

from me than I am willing to give. I will give you one hundred *gulden*, and that is it. One more thing. I insist that the inscription on my head stone to read: Here lies Yisrael Goy."

The members of the *Chevra* could not argue with the man. He was adamant. They completed the paperwork and left his home in desperation. The latest act of miserliness evinced by Yisrael Goy duly annoyed the populace. "How low could a person get?" they wondered. Apparently, this man would leave the world a very lonely person – which is what he did. It took great effort to secure a *minyán*, quorum, for his funeral. There were no eulogies; people simply were not interested. [We are not allowed to judge, but, when someone is destitute and he has no food to give his hungry family-- with no hope for a solution other than the wealthy man who refuses to help him-- people will do strange things and often act out of character. We may not judge those who are in dire need.]

That Thursday evening there was a knock at the door of Cracow's *Rav*, the distinguished *Horav Yom Tov Lipa Heller, zl*, author of the *Tosfos Yom Tov* commentary on *Mishnayos*. It was one of the community's poor who asked for money to purchase the necessary foods for *Shabbos*. The *Rav* gave him a few coins from his discretionary fund. No sooner had the man left than someone else appeared at the door with a similar request. During the next hour, twenty men came to the *Rav's* door asking for *Shabbos* funds. The *Rav* had never experienced such a sudden rise in the community's poor. What had happened? He called an emergency meeting of the community's *tzedakah gabbaim*, trustees. They, too, did not understand this phenomenon.

A few minutes into the meeting, another poor petitioner knocked on the door requesting funds. This time the *Rav* asked him, "Tell me, how did you survive until now?" "We bought on credit at the grocers. We had no money. He simply wrote it down in his ledger, and that was the last we heard of it. He never asked us for the money." (Apparently, they were not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. They knew it was unreal to receive unlimited credit, but, regardless, they accepted it.) The *Rav* investigated and discovered that literally hundreds of families lived this way – receiving credit at the town's grocers.

Now it was time to meet with the grocers. The *Rav* called them all together and said, "You will not leave this room until you share with me how you were able to give credit for hundreds of families each and every week."

They hemmed and hawed until the truth finally came out. For years, Yisrael G. had sustained hundreds of poor families. Every week, when a merchant presented him with a bill, he immediately paid it in full. There was one condition, however: No one – absolutely no one- not even his closest family, was to be made aware of his practice of anonymous charity.

When the *Rav* heard this tale he was shattered that such a righteous person had lived in their midst, and the community, in their haste to judge him, had excoriated a Jew who stood on a much higher spiritual plane than any of them.

Rav Yom Tov Lipa immediately declared a public fast day on

Yisrael G's *sheloshim*, thirty days after his passing, to atone for misjudging and reviling a fellow Jew. They were to gather at the cemetery where they would all beg forgiveness from the deceased. The *Rav* followed their supplication with a fiery eulogy extolling the quality of he who gives charity anonymously, despite the fact that it caused him extreme personal humiliation. Last, the *Rav* declared that, when his time to leave this world would come, he asked to be buried next to *Reb* Yisrael.

The *Rav* instructed that the community comply with *Reb* Yisrael's last wish to have Yisrael Goy engraved on his stone. He had them, however, add a word – *kadosh*. The stone now read *Yisrael Goy Kadosh* – a different meaning for a different person. Apparently, they had a never known the original person.

Va'ani Tefillah

השיבנו אבינו לחורתך וקרבונו מלכנו לעבודתך

Hashiveinu Avinu l'sorasecha v'karveinu Malkeinu la'avodasecha
Return us our Father to Your Torah and bring us near,
our King to your service.

Why did *Chazal* choose to use the word *hashiveinu*, return us, with regard to Torah, while employing *karveinu*, bring us near, concerning *avodah*, service, prayer? *Achas Shoalti* explains that each and every Jew studies the entire Torah with an angel while he is a fetus growing in his mother's womb. Furthermore, each and every Jewish soul stood at *Har Sinai* and received the Torah. What is missing in his Torah repertoire? *Chazarah*, review! He must return to the Torah which he had once imbibed and review what he had once known. Thus, *hashiveinu*, return us, with regard to Torah. *Avodah*, however, is a reference to prayer and *mitzvah* observance. Thus, *Chazal* chose the word *karveinu*—one must initiate and bring himself closer -- to inspire, arouse and energize himself to serve Hashem. We ask Him for assistance, because we need all the help that we can get.

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by the

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Parashas Vayechi

תשע"ז

פרשת ויחי

TORAH THOUGHTS ON THE PARSHA

ויקרבו ימי ישראל למוות ויקרא לבנו ליוסף

The time approached for Yisrael to die, so he called for his son, Yosef. (47:29)

Religion believes that life has purpose; each person's existence has a clear *raison d'etre*. One who has no religion does not ascribe to a system of principles and beliefs; he lives a random, carefree life of abandon, without purpose or meaning. One who lacks religion lacks purpose; hence, he has no identity. The secular culture surrounding us – which is the result of a society where decadence is no longer taboo, but in vogue – has little use for religion. From the average "Joe" to the most powerful politicians and world leaders, religion will, at its best, receive nothing more than mere lip service. As Jews, we have both a moral and spiritual calling; thus, we have an identity which is affirmed regularly by our *yiraa Shomayim*, awareness and fear of Heaven. Without this, we are no different than the millions of people floundering aimlessly in a sea of moral and spiritual confusion.

When one remains focused on the purpose of life, he lives with goals and objectives. He realizes that life has its ultimate rewards and punishments; while some of each occurs in this world, there must be something else, something higher and more real to which we strive. This is *Olam Habba*, the World to Come, the Eternal World of Truth. Death is inevitable. It is only a question of "when." A Jew lives with the notion that, while life on this world is temporary, real life begins when his *neshamah*, eternal soul, the battery pack that sustains his life, returns to the World of Truth. Mortality is part and parcel of the human condition, but so is immortality. Death is inevitable; perpetuating life – thus, achieving immortality - is up to us. When we do good, act with kindness, it continues on long after we have passed from this world. We can overcome death by perpetuating our lives. When our lives are a blessing – we defeat death.

Rejecting purpose was priority one for those who sought to change Judaism from a faith, a religion, into a culture. If people would believe that life has no specific purpose other than living for oneself, then they would reject the tenets of Judaism. How sad it is that secular, gentile historians recognize what our detracting co-religionists have refused to accept. Paul Johnson, a respected secular historian writes: "No people have ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny... The Jew stands at the center of the

perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose." This is one of the very principles of our faith, yet our secular brethren have chosen to deny it.

When one lives life with a purpose, his death also has purpose. In *Parashas Chayei Sarah* we see how the Patriarch of our Nation, Avraham *Avinu*, took great pains to ensure the performance of two *mitzvos* which focus on "continuity": *halvayas ha'meis*, making adequate provision for the burial of his wife, Sarah *Imeinu*; and *hachnosas kallah*, seeing to it that his son, Yitzchak *Avinu*, found his appropriate mate, so that there would be proper continuity.

Avraham *Avinu* spared no expense in procuring a burial place for Sarah. When one values life, he sees to it that the container, the body which has housed the soul during its earthly journey, is treated with reverence and respect, and is buried in the ground as prescribed by Torah dictate.

Avraham cared about eternity, but, in order to ensure eternity, one must focus on eternity during his life on this world. He must see that his children are imbued with Torah values, and that his wife is on the "same page" as he is. How sad it is to listen to the anguish of parents who had grandiose plans for their children, which were destroyed when the children connected with friends whose values were not consistent to the spirit of their upbringing. We should not allow our children to live in an environment that is alien to our beliefs. We are a nation with a destiny, a people with a purpose. Unless we understand and commit to this verity, our future will be as meaningful as our present: we will have nothing.

I have chosen to focus on life, its purpose, meaning and future, as a segue to writing about the value of life, concerns about illness and death, as part of "Team *Shabbos*," a national movement dedicated to generating awareness, education and guidance for the Jewish community concerning end of life matters. *Parashas Vayechi* has been earmarked as the *Shabbos* when rabbis across the country dedicate their sermon to discuss relevant topics endemic to end of life issues. Sad as it may sound, some Jews are not aware of: the many issues involved; the decisions that must be made, both ethical and spiritual; and the options available for traditional burial choices. Since the readership of *Peninim* is eclectic, covering all areas of the Jewish spectrum, *Peninim* is an excellent vehicle to serve as a wake-up call to the many who have never given a second thought to the matter, and to those who have decided that they cope with

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enough difficulties in the present so they simply do not care about the future.

Obviously, the constraints of space do not permit a complete treatment of the manifold issues which may arise. Awareness, however, is the primary goal of this *Shabbos*. Many observant Jews are uneducated concerning the questions surrounding end of life issues. Our non-practicing brethren are, for the most part, unaware of the Torah's requirement for in-ground burial, which follows after the ritual preparation of the body by competent and knowledgeable members of the *Chevra Kaddisha*, Jewish Sacred/Burial Society.

From time immemorial, the greatest fear of the European Jews was not death, but the fear of the grave – of not reaching *kever Yisrael*, a Jewish burial. *Dayan Moshe Swift, zl*, relates how his saintly, pious, aged grandmother, who summoned her children to her bedside as she neared her last moments, removed from beneath her blanket a well-worn pouch in which were wrapped some bills. She said, "This is to pay for my funeral!" This is what the people feared: Will I lay among Jews? Will I have a burial?

During World War II in England, *Dayan Swift* was called to attend the execution of a Jew on the gallows. One of the last words uttered by the victim prior to his execution was, "*Dayan*, who is going to bury me, and where will I be buried?" The grave has been hallowed in Jewish life; the greatest *mitzvah* is *chesed shel emes*, kindness of truth, whereby one does not expect any recompense, since the beneficiary is deceased; and the most sacred institution of its Jewish community is its *Chevra Kaddisha*.

Yet, despite this, many of our co-religionists have chosen to disregard this hallowed practice wantonly. Cremation is a method of destroying the Jewish body, so that there is no physical remembrance left of the Jew. This method was employed by our enemies, whose insane hatred of the Jew drove them to act as barbarians. Why must we follow their lead, unless our self-loathing is comparable to the animus they had manifested towards us.

Our *parsha* relates the last hours of the life of *Yaakov Avinu*. The story is one that every living Jew should read over and over again. We may derive the significance of life from viewing our Patriarch's perspective on death and burial. *Yaakov Avinu* had a difficult life, in the sense that he went from anguish to anguish, misery to misery. He lay there on his deathbed, surrounded by his family. The life that had known so much anguish and suffering was now drawing to a close. He entrusted to no one his dying request, but to his beloved and trusted son, *Yosef*. He did not even trust *Yosef* until he exacted a promise from him to honor his dying wish to be buried in *Eretz Yisrael*. He even gave special instructions about who should carry his coffin, with three sons carrying the bier at each side of the coffin. No Egyptian could touch *Yaakov Avinu's* coffin; no one would defile its *kedushah*, holiness. We should learn how to live from the way he showed us how to die.

When confronted with end of life issues, even observant Jews are apt to lose perspective. Observing a close relative in terrible pain, suffering "needlessly" (as the medical profession will have us believe), can be overwhelming. We believe that life is precious. We do not eschew life just because it is accompanied by chronic pain and illness. Hashem wants us to do the best that we can with what we have been given. Perhaps this is the underlying motif of the *pasuk* in *Devarim* 30:19, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; you shall choose life so that you and your descendants will live." Hashem

gives us a choice; why would anyone in his right mind not choose life over death? Furthermore, the *pasuk* seems to equate life with blessing and death with curse. Why would anyone choose curse over blessing?

Obviously, no sane person would choose death over life, or curse over blessing. What happens, however, if one's perspective on life becomes distorted; or if one perceives a blessing to be a curse? When a person is in terrible pain, he/she might feel that this is not a life worth living; it is not a life of blessing, but one of curse. Pain, misery, anguish, anxiety can drive a person to the brink, to the point that he/she, or those who attend to him/her believe that this is no life; it is a curse – not a blessing. Thus, Hashem says, "determine what is life and what is death; likewise, I designate what is blessing and what is curse."

We have no idea of the infinite value of each and every moment of life. Our *neshamah*, soul, which is our life source, is a *chelek Elokai miMaal*, part of the Divine Above. Who are we to measure or determine its significance? When we attempt to put labels on life, it is an indication that we fail to recognize life's most basic verity: it is an expression of Divine Will. He created us and He will summon our souls when He sees fit. We live at the "pleasure" of the Creator. The *ratzon* Hashem, will of G-d, should be the only determining factor in our life's decisions. "What is it that Hashem wants?" will find its answer in the Torah as interpreted by our spiritual leadership. For information concerning Team *Shabbos*, Traditional End Of Life Awareness Movement, please contact NASCK, National Association of *Chevra Kaddisha*, Richmond Hill, New York.

**ואני בבואי מפדן מתה עלי רחל
But as for me, when I came from Paddam, Rachel died on me. (48:7)**

Rashi explains that *Yaakov Avinu* was validating his burial of *Rachel Imeinu* outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, because it was Hashem's decree that she be "available" to assist her descendants. "When Nevuzaraden will exile them, they will pass by her grave and *Rachel* will go out and pray on their behalf."

There is a very telling story connected with this *pasuk*. Although the story has very little direct connection with the *pasuk*, it does give us insight into the mind and heart of a secular Jew who, for all intents and purposes, never had any exposure to real Torah learning and its effect on an individual - despite his youth. Dr. Max Nordeau, a psychologist practicing in Paris, France, at the end of the nineteenth century, was an enigmatic personality. Raised in a "mildly" observant home, he did receive somewhat of a Jewish education. Sadly, it was insufficient to protect him from falling into the clutches of the secular free-thinking movement which was prevalent at the time, especially in Western Europe. Like so many of his ilk, he had a disdain for Torah Judaism – quite possibly because he was clueless as to its meaning and beliefs. He related the following story.

"One day, in Paris, during reception hours at my office, a poor woman from the Jewish quarter (ghetto) came with her nine-year-old son to receive treatment. I saw the boy was clever, but I felt that his French was, at best, poor. I asked him what school he attended. He responded that he attended a certain *cheder*. His mother immediately interjected that he attended that school because her husband, his father, was old-fashioned in his ways and refused to let their son attend a secular school until he completed his course of studies at the *cheder*.

"I pondered angrily over this man who had prevented his son

from receiving a European education, and, almost mockingly, I asked the boy what he had learned in *cheder*. Immediately the boy became animated and with astounding emotion, in *Yiddish*, began to expound on *Rashi's* explanation of why *Yaakov* did not bury *Rachel* in *Eretz Yisrael*.

"At that moment, all of my organs trembled and my heart muscle began to vibrate with a new song. I stood up and hugged the boy and kissed him on the forehead. In my heart I said, 'A nation like this who preserves such memories for thousands of years and roots them in the hearts of their children – such a nation cannot die. It is promised a life of eternity.' This occurred during the Dreyfus trial (an anti-Semitic libelous trial against a high ranking Jewish officer in the French army), when I had begun to doubt the gentile nations' 'justice' toward *Yisrael*. I can honestly say that this experience was one of the factors that brought about my return to Judaism."

Dr. Nordeau remained a secular Jew who fought passionately for a Jewish state, albeit secular. It took him a lifetime to realize what our young children know from the earliest stages: Torah is our life. Without it life has no purpose – no meaning – no value. The quality of life is determined by the meaning supporting it. A life without values has limited quality.

ואני בבאי מפדן מתה עלי רחל בארץ נענן בדרך...ואקברה עם בדרך אפרת.

But as for me – when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me in the Land of Canaan on the road...and I buried her there on the road to Efras. (48:7)

Yaakov Avinu seems to be apologizing to *Yosef* for not having done for *Rachel Imeinu* as he was expecting *Yosef* to do for him. "Although I trouble you to bury me in the land of Canaan, though I did not do so for your mother, for, see now, she died near Beis Lechem"; "And I did not even take her to Beis Lechem, to bring her into the Land, and I know that there are hard feelings in your heart against me. But you should know that by the Word of G-d I buried her there so that she should be of aid to her children when Nevuzaradden would exile them, and when they would pass through by way of *Rachel's* tomb, *Rachel* would go out and seek mercy for them." (*Rashi*)

Despite the fact that he did not bury *Yosef's* mother in *Chevron*, *Yaakov* asked his son to do for him what he did not do for his mother. Furthermore, this validation of *Rachel's* burial is placed right in the middle of *Yaakov's* blessing of *Yosef's* two sons. He says: "Ephraim and Menashe will be to me like Reuven and Shimon ... But as for me..." He then continues with the designated blessings for Ephraim and Menashe. What is *Yaakov* intimating by what appears to be a disjointed conversation?

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, explains that when *Yaakov* asked *Yosef* to bury him in *Eretz Yisrael*, he was actually presenting his son with a powerful challenge. He was requesting that *Yosef* do something which he himself had not done for *Yosef's* mother! Would *Yosef* refuse? Would he rebel? Not *Yosef HaTzaddik*. He stood there respectfully. He neither complained nor rebelled. Instead, he immediately promised his father that his request would be executed to the fullest extent.

Now, let us address the blessings and why *Yaakov's* validation is placed in the middle of the conversation concerning the blessings. What happened to Reuven? Why did he lose the *bechorah*, right of the firstborn? Impetuosity. He criticized his father for not moving his bed into *Leah Imeinu's* tent following the passing of *Rachel*. Reuven made the move, placing *Yaakov's* bed in *Bilhah's* tent. Reuven had *taanos*, complaints. One who cannot accept a challenge-- confront a situation with which he

neither agrees, nor understands -- loses the birthright. He lacks the quality of *amidah b'nisayon*, staying the course, even when confronted with a difficult challenge. *Yosef*, however, was silent. He, too, had reason to perhaps express his *taanos*; yet, he remained silent. He stood strong in the face of challenge. Thus, he became the *b'chor*, firstborn.

Yaakov is now transferring the *bechorah*, saying that Ephraim and Menashe will be like Reuven and Shimon. *Yaakov* intimates to *Yosef*: Do you want to know why I am giving you the *bechorah*? It is because when I came from Paddan, your mother, *Rachel*, died and I was compelled to bury her on the side of the road – not in *Eretz Yisrael!* Yet, you did not complain! This is why you have become the firstborn – instead of Reuven.

How many times in life do we lose our cool – justifiably? How often do we lose something important as a result of our impetuosity? How often do we say to ourselves: "If I would have only controlled myself..."? Last, how often do we judge people negatively without giving them the benefit of the doubt, without asking ourselves: "Perhaps there is something about him that I am overlooking"? It all boils down to what the *Maggid* explains: Leadership goes to he who is able to rise above challenge. Some of the greatest and most powerful people have fallen because they could not overcome petty challenges. Challenge may be defined as a refusal to accept something as true or correct when our hearts do not coincide with this line of thought. In other words, if my "gut feeling" tells me that something is not right, the fact that my mind tells me there might be a reason, a validation for what our gut feeling is telling us is incorrect, we follow our heart and ignore our mind. Such a person has failed the challenge.

The following is one story where, indeed, an entire city fell victim to this gut feeling. The city of Krakow/Cracow, Poland, in the seventeenth century had a large Jewish population, many of whom were devout Torah scholars. A city is home to all types of people. Cracow was home to a wealthy Jew by the name of *Yisrael* who achieved infamy for his uncompromising stinginess. The local beggars had long since stopped coming by his house to solicit funds, knowing full well that it was a waste of time. The city's trustees had followed suit, since every attempt at fundraising was met with polite, but adamant, refusal.

Seventeenth century European Jews were, for the most part, devoid of economic opportunity. Many lived lives of abject poverty, augmenting their meager "income" by begging from door to door. Thus, *Yisrael's* utter heartlessness enraged the community. Here was a Jew who had so much and was capable of supporting the community; yet, he did not. As a result of their annoyance with him, they nicknamed him *Goy*, a *nom deguere* that stuck, despite its crude and vulgar connotation.

Time does not halt for anyone; the wealthy miser was no exception. He now lay on his deathbed surrounded by members of the *Chevra Kaddisha*, Jewish Sacred Burial Society, negotiating for his burial and tombstone: "I have already had *tachrichim*, shrouds, sewn for me. I need a simple plot anywhere in the cemetery. Likewise, a simple stone to serve as a marker will suffice."

"You understand that the money incurred from the sale of plots is used for charity," the head of the *Chevra* began. "Each Jew pays according to his means. In your case, you are quite capable. In addition, you have hardly assisted the poor in the past."

"As far as my non-relationship with the poor, Heaven will judge me. You, on the other hand, have no right to extract more