

began to weep incessantly over it. "Can you imagine how many *tefillas* my mother *davened* and how many tears she shed, so that her young Yisrael Meir should grow?"

It all begins and ends with *tefillah*. Obviously, issues arise and interventions are necessary, but that is all part of *hishtadlus*. Without *tefillah*, first and last, one has nothing.

שמענו ולוי אחים כלי חסם מכרתיהם ... ארור אפם כי עו ועברתם כי קשתה

**Shimon and Levi are brothers; their weaponry is a stolen trade...Cursed is their wrath for it is intense and their age for it is harsh. (49:5,6)**

The greatest blessing a parent (or anyone, for that matter) can confer upon a child is to tell him the truth about himself. If the subject of the blessing suffers from a shortcoming, his/her parent should note it and advise him/her about how to address the issues arising from this failing. Some parents and mentors shy away from relating the truth for fear of a negative reaction. This alone is proof that something is very wrong and should be addressed. Yaakov *Avinu* showed us the way, as he admonished his sons while he blessed them. After all, what value can a blessing have that ignores the negative character traits of the individual whom he is blessing?

Yaakov addressed each son individually, except when he spoke to Shimon and Levi, the two brothers who in the course of avenging their sister, Dinah, destroyed the captors and their entire city. *Rashi* observes that Yaakov did not curse them; rather, he cursed their father. *Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl*, relates that *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, was once asked if it was permissible to disdain and even dislike a Jew who is unobservant. The *Mashgiach* replied that for most people, such behavior is prohibited, because the average person has difficulty distinguishing between the person (he dislikes) and the negative character traits which provide the reason for the animus. Hence, rather than hating the traits, he ends up hating the person, which is not permissible. Only a great person can make the distinction in order to hate the traits, while continuing to love the person who falls prey to his negative traits.

*Rav Yeruchem* was wont to embellish this thought. A person who is plagued by bad *middos*, deficient character traits, can be compared to a closet filled with pearls and diamonds in which a rotten apple is wedged in its center. Certainly no one who is in possession of his faculties would consider disposing of the millions of dollars worth of jewels just because a rotten apple is in the closet. Get rid of the apple! Keep the diamonds! Likewise, every individual has an intrinsically high value. Negative character traits should not be ignored, and, indeed, should be dealt with. They, however, do not diminish the positive value of the person.

If we internalize this concept, making it a part of our outlook on people, our whole attitude is apt to change. We are used to viewing a person's value through the lens of his character deficiencies. Thus, if he is imperfect, our attitude towards him is likewise. We must look at the person, while simultaneously regarding his negative traits as qualities which

we must address. It takes an astute educator, a loving parent, an individual endowed with common sense, to ignore the moldy apple in the middle of a closet of diamonds. In other words, it takes effort on the part of the judge of character – a commodity which is in serious deficiency.

## Va'ani Tefillah

**V'sabeinu mituvecha. And satisfy us from Your bounty.**

Satisfaction is elusive for some people. In *Pirkei Avos*, the *Tanna* extols one who is *sameach b'cheiko*, happy with his lot. This means that he does not determine financial success by how much he has accrued, but, rather, by what he has – period. He understands that he is blessed according to what Hashem has determined his needs are. Everyone receives from Hashem enough to meet his needs. Many of us are dissatisfied with just having our "needs" filled. We also want to satisfy our "wants." It does not work that way. A truly wealthy person is a satisfied person. Thus, we ask Hashem to "satisfy us from Your bounty." We should be *tzufreeden*, happy, with what we have, because that is what we need. First, we ask Hashem to give us; then we ask Him that what He gives us should satisfy us. We ask Him to grant us the ability to be happy with what we have.

In his *Yaaros Devash*, *Horav Yehonasan Eibeshutz, zl*, defines *tuvecha*, Your goodness/bounty, as that which Hashem considers good, a specific reference to kosher food. It is possible to err and ingest foods that are either actually not kosher or have come into our possession by means that are not kosher. We know that mistakes occur. Therefore, we ask Hashem to watch that what comes into our mouth be food that is worthy of being consumed by a Jew.

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נפטר כ"ב טבת תשס"ב

by the

Schulhof and Winter Families

Peninim is published weekly by *Peninim Publications* in conjunction with the *Hebrew Academy of Cleveland*, 1860 S. Taylor Rd. Cleveland, Ohio 44118

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Parashas Vayechi

תשע"ח

פרשת ויחי

ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים

**Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt. (47:28)**

There is a general rule concerning the placement of a new *parshah/sidrah* in a Torah scroll: The new *Sidrah* either begins on a new line, or it is separated from the previous *parshah* by a nine-letter space. *Parashas Vayechi* is unique in that no extra space exists between it and *Parashas Vayigash* – the preceding *parshah*. Thus, *Rashi* calls *Parashas Vayechi* a *parshah setumah*, closed *parshah*. Since nothing happens in a vacuum, *Rashi* explains why *Vayechi* is "closed." It teaches us that at the time of his passing, the mood of Yaakov *Avinu's* children was "closed." They were acutely aware that with the Patriarch's passing, the suffering and persecution of the impending Egyptian exile would slowly and subtly begin. Although the physical bondage did not commence until all of the *shevatim*, Tribes/brothers, had died, the spiritual endangerment which is a major part of exile began with Yaakov's passing.

Another reason given for the "closed" nature of *Parashas Vayechi* is that Yaakov sought to reveal the "end" of our *tzaros*, troubles, i.e. when *Moshiach Tzidkeinu* will finally appear. He was prevented from making this revelation because his prophetic vision was suddenly halted. It had become "closed."

*Horav Nissan Alpert, zl*, offers an insightful understanding of the term "closed" with regard to Yaakov, the *Shevatim* and, by extension, us. Life is an entity which we, human beings, do not understand. Indeed, it is certainly not predictable and it is often mysterious; it is essentially a "closed" book. Its final chapters – the story's ending – are carefully concealed from the "reader." We are left to wonder: How will it all end? Will it be a good ending? What is the status of continuity? Likewise, when we are in a period of distress we pray, supplicating Hashem for a positive response. From where will deliverance materialize? Will we extricate ourselves from this *tzarah*, trouble? Good might spring forth from the least expected source. What appears to have been "bad," suddenly becomes "good." In other words, life is filled with ambiguity, the greatest obscurity being when and how will it all end? We know not from where and when deliverance and salvation will emerge. What keeps us going? How do we maintain a sense of equanimity, despite the many doubts that surround us? How do we grasp some form of "opening" to the "closed" book of life?

*Vayechi Yaakov b'erezt Mitzrayim*, "Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt." It does not state *vayehi* – "and Yaakov was" (in the land of Egypt). The Torah underscores the fact that he lived. Did the Patriarch even dream that his best years, the years that he had lived, would be the years that he had spent living in Egypt? Did he even imagine that he would see Yosef again? Did

he even begin to dream that if he would have a reconciliation, Yosef would have remained *frum*, observant, a *tzaddik*, his righteous personality and character intact?

Life is filled with surprises. Yaakov can attest to this reality. To say that Yaakov's life had its rough spots is an understatement. At the end of the day, however, except when he was in Lavan's home, he was in a spiritually correct environment, away from the moral perversion that prevailed in the pagan world. Now he was in Egypt, the capital of decadence. Who would think that it was specifically during these last years, during this relative tranquility from trouble, that Yaakov would have attained true life. Our Patriarch remained immune to – and unaffected by – the environment. He did not allow the corruption around him to deter him from ascending the ladder of spirituality.

Life is filled with its stunning moments. *Rav Alpert* explains that this idea is alluded to by the word *olam*, Hebrew for world. *Olam* shares a root with *he'e'lam*, hidden/concealment. We will never know what will happen. It is beyond us. Thus, it is *he'elam – olam*.

*Horav Yaakov Meir Shechter, Shlita*, teaches that the primary skill in this world is to be able to relate to Hashem in all situations. Thus, one who has been born without the ability to rise to an exceptional spiritual height in his service to Hashem should not become disenchanted. He should serve Him simply and wholeheartedly: studying easy and uncomplicated subjects in Torah, and praying in a simple, straightforward manner. He will, thus, realize that Hashem is to be found even in the simple places. The true test of a Jew's commitment to Hashem is how he behaves when he is feeling uninspired and low.

Furthermore, as *Horav Nachman Breslover, zl*, teaches, the Jewish perspective on serving Hashem varies greatly from that of the non-Jew. A Jew has *emunah*, faith. With faith, one has hope. When one has hope, he is willing to wait patiently for salvation. *Rav Nachman* offers an insightful analogy that not only delineates the variance between Jew and gentile, but I think also defines Jewish faith. The faith of the individual who does not maintain such a level of trust in the Almighty, his faith is questionable. It is easy to have faith when everything is rosy. It is when life throws us a curve that we see who truly believes and who simply pays lip service.

Now for the story. Two beggars – one Jewish, one gentile – found themselves in a Jewish community on *Erev Pesach*. *Pesach* is a time when food is plentiful and hearts are open. The Jewish beggar taught his gentile friend how to "act" like a Jew, so that they would be invited to a *seuder* and receive a hearty meal. The two men were invited to different families. The gentile had never been inside a Jewish home; he had been subsisting on the meager pennies he would get from begging on street corners. How thrilled he was to enter a beautifully lit and decorated home.

It was *Yom Tov*, and the Jewish family went all out to celebrate its good fortune in having been redeemed from Egypt. He was shown to his place at an exquisitely set table.

The beggar sat down and waited for what he expected would be a sumptuous and lavish meal, but he received nothing of the sort. He was given a Hebrew book (*Haggadah*) and forced to listen and listen to expositions and stories. Even the children spoke words of Hebrew! Meanwhile, while everyone else was aglow with Torah thought, he was getting hungrier and hungrier. These people were insane. How could they talk and talk, while the aroma of delicious food was wafting through the air? Finally, they brought out the food! What food it was! Dry crackers (*matzoh*) and horseradish? Bitter tasting horseradish whose smell was sufficiently potent to destroy a person. This is what these Jews were finally serving after two hours of stories! He took one bite of the *matzoh* and horseradish and almost choked. This was too much. He would return to begging by the *goyim*! He got up from the table, kicked away his chair, and left the house in a rage.

Meanwhile, his Jewish friend, having been schooled in Jewish tradition as a youth, waited patiently for the real meal, which he knew was coming. The lesson, explains the *Breslover*, is simple: A Jew knows (or at least should know) how to accept the bitterness of the world with patience and love. He knows that the true feast will follow later. We serve Hashem in all situations, under all circumstances, because we understand that they are all temporary.

We forget that we are nothing more than playing a part in the play called “life.” Each of us has a different role; some roles are fortunate at first, but change as the scenes unfold. Others, vice-versa. At the end, we all end up before the Heavenly Tribunal where we receive our due based upon the manner in which we have played our role. Some do better than others. It all depends upon our understanding of “our role.” Stories abound which extol the *middos*, attributes, of *emunah* and *bitachon*. The following is a classic from which a number of lessons may be gleaned. I will leave that part up to the reader.

By nature, Jewish people are giving, wanting to share their good fortune with others. Yosef was a wealthy man who was miserable, because he had no one with whom to share his wealth. He had no family. “What enduring charitable act can I make? What lasting accomplishment can I achieve?” he wondered. Finally, he came upon an original idea that was quite generous. He would look for a poor man who was so down on his luck that he had entirely given up hope. He searched and “interviewed” a number of down and out men, but each one had someone who was helping him. Finally, he met a man who looked like he was in seriously bad shape. “I have finally found someone who has no one,” he declared. Hearing this, the poor man responded, “Who says? Perhaps there is no one in this world who can help me, but there is Hashem Who helps all creatures. I certainly can rely upon Him! If you want someone who has given up all hope, go to the cemetery. That is a hopeless place!”

The man thought a moment and realized that it really was not a bad idea. He went to the cemetery and buried his large sack of money, so that it would remain hidden until he found someone whom he could help. Several years passed, and the man’s fortune reversed itself. All of his properties and investments had tanked. He was now penniless and destitute. He started thinking and remembered that he had buried a fortune in gold in the cemetery. He took a shovel and proceeded to the cemetery to retrieve what was his.

In the midst of his digging, he was apprehended by the police who claimed he was digging up stolen goods. It was difficult to prove otherwise, so he was taken to jail to await trial by the mayor. The mayor read the charges against him and asked, “Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Our hero began to recount his long story, how after being unable to find anyone to take his money, he buried it in the cemetery. He was digging up what was rightfully his. “I am aware that my story sounds far-fetched, but every word of it is true,” he said.

“Oh,” said the mayor, “I believe every word of your story. You do not recognize me, do you?” he asked. “Wait, now I know who you are,” the defendant said. “You are the poor man who told me to bury my money.” “You are correct,” said the mayor. “I hail from a distinguished lineage, and when the town’s mayor died, I was appointed to serve in his place. I am now a wealthy man. I told you that all one must do is place his trust in Hashem.”

The mayor invited Yosef to live with him in his mansion, an invitation which Yosef readily accepted. He had learned an invaluable lesson. A Jew is never alone. A Jew never gives up hope. We have Hashem to Whom we should *daven* for everything. Only He has the power to elevate a person from the lowest depths to the greatest heights – and vice versa.

ויקרבו ימי ישראל למוט

#### And the days of the death of Yisrael drew near. (47:29)

The “days” of Yaakov’s death drew near. A person does not die over a period of days; he dies in a moment. The *Zohar* wonders what is the meaning of the “days of death”? The *Zohar* explains that when the time for a person to pass from this world arrives, all of his days (which he has lived) are calculated and assessed. Each day that was spent in the service of Hashem, committed to *mitzvah* observance, Torah study and performance of acts of lovingkindness – is considered a day worthy of being counted. Other days, which are found lacking in these qualities, are isolated and not included in the “day count.” The days of the righteous, which the Torah aptly describes as days of “drawing near,” refer to those days that involve a connection with the Creator. Each and every one of these days is considered worthy of being presented to Hashem.

Each of us is granted a certain amount of time/days to spend on this world. We are to fill those days with *mitzvos*. Days filled with sin are discarded. They have no value; they are not worth saving. Furthermore, a wasted day is not wasted for one day – it is wasted forever, for eternity. There is a flipside to this. When a person utilizes a day properly to connect with Hashem, when his time is used wisely for the true purpose of his creation, it will be accredited to his eternal account in *Olam Habba*.

We can go through life merely existing, and at the end of the day, we will have nothing to show for our existence. A long life is not measured by age, but by how many actual days we have accrued. Living without accruing days is like earning money and allowing it to fritter away in the wind.

ואני נחתי לך שכנם אחד על אחיך אשר לקחתי...בחרבי ובקשתי

#### And as for me, I have given you Shechem – one portion more than your brothers, which I took...with my sword and my bow. (48:22)

*B’charbi u’b’kashti*, with my sword and with my bow. *Rashi* interprets sword and bow as: sword – sharp wisdom; bow

– prayer. *Targum Onkelos* translates it as *tzalusi u’b’bausi*; with my prayer is my supplication. Thus, Yaakov *Avinu’s* strength lies not in his physical prowess, but rather, in his spiritual potency. Yaakov’s prayer was much more effective than his physical strength. This is true for all of us. Our strength is in our spirituality. We vanquish the enemy with our supplications, not with our guns. *Horav Shimon Pincus*, *zl*, observes that during an *eis tzarah*, period of tribulation, when the numbers are against us and the enemy’s weapon is far more advanced than anything we have, we emerge triumphant because we have the power of prayer. *Rav Pincus* explains that Hashem runs towards us. As the Psalmist says, *Imo anochi b’tzarah*, “I am with him in his troubles.” Hashem shares with us the *tzaar*, pain and anguish. It may appear that we are running towards him, but, in essence, He is running towards us. A person travels in a car; it seems as if the buildings that he passes are moving towards him, while he stands still – when, in fact, it is the opposite. We think that we are running to Hashem, when, in fact, the moment that we turn to Him, He “comes running.”

We do not realize that Hashem is present, ready and willing to help. We do not ask, because we do not think. A *chassid* once came to *Horav Mendel*, *zl*, *m’Kotzk*, and lamented his bitter circumstances. “*Rebbe*,” he cried, “my cupboard is bare. I have a houseful of children and nothing to feed them.” He then broke down in bitter weeping. The *Rebbe* looked at him and said emphatically, “Pray to Hashem! He will sustain your family.” “But *Rebbe*,” the *chassid* cried, “I do not know how to pray.” “If this is the case,” retorted the *Rebbe*, “you have a greater problem than a lack of livelihood!!”

A Jew must be acutely aware that his success (as part of *Am Yisrael*) is through the medium of prayer. His “mouth” is his greatest and most effective tool for catalyzing salvation/deliverance. Yaakov *Avinu* alluded to the power of prayer and supplication. The *Kotzker* explains that the efficacy of a sword is determined by how the soldier prepares it prior to battle. He sharpens it razor sharp. Likewise, in order for the arrows to reach their distant target, the soldier’s bow must be prepared by tightening it. Prayer is no different. One must prepare himself prior to *Tefillah*. This is why the early *Chassidim*, pious Jews (*Talmud Berachos* 30A) put their minds and hearts in order, so that they could focus properly on the prayers before them. I guess this means that they did not just run in a minute before *Barchu* and leave after *Kedushah*. They took the time they spent speaking with Hashem seriously.

Ask someone who has just concluded *Shemoneh Esrai*, “Did you say *Bircas Hashiveinu*” (or whatever *brachah*), the response will most certainly be, “Probably.” The *Baalei Mussar* offer an insightful analogy to a fellow traveling in a wagon. At one point, the driver ties the reins around the horse that is pulling the wagon. The driver then proceeds to go to sleep. The bewildered passenger asks the driver, “What gives?” The driver’s response is: “Do not worry. The horse knows the way. He knows when to stop for water. ‘We’ will get you to your destination in time.” Our *davening* is often like that of the horse who knows when to stop for water. When we finish “reading the words,” we know that *davening* is over; we have reached our destination. It is now time for water.

Everyone knows that *tefillah* is required as a tool for extricating oneself from a *tzarah*, trouble. When someone is in need of a *refuah*, healing, *brachah*, blessing, any form of *yeshuah*, he knows that *tefillah* is the address to which he should turn. It is the most effective medium for reaching Hashem, Who is the only responder. There is something else for

which we must *daven*, something that might ruffle some readers’ sensibilities: I refer to the *tefillas* parents must offer that their children grow up in the Torah way and be a source of *nachas* to them, *Klal Yisrael* and Hashem – not necessarily in that order. Some parents might neither agree that this warrants serious *tefillah*, nor will they acquiesce that the qualities that *Chazal* consider important are to be the objectives of our prayer service.

The *Mishnah Berurah* (47:10) (quoted by *Horav Matisyahu Solomon*, *Shlita*) writes: “The *tefillas* of a father and mother should always be fluent in their mouths, *davening* that their children learn Torah, become *tzaddikim*, righteous people, and have good *middos*, character traits.” He then goes on to point out that one should especially concentrate during *U’va’LeTzion* when we say: *Shelo niga larik v’lo neilad la’behalah*, “In order that we should not toil in vain nor give birth to confusion.”

Parents are expected to be fluent because they are (or at least should be) constantly *davening* for their children. This, explains the *Mashgiach*, is at the very heart of success in *chinuch*. *Tefillah*! A faithful Jew understands that absolutely nothing is in his hands. He can – and should be – *mishadel*, endeavor, but he must reiterate in his mind that only Hashem can affect the outcome. There is no *kochi v’otzem yadi*, “my power and the strength of my hand,” that sees the achievement through to fruition. If one understands this verity, then he will *daven* – and *daven*, for his children’s success. Parenting techniques are *hishtadlus*, but, at the end of the day, without *tefillah*, one does not show that he really cares.

When parents are successful in raising a beautiful family which gives them much Torah *nachas*, satisfaction, it is because they are the beneficiaries of Hashem’s blessing. Those who have missed achieving success, is because Hashem withheld the gift of success from them. They must ask, plead, beg for it. It is the most effective thing that they can do.

The *Mashgiach* underscores the necessary attitude one must have when *davening* for his children’s success. It must be as the *Mishnah Berurah* writes: “We should *daven* that our children learn Torah and will become *tzaddikim* and have good *middos*... so that we should not toil in vain nor give birth to confusion.” We must be infused with the feeling that if our children do not learn Torah, are not *tzaddikim*, do not have good *middos*, then something is very wrong. We have toiled in vain and given birth to confusion. These should be every parent’s goals.

So what if he does not learn Torah, or is not a *tzaddik*, or has not developed good *middos*? Parents who have this attitude have a problem that goes far beyond child-rearing. Their own commitment to Torah ideals are questionable. One who is *frum*, observant, follows *halachah* and does not concoct his own theory on what determines Jewish values. He follows tradition. The *Mishnah Berurah paskens*, renders the *halachic* basics, concerning childraising. This is what we should ascribe to. This is what we should adhere to.

The *Chafetz Chaim* did not become the spiritual leader of his generation overnight. It was the attitude and focus on the manner in which he was raised that set the trajectory for his spiritual involvement. He would often talk about his mother’s *siddur*. The *Chafetz Chaim’s* mother passed away when he was a young child. Many years later, someone brought to the *Chafetz Chaim* the *siddur* from which his mother had davened. The sage took the *siddur* in his trembling hands, kissed it and