a slave. Had his father not learned? Or did he think that Ephraim -- whom Joseph held in his right hand -- was the elder? Did Jacob know what he was doing? Did he not realise

that he was risking extending the family feuds into the next generation? Besides which, what possible reason could he have for favouring the younger of his grandchildren over the elder? He had not seen them before. He knew nothing about them. None of the factors that led to the earlier episodes were operative here. Why did Jacob favour Ephraim over Manasseh?

Jacob knew two things, and it is here that the explanation lies. He knew that the stay of his family in Egypt would not be a short one. Before leaving Canaan to see Joseph, G-d had appeared to him in a vision: "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." (46:3-4)

This was, in other words, the start of the long exile which G-d had told Abraham would be the fate of his children (a vision the Torah describes as accompanied by "a deep and dreadful darkness" --



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15:12). The other thing Jacob knew was his grandsons' names, Manasseh and Ephraim. The combination of these two facts was enough.

When Joseph finally emerged from prison to become prime minister of Egypt, he married and had two sons. This is how the Torah describes their birth: "Before the years of the famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphra, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh, saying, 'It is because G-d has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.' The second son he named Ephraim, saying, 'It is because G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.'" (41:50-52)

With the utmost brevity the Torah intimates an experience of exile that was to be repeated many times across the centuries. At first, Joseph felt relief. The years as a slave, then a prisoner, were over. He had risen to greatness. In Canaan, he had been the youngest of eleven brothers in a nomadic family of shepherds. Now, in Egypt, he was at the centre of the greatest civilization of the ancient world, second only to Pharaoh in rank and power. No one reminded him of his background. With his royal robes and ring and chariot, he was an Egyptian prince (as Moses was later to be). The past was a bitter memory he sought to remove from his mind. Manasseh means "forgetting."

But as time passed, Joseph began to feel quite different emotions. Yes, he had arrived. But this people was not his; nor was its culture. To be sure, his family was, in any worldly terms, undistinguished, unsophisticated. Yet they remained his family. They were the matrix of who he was. Though they were no more than shepherds (a class the Egyptians despised), they had been spoken to by G-d -- not the gods of the sun, the river and death, the Egyptian pantheon -- but G-d, the creator of heaven and earth, who did not make His home in temples and pyramids and panoplies of power, but who spoke in the human heart as a voice, lifting a simple family to moral greatness. By the time his second son was born, Joseph had undergone a profound change of heart. To be sure, he had all the trappings of earthly success -- "G-d has made me fruitful" -- but Egypt had become "the land of my affliction." Why? Because it was exile. There is a sociological observation about immigrant groups, known as Hansen's Law: "The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget."

Joseph went through this transformation very quickly. It was already complete by the time his second son was born. By calling him Ephraim, he was remembering what, when Manasseh was born, he was trying to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh had nothing to do with their ages and everything to do with their names. Knowing that these were the first two children of his family to be born in exile, knowing too that the exile would be prolonged and at times difficult and dark, Jacob sought to signal to all future generations that there would be a constant tension between the desire to forget (to assimilate, acculturate, anaesthetise the hope of a return) and the promptings of memory (the knowledge that this is "exile," that we are part of another story, that ultimate home is somewhere else). The child of forgetting (Manasseh) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The holy book of Bereshith comes to its conclusion in this week's parsha. The story of the creation of the Jewish people through the development of one family over a number of generations and by the perseverance of the great personalities of our patriarchs and matriarchs is now complete.

This raises the question originally posed in Rashi's commentary to the very beginning of the book of Bereshith -- why does the Torah, which appears to be basically a book of laws and commandments, bother with all of this detailed description of creation and continued familial based narrative? Why is this seemingly anecdotal knowledge of the lives of our ancestors so necessary to be included in the eternal Torah and how does it register in the survival of the Jewish people throughout the ages?

In response to this question of relevance, the rabbis taught us that the events that occurred to our ancestors are indeed the harbingers of happenings that will occur to their descendants. But many times it is difficult for later generations to make this connection, except in the most general way of experiencing historic repetitions of circumstances.

This book of Bereshith, which comprises a substantial part of the entire written Torah, contains within it almost no commandments and is basically a book of narrative tracing the development of one family -- eventually seventy in number -- and of the difficulties that this family encountered over generations. So what therefore is its main message to us living in a far different world, millennia later?

I think that the message of Bereshith is the obvious one of family and its importance. The Torah purposely and in minute detail describes for us how difficult it truly is to create and maintain a cohesive family structure. Every one of the generations described in Bereshith from Kayin and Hevel till Yosef and his brothers is engaged in the difficult and often heartbreaking task of family building.

There are no smooth and trouble free familial relationships described in the book of Bereshith. Sibling rivalry, violence, different traits of personality, and marital and domestic strife are the stuff of the biblical narrative of this book. The Torah does not sanitize any of its stories nor does it avoid confronting the foibles and errors of human beings.

The greatest of our people, our patriarchs and matriarchs, encountered severe difficulties in attempting to create cohesive, moral and cooperative families. Yet they persevered in the attempt because without this strong sense of family there can be no basis for eternal Jewish survival. There is tragic fall out in each of the families described in Bereshith and yet somehow the thread of family continuity is maintained and strengthened until the family grows into a numerous and influential nation.

This perseverance of family building, in spite of all of the disappointments inherent in that task, is the reason for the book of Bereshith. It is the template of the behavior of our ancestors that now remains as the guideposts for their descendants. The task of family building remains the only sure method of ensuring Jewish survival. ©2012 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Then Jacob called for his sons and said... 'Gather yourselves and listen, sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father.'" (Genesis 49:1)

The Book of Genesis has reached its closing chapter, with Jacob, grandfather of the emerging tribes of Israel, lying on his death bed surrounded by his family.

Our sages teach that Jacob prayed to G-d for a warning before death; an illness that would provide him the opportunity to prepare to take leave of the world by placing his household and business in order, giving and seeking forgiveness, righting past wrongs and expressing his legacy for the future.

Jacob is 147 years old as he reviews his many experiences and peregrinations, his trials and his triumphs, the relationships he nurtured and the relationships he neglected. Now, as his entire life passes before him, he expresses his last will and

testament. This is not about giving material gifts to his children; instead he praises and chastises each one, assessing their strengths, charging them to use their gifts for the good of self, family and world.

What clearly emerges is how much Jacob has learned from his children, how far he has come from the young father who prematurely elevated the precocious firstborn of his most beloved wife to position of familial leadership.

Judah is his heir apparent, accepted by all the brothers as leader. Leadership must be won by the willing acclamation - it cannot be imposed from without by paternal fiat.

Judah's most noteworthy trait is his ability to repent and change, his ability to rise above his weaknesses: "From the torn and bespattered cloak [teref' is reminiscent of 'tarof toraf Yosef,' (Gen. 37:33)] you have risen, my son" (Gen. 49:9). From your sale of Joseph to your willingness to become a slave in Egypt in place of Benjamin, from your having forsaken one son of Rachel to your having assumed personal responsibility for her other son.

Judah's lioness strength manifests itself in his ability to overcome and change himself, in his ability to teach by knowledge and example rather than by physical force and the sword. He is the peaceful unifier of the family, and from there shall he unify the world with the ingathering of nations and the peaceful prosperity gleaned from plentiful vineyards.

Joseph is the most charming and fruitful of the brothers, a ben-porat (fruitful bough), which comes from the Hebrew pri (fruit) or the Aramaic apirion, meaning charm or grace (B.T. Bava Metzia 119a and Rashi ad loc). He receives the material blessings of "the heavens above and the abyss crouching below." He is certainly master over his brothers in Egypt by dint of his grand viziership, but remains separated and divided from them in his elevated status.

Joseph has changed drastically from the arrogant kid brother whose dreams expressed his desire for Egyptian agriculture rather than Israelite shepherding, who saw himself and not G-d as the center of the family and even of the cosmos. When he stands before Pharaoh, a chastened Joseph gives full credit to G-d, and with his last breath he asks to be buried in the Land of Israel.

Nevertheless, he cannot be the ultimate leader of the family and progenitor of the Messiah because, for most of his life, he expended his energies toward the furtherance of Egypt rather than Israel and the family mission.

Moreover, he never repents for his immature braggadocio - and it is only repentance, like that of Judah, which brings atonement, at-one-ment, true family unity.

Joseph does forgive his brothers for their cruelty toward him, however, and he even forgives his father for having mismanaged the internal family.

Joseph teaches that it was G-d Himself who extracted from their jealous hatred the building blocks for redemption; did not Joseph save them from starvation in Canaan, and was he not the catalyst for their subsequent Egyptian enslavement and redemption? None of these momentous events would have happened had Joseph not been victimized by his siblings.

It is Jacob, however, who repents most deeply. The most painful lesson that he learns is that blind Isaac may have been a more profound seer than was the wise Rebekah, that in a family, blessings can be divided among many sons, aspects of leadership can be shared, no son ought be rejected, each sibling is to be held responsible for every other sibling. Esau should have been co-opted, not rejected. Only the unified family can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Hence, Jacob does what his father Isaac had wished to do: he bestows the birthright scepter of religious and universal leadership upon Judah, the material blessings of a double portion upon Joseph, and continues to divide the many other blessings among the rest of his children. Ultimately he realizes that nothing is as important as the continuity of the entire family and the transmission of its narrative and mission into the future.

He also recognizes that in singling out young Joseph above all the other brothers, he - Jacob - had really been responsible for the subsequent enmity and jealousy that almost tore the family asunder. Hence he can truly forgive all of his sons for their deceptions, sincerely bless them and charge them with the continuity of the Abrahamic legacy, leaving this earthly journey at peace with himself and his beloved family.

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RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week's parsha, Va'y'chi, begins: "And Yaakov lived in the land of Mitzrayim {Egypt} seventeen years, and the days of Yaakov was, the years of his life, one hundred and forty seven years. [47:28]"

What is the significance of the 'days' and the 'years' of his 'life'? Furthermore, why does the passuk {verse} use the singular: "the days of Yaakov was" as opposed to the plural that "the days of Yaakov were?"

Back in last week's parsha, when Paroah saw Yaakov, he exclaimed in surprise: "What are the days of the years of your life? [47:8]" Yaakov responded in a surprising, seemingly 'kvetchy' way. "The days of the years of my sojourn have been one hundred and thirty years. Few and deficient were the days of my life's years and they never reached the days of the years of my forefather's lives. [47:9]" Once again, 'days', 'years' and 'life' figure prominently.

The Malbim offers a beautiful explanation. He writes that 'years of life' connote good, peaceful,

successful years. Paroah, unaware of the nuance of his question, asked Yaakov about the years of his life -- the years that he had the peace of mind to serve Hashem in a fitting, wholesome way.

Yaakov responded, pointing out the difference between years of sojourn and years of life. "I've sojourned on this earth for one hundred and thirty years," he told Paroah, "but in terms of what I've actually accomplished, the years of my 'life', they've been few and deficient compared to my forefathers."

Rav Shimon Shwab builds on this theme in his explanation of our passuk. "Yaakov lived in the land of Mitzrayim {Egypt} seventeen years." Those years were alive! And not only were they alive, but they now allowed him to reflect back upon his life and see it from a totally new perspective. Reunited with his beloved Yosef, seeing all of his sons living together in brotherly harmony, he understood that even the difficult years of his life, those years of sojourn, were true years of his life.

The Talmud [Pesachim 50A] teaches that in this world, when a good event occurs we pronounce the blessing of "Hatov umaitiv -- He is good and does good." When a 'bad' event occurs we pronounce the blessing of "Dayan Emes -- He is the true judge." However, in the next world we will only pronounce the blessing of Hatov umaitiv -- He is good and does good." We will recognize that every event was actually good.

That was the level that Yaakov reached in his final years. The "days of Yaakov was the years of his life!" Those days of travail where he thought he was distant from Hashem, he now understood that they were the days of his life. It was the composite of all his years that formed the tapestry of life.

The Ohr HaChaim writes that the name Yisroel, as opposed to Yaakov, was used when he was in a lofty, uplifted state. As such, once Yaakov reached this Olam Habah {World to Come} state in this world, "and the days of Yaakov was the years of his life," the next passuk tells us that "the days of Yisroel were drawing close to death." He had reached the level of Yisroel.

Although that is a level that we will only attain with the advent of Moshiach {Messiah}, Yaakov did reveal the key through which to reach that time.

"And Yaakov called his sons and told them: 'gather and I will tell you what will occur in the end of the days'. [49:1]"

Rashi explains that Yaakov wanted to reveal the time when Moshiach would come but Hashem's presence left him, rendering him unable to reveal that information. The Zohar writes that Yaakov did actually reveal that which needed to be revealed. Some explain this to mean that Yaakov told them to gather...

Become one group, have unity and then, the same way that that propelled me into a state of the World to Come, it will also propel you as a nation into the stage of heaven on earth -- the coming of the Moshiach. © 2012 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vayechi, the last in the first Sefer (book) of Bereishit, is where Yaakov (Jacob) gives all of his sons their blessings. Ironically, though, Yaakov starts with the blessings for Ephraim and Menashe, who were Yosef's sons that were born to him in Egypt. It all started when Yosef found out that Yaakov was sick (48:1), Yosef ".took his two sons with him." (presumably to bring them to Yaakov, although it doesn't say that anywhere). When Yosef and his sons got there, Yaakov "strengthened himself" (48:5) (which also seems strange), sat up on the bed, and told Yosef that his two sons would now be considered like Yaakov's children, and will get a portion in the land just like the rest of the brothers. Yaakov then called over the 2 children, placed his hands on their heads, and started blessing Yosef, giving him the famous "Hamalach" blessing (48:16), that the angel that protected Yaakov from evil should also protect Yosef's sons, and that Yaakov's name should be associated with them, along with Avraham and Yitzchak, and they should multiply in the land. All these events seem inconsistent, unless we put it in perspective.

When Yaakov got sick, the Torah doesn't say that Yosef brought his sons to Yaakov, but that Yosef took his sons with him! What it could mean is not that Yosef brought his sons physically to Yaakov, but that Yosef kept them close to himself, so that they wouldn't be spiritually influenced by their non-Jewish surroundings. Yaakov recognized this, which is why he felt strengthened when Yosef came to him with his sons. That's also why when Yaakov claimed the sons as his own, he made sure to stress that it was those two sons that were born in Egypt (48:5), because their greatness and Yosef's greatness was that they were Jews despite living in Egypt. And finally, although his hands were on the two sons, Yaakov's blessing was that Yosef's children, and anyone who has to live in a non-Jewish world, should be protected throughout history so that we can all be proudly called the children of Avraham and Yitzchak. But it won't happen unless we learn to put our hands on their heads and guide the next generation. The adults have a duty to take along and guide the kids, and the children have an equal responsibility to let themselves be guided. © 2012 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Notified that his father Yaakov (Jacob) is sick, Yosef (Joseph) takes his sons Ephraim and Menashe to see their grandfather. As they enter, Yaakov proclaims "mi eileh?" "Who are these?" (Genesis 48:8)

Having already been in Egypt for 17 years, is it possible that Yaakov didn't know the identity of his grandsons?

Some commentators suggest a physical reason for Yaakov's question. Bearing in mind that Yaakov could not see, he could not recognize his grandsons even as they stand before him.

Other commentators suggest that Yaakov's question "mi eileh?" does not refer to his grandsons themselves, but rather a question about their progeny. Prophetically, Yaakov discerned that amongst the descendants of Ephraim and Menashe would be evil people. Yaakov inquires, "who are they?" How is it possible that such evil men could come from good people like Ephraim and Menashe?

Other commentators insist that Yaakov asked "who are these?" to precipitate a "nachas report" from Yosef about the moral, spiritual and religious progress of Ephraim and Menashe. (Genesis 48:9)

But there is another approach. Yaakov may not recognize his grandchildren because he has little relationship with them. This could be because Yosef rarely ever took them to Ya'akov.

Yosef may have denied his father this relationship because of possible ill will towards Yaakov for having sent Yosef to his brothers to make peace, a plan which, of course, backfired. Not to mention, of course, Yaakov's favoring of him (Yosef) in the first place. Upset with his father, Yosef never contacts his father for 22 years and blocks his children from developing a close relationship with their grandfather.

Another suggestion: Maybe "mi eileh," is an existential question. Having grown up in Egypt, Ephraim and Menashe must have, on some level, assimilated into Egyptian society. Standing before Yaakov as Jews living in Egypt, Yaakov asks, "who are these?" What he is really asking is do my grandchildren identify themselves as Egyptians or Jews?

Whichever way one approaches Yaakov's "mi eileh" question, one point is certain: Yaakov is the first person to be recorded in the Torah as interacting with his grandchildren on any level at all. Not only does he interact with them, he actually gives each of them a blessing. In fact, the blessing is so powerful it becomes the standardized blessing of parents to children every Friday night. Placing our hands on our children, we say, "may G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe." (Genesis 48:20)

A grandparent's relationship to a child, on some level, is deeper than a parent/child relationship. Unencumbered by parental responsibility, a grandparent, blessed with wisdom and maturity of life can powerfully bestow blessings upon their children. In a brief instant, a grandparent asks, "mi eileh," who are these, not so much as a question but as an expression of thanksgiving to G-d for having been blessed with such glorious grandchildren.

Even if they are not specifically for grandchildren, may our lives be filled with many such utterances of "mi eileh"-expressions of thanks, awe and wonder of the incredible gifts given to us by the Divine. © 2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DAVID LAPIN

iAwaken

Three times a day we glibly say the first verse of the Shema, articulating the belief that most defines our Jewishness. But what is its origin, what does it really mean and why is it so central to our prayers?

The preeminent phrase in all of Jewish liturgy, Shema Yisrael: Hear Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One, was composed in Parshas Vayechi by the sons of Ya'acov. It is the key to awareness of Divine intent in everything we experience.

Traditionally we assume that in the Shema we address our nation, Israel. Each of us directs the community of which we are a part to accept and understand Hashem's unity. But the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 98:4) suggests that the statement is actually addressed to our forefather Ya'acov who was also known as Yisrael.

R. Berechya and R. Chelbo both said in the name of Shemuel: This is why the nation of Israel says early each morning and every evening: "Hear, our father Yisrael from the Ma'aras Hamachpeilah in which you are buried, that which you instructed us is still with us: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One."

The Midrash also describes the background to this declaration of faith. Before his death Yaacov feared that his sons might not fully subscribe to the absolute indivisibility of G-d. We do not know the reason for his concern. Perhaps he feared the influence of Egyptian culture. Or, perhaps seeing how different and unique each of his sons was, he wanted to be sure they all subscribed to the integrated, overarching belief that defines their Jewishness -- the integrity (oneness) of Hashem. He asked them whether they perceive any separateness in the idea of Hashem. They answered, "Listen our father Yisrael, in the same way that you experience no separateness in G-d so we too experience no separateness. Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One." The twelve sons of Ya'acov began a tradition that we continue every day, assuring their (and our) father Ya'acov, that we experience G-d as one integrated, almighty force in our lives in the same way that he did.

From the sons' answer we see that the separateness of Divine experience about which Ya'acov was concerned referred to two specific dimensions of Hashem: i) The G-d of love and mercy (YHVH), and ii) the G-d of discipline and accountability, Elokim. The integration of these two almost paradoxical forces into a

single, integrated Deity, Hashem, is the cornerstone and the uniqueness of our belief. Islam emphasizes the harshness of Divine discipline. Christianity focuses on the softness of Divine love. In Judaism, love without discipline is appeasement, and discipline without love is cruelty. Like good parents, Hashem develops our characters with discipline and with love, but unlike parents His discipline and His love are indivisible. This is why we refer to Hashem as Avinu Malkeinu, our father (love) -- our King (accountability) without the conjunctive vav in between: the two properties of Father and King are One just as Hashem Elokeinu is One.

Did Ya'acov's sons understand that the hardships of their lives came from the same source as their joys and that this is not a contradiction? This was Ya'acov's concern. They answered in the affirmative: "Hashem (YHVH) is our Elokim, Hashem is One."

This oneness of the source of nourishing love and tough discipline is essential to our outlook on life. We can only see the true value of hardship and the privilege of joy when we see them both as messages from the same Divine source, both intended to make us better. Kesheim shemevareich al ha tova...."just as we give thanks for that which is good, we also give thanks for that which we experience as bad." (Talmud Berachos 48b)

If we don't accept this unity of Divine force, then we could see either good experiences or bad ones (or both) as random acts. Randomness comes with no responsibility and so there is some ease in believing in randomness. As Jews we do not believe in randomness. We see Divine deliberation and intent with their concomitant responsibility, in every occurrence. Both the seven years of Egyptian famine and the years of plenty were deliberate Divine interventions. The sale of Yoseif and his incarceration were as intentional as was his appointment as Viceroy of Egypt and the deliverance of his father and brothers. Whether we experience life's forces as acts of Divine love or as harsh discipline, the source is the same, the source is One.

The degree to which we truly buy into the quintessential monotheism expressed in the Shema as opposed to randomness, also impacts what we see as the powers that influence our lives. Are we subject to many forces that impact our success and failure or are we governed by only One holy force? Do we really regard Hashem as the only power in our lives in the way we suggest in the Shema? And if so, why do we invest more time, thought and effort in our material endeavors to ensure their success, than in our Tefilla (prayer)? When things are not going as well as we would like them to, why don't we modify our characters and behaviors rather than find the causes for our failures outside of ourselves?

Consider for example how often we attribute loss or illness to forces beyond our control. By doing so we secularize our lives and strip Divine intent from our

experience. If we believe in the Shema that we so often recite, we should probe more deeply into our own actions and intentions to uncover the causes of both our positive and negative life experiences because everything that occurs is a deliberate message from Hashem. Nothing is random; there is no coincidence.

Well, perhaps not exactly. There are times when things do happen randomly. When Hashem unleashes a destructive force in the world, it does not discern between the wicked and the righteous (See Rashi, Shemos 12:22). If there is a flood or an earthquake righteous and wicked people can suffer loss simply because they were at the wrong place in the wrong moment. In the same way a global or even national recession can impact the wealth of both good and bad people. The need to examine ones personal deeds and intentions to explain events applies only to those experiences that are both somewhat out of the ordinary and unique to us.

With randomness excluded (other than in the circumstances described above) from our understanding of why things happen to us, we can begin the process of personal mastery over our characters and over our lives. Knowing that there is One source for everything that happens and One deliberate power that guides our lives, we learn to question the why's of life, not just its how's. As we do this, we can learn what in our lives and characters we need to modify or improve.

The answers to the why questions, are not always apparent and sometimes they emerge only after many years. Sometimes however, clear correlations emerge between our actions or attitudes and our experiences. By modifying our actions and attitudes we can change the experiences we have. This is the practice the Ba'alei Mussar (Mussar masters) called Cheshbon Haneffesh, the gateway to personal self-mastery and spiritual growth. © 2012 Rabbi D. Lapin and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

During the journey from Egypt to Chevron to bury Yaakov, a stop is made at Goren Ha'atad for a seven-day period of mourning and eulogies (B'raishis 50:10). The shortest path from Egypt to Canaan was "via the land of the P'lishtim" (Sh'mos 13:17), going west then south, while Yaakov had come down to Egypt via B'er Sheva (B'raishis 46:1), going south then west (a similar traveling distance). Yet the Torah tells us (twice, 50:10 and 10:11) that Goren Ha'atad was "on the other side of the Jordan (River)," implying that they took a circuitous route from Egypt to Chevron (as Goren Ha'atad was either on the eastern side of the Jordan, or, if it was in Canaan, the "other side of the Jordan" is mentioned because they crossed the Jordan from east to west to get there; see Torah

Sh'laima 50:29). Why did Yosef go so far out of the way to get to Chevron, traveling all the way east before coming back west?

Although it would be nice and tidy to suggest that Yosef took the same route that the Children of Israel would eventually take when they left Egypt (which fits with the notion that Yaakov had his sons carry his coffin in the same formation that the Tribes would travel to the Promised Land, see Rashi on 50:13), it is unlikely Paro would have allowed his army and dignitaries to travel so far out of the way, and be away from Egypt for so much longer, if there wasn't a practical reason to do so. It was only because of the oath Yosef had taken that Paro let him go at all (see Rashi on 50:6); letting him go for longer than necessary would seem to be out of the question. Besides, if Yosef knew the route that would be taken during the exodus, why did his descendants, the B'nai Efrayim, take a different route when they left 30 years too early?

Rashi explains why it was called Goren Ha'atad; "all the Canaanite kings and the princes of Yishmael came to wage war. Since they saw Yosef's crown hanging from Yaakov's coffin, they got up and hung their crowns there as well, surrounding it with crowns just as a threshing area (goren) is surrounded by a fence of thorns (atad)." [A similar explanation is put forth in the Talmud (Sotah 13a), although the Talmud says it was the children of Eisav, Yishmael and Keturah that had come to attack but changed their minds upon seeing Yosef's crown on Yaakov's coffin. Midrashim (i.e. Tanchuma) say it was the Canaanites (who are mentioned explicitly in the text, see 50:11), but only mention their crowns surrounding Yaakov's coffin without mentioning that they were coming to wage war. B'raishis Rabbah doesn't mention the crowns, but does say that the Canaanites would have been heavily defeated had they not honored Yaakov (in other ways than placing their crowns on his coffin). I would suggest that Rashi synthesized the Midrashim, with the war being averted and the reason for the name "Goren Ha'atad" expressed the way the Talmud and some Midrashim describe it, the Canaanites included as opponents the way the two sets of Midrashim have it. Rashi may have left out the children of Keturah because they are sort-of included in "Yishmael," and left out Eisav because he was an adversary until his death (see Rashi on 27:45), making it unlikely that at Goren Ha'atad he paid homage to Yaakov. The Talmud does have Eisav, or at least his descendants, in both places (placing their crowns on Yaakov's coffin at Goren Ha'atad and protesting Yaakov's burial in Chevron), so Eisav could have mourned his brother's death while contesting where he should be buried. Nevertheless Rashi avoids the issue by having Eisav present at only one of them.]

There are two ways to understand what happened with the crowns; either the Canaanites and/or the other nations came to attack the Children of Israel

as they attempted to bury their patriarch but backed off once they saw Yosef's crown on Yaakov's coffin, realizing that the Egyptian military was protecting the Children of Israel so it would be foolish to attack, or they came to attack Egypt because they thought this large Egyptian entourage was coming to assert Egyptian control over their land, but backed off once they realized it was a large funeral procession, not an invading Egyptian army. When the "inhabitants of the Canaanite land" said "it is a great mourning for Egypt" (50:11), were they emphasizing "Egypt," because Egypt was mourning too, not just the Israelites, or were they emphasizing "mourning" because this large faction, including chariots and horseman (50:9) were there to mourn, not to fight? Did Yosef's crown protect Yaakov's coffin, or did Yaakov's coffin protect Yosef's crown?

The Talmud discusses the crowns surrounding Yaakov's coffin to explain why on the trip there the Egyptian nobles were given precedence (50:7-8) while on the trip back Yosef's brothers were (50:14); after seeing the honor given to Yaakov by the other nations, the Egyptians realized how special and important he, and by extension his family, were, so the Children of Israel were treated with greater respect. (Rashi, on 50:14, quotes this part of the Talmud too.) If the other nations only put their crowns on Yaakov's coffin because they saw Yosef's crown there, it could not have caused the Egyptians to have additional respect for the Children of Israel. If, on the other hand, it was Yaakov's coffin that prevented the nations from attacking the Egyptians, and rather than just back off they put their crowns on his coffin, we can understand why the status of Yaakov's family had improved. From a practical standpoint as well, it is much more likely that the nations were planning to attack the Egyptian entourage because they thought the Egyptians were attacking rather than because they were accompanying Yaakov's body, as it would have been difficult for them to ascertain that Yaakov's coffin was part of the entourage until they were already close to it.

This is supported by a Midrashic manuscript quoted by Torah Sh'laima (31), which says that Yosef realized the eulogy had to be made outside the boundaries of Canaan, as otherwise the people of Canaan would think the Egyptians were coming to conquer their land and would launch a pre-emptive attack. Some of the Tosafists explain that Yosef did not continue past Goren Ha'atad, as these nations still feared that he would try to conquer their land. This would explain why the seven-day period of mourning started before Yaakov was buried; since Yosef did not accompany his brothers any farther, he started sitting shiva then. Once his mourning started, Yaakov's other relatives, who had come to meet the entourage (according to B'chor Shor this included the families of Eisav, Yishmael, Keturah and Lavan) joined in the mourning.

The Torah's description flows very nicely: "And chariots and horsemen went up with him (Yosef), and they were a very large camp" (50:9). This large group, including horses, chariots and Egyptian officials, could easily have been mistaken for an invading army. Whether the chariots and horsemen went to honor Yaakov or as a preventative measure in case the Canaanites (or Eisav) would try to stop them from burying Yaakov in Chevron is unclear. Either way, Yosef knew how it could be perceived, and therefore took a circuitous route, to an area where it would be easier to hold a eulogy for those relatives who were not in Canaan, traveling through the wilderness to the other side of the Jordan River. Defending armies came to meet them, but when they saw that it was a funeral procession ("Yosef's crown was hanging from Yaakov's coffin"), they joined in the mourning. "And they came to Goren Ha'atad which is on the other side of the Jordan, and held a very large and touching eulogy, and mourned for his father for seven days" (50:10). [It wasn't for "their" father (i.e. all the brothers), but for Yosef's father, since he was not continuing any farther.] Why did the nations change their minds and not attack the large Egyptian contingent? "And the people of the Canaanite land saw the mourning at Goren Ha'atad, and they said 'this is a large group of Egyptian mourners'" (50:11), and not, as they first thought, Egyptian invaders. By taking a circuitous route, Yosef avoided an immediate confrontation with the Canaanites, and allowed Yaakov's relatives on the eastern side of the Jordan to join in the mourning.

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SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

“Then Yisrael prostrated himself towards the head of the bed." (47:31) Rashi z"l writes: "He turned towards the Divine Presence. Our Sages infer from this that the Shechinah is above the head of an ill person." Why is the Shechinah found above the head of an ill person? R' Chaim Friedlander z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak; died 1986) explains: The term "Shechinah" refers to Hashem's "presence" in our lower world, which is dependent on whether we make room for Him to be revealed here. Specifically, the degree to which the Shechinah rests upon a person is dependent on the degree to which he humbles himself, as we read (Yeshayah 57:15), "For so says the exalted and uplifted One, Who abides forever and Whose Name is holy, 'I abide in exaltedness and holiness--but I am with the contrite and lowly of spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite'." Since a person who is ill is more likely to feel humble and subdued than is a healthy person, the Shechinah is more likely to be found at a sickbed than elsewhere. (Derech L'Chaim Al Derech Hashem p.241) © 2012 S. Katz and torah.org