

survivors who saw it all – yet survived, their *emunah* intact. I write this today on the 75th *yahrzeit* of my three sisters who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto on *Tishrei 13*, 1942. *Hashem yinkom damam*.

A female Holocaust survivor had been married for twelve years without being blessed with children. One day, she sat in the Madison Avenue (Manhattan) office of a distinguished gynecologist and heard the following: “Madame, I implore you to listen to me, since what I am saying is for your own benefit. Medically speaking, there is nothing that we can do for you. Hair will sooner grow on my palm than you will conceive.” The woman listened to the devastating news, bid the doctor good-by and left. She boarded the Madison Avenue bus. She sat there lost in thought, feeling sorry for herself, her life flashing before her.

She had experienced the terrible horrors of the Holocaust. Her family had a trap door beneath their dining room table, which they would use to access their hiding place, climbing down to the basement to evade the accursed Nazis. Her job (for which she volunteered) was to smooth over the small rug that covered the trap door. She would then hide beneath some furniture, hold her breath, and pray that her presence would not be detected. The family descended the steps to the basement. She closed the trap door, smoothed over the carpet, then curled up as much as possible, and hid under some furniture. Time and again, the family was saved as a result of her courage. Finally, however, the Nazis noticed a soft spot beneath the carpeting, and they discovered the trap door. She remained hidden. Her family – everyone – did not fare as well. They were all dragged away and sent to Auschwitz. None survived the war.

She arrived in America with hope to rebuild her life, raise a family and somehow repair some of the loss of her family. Now, however, these hopes had all been shattered. She sat on the bus, not getting off at her usual stop because she felt she had nothing, no reason to get off: “I have nothing for which to live.” The driver felt bad, but it was the end of the line. He had put in a long, hard day. “Lady, I’m sorry that you are unhappy, but I have to go home and eat supper. Have a life – somewhere else” were his parting words.

She got off the bus and raised her eyes Heavenward: “*Ribbono shel olam!* You saved my life countless times. You must have had a reason for keeping me alive. I want so much to start over, to have a family and raise them *al taharas hakodesh*, amid purity and holiness. Please do not abandon me. I will not give up. I will always serve You. You have done so much for me, I only ask, please, perhaps give me a little more?”

One year later, she was the proud mother of an infant boy. Subsequently, she had a long life witnessing the births of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She never gave up hope. She believed with all of her heart in Hashem and in His ability

to change everything *k’heref ayin*, with the blink of an eyelash. He did. She was Rabbi Fishel Shachter’s mother.

We all have such stories. Those of us whose parents survived the purgatory of the European Holocaust all can attest to our parents’ abiding faith. It was absolutely clear and unshakeable. They saw with a vision unlike that of anyone else – because they believed.

Va’ani Tefillah

הזאת השנה הזאת – ברך עלינו ... את השנה הזאת *Bareich aleinu ... es ha’shanah ha’zos.*

After Adam and Chavah sinned in *Gan Eden*, Hashem brought certain curses to the world. One of these curses was *B’zeias apecha tochal lechem*, “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread.” Toil and labor in the pursuit of a livelihood comprise a curse. Unfortunately, some of us have elevated this “curse” to blessing status, almost as if one looks for every opportunity to work himself to the bone in order to earn a living. Hashem provides one’s “needs.” Some of us “want” more than we “need.” This is where the curse enters into the picture. We work and toil to the point that we become wed to our livelihoods. Will it make a difference? No. A person earns what Hashem deems for him. When his livelihood takes over his life – he manifests the curse, *B’zeias apecha tochal lechem*.

Another aspect of this curse is the preoccupation with earning a livelihood. It takes an individual away from his spiritual growth. How is one to achieve spiritual stature if his mind is on his material needs? He must realize that this is a curse. If he would only trust Hashem to provide for him while he instead focuses on his spiritual achievements, it would not be a curse. This does not mean that one should ignore his material needs. He should not, however, let them become his primary focus in life.

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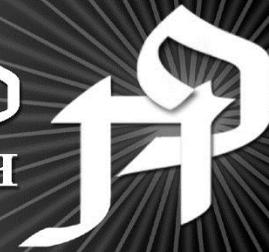
Parashas Vayeishev

תשע"ה

פרשת וישב

פנינים על התורה

בית חינוך הבר דסלה תלנינג
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יִסְפָּךְ ... הִיָּה רַעְיָה אֶת אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן

Yosef ... was a shepherd with his brothers by the flock. (37:2)

As parents, we have an awesome responsibility to infuse our children with proper *middos*, character traits, coupled with *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, and an abiding commitment to Torah study and *mitzvah* performance. As parents, we are our children’s first and primary mentors. The *rebbeim* and *moros* that we choose for them are a reflection of our standards. Last, the joy in *mitzvah* observance that we present will have a lasting impression upon our children as they journey forward in the world. *Horav Nissim Yagen, zl*, relates the story of two American families who, on the outside, maintained similar lifestyles, until their children grew up and chose contrasting paths: one remained observant, while the other married out of the faith. Both boys had studied in the same elementary school and *yeshivah* high school. One became a *rav*, while the other *r”l* apostatized himself.

Both fathers rose early to daven *vasikin*, early *minyans*, dressed the part of observant Jews, and were observant in all facets of *Yiddishkeit*. The father whose son converted came to his *rav* and, after relating the tragedy that had befallen his family, asked for a reason: “*Rebbe*, tell me why my good friend and neighbor merited to have his son become a rabbi, while my son, who became a physician, converted out of the religion to satisfy his wife.”

The *rav* replied, “I believe I know the reason. Both you and your neighbor did the same things, but it was your individual attitudes, which your sons sensed, that created the difference. Years later, your attitude manifested itself in your son turning away from Judaism. When you arose at 5:00 a.m. to pray, it was unquestionably not easy, but you overcame your weakness, your desire to sleep another hour, and jumped out of bed prepared to serve your Creator. When your son saw this, he asked, ‘Daddy, why do you get up so early?’ You responded, ‘What can I do? I must get up. It is an atonement for our sins.’

“Afterwards, when your son saw you putting on *Tefillin* and reciting the *brachah*, blessing, with a pinched face, your son asked why you were doing this. You replied, ‘We must put on *Tefillin*. We have no choice in the matter. That is what Hashem has commanded us to do.’ You did everything because you were forced to do it; you had to do it. So your son developed the idea that his

father was unfortunate, doing everything because he was forced to do it; he had no mind of his own. Thus, the moment your son grew up, he said that he would not have a miserable life like his father. So, now he has nothing!

“Your neighbor, on the other hand, had a different attitude. When his son asked why he rose so early in the morning, he responded with a bright and cheerful face, ‘To serve Hashem! I am so happy to serve my Creator. I cannot wait to go to *shul* to pray to Him, to thank Him for all that He does for us.’ When they arrived in *shul* and his son observed his father putting on *Tefillin*, he asked once again, ‘Why? What are you doing?’ and the father would reply once again, ‘I am becoming one with Hashem.’ These words made the boy long for the day when he could become one with Hashem.

“The big difference between you and your neighbor is that you told your son, ‘I have to do this.’ As a result, at the earliest opportunity, your son demonstrated his disinterest. Your neighbor imparted a different message. He said, ‘I love to do this; I want to do this.’ Why should a son not want to do what his father loves to do?”

The story is not new. The lesson certainly is not. The purpose of this preamble is to shed light on an anomaly concerning the primary focus of the next four *parshiyos*: Yosef *HaTzaddik*. While, indeed, Yaakov *Avinu* and the *Shivtei Kah* also have starring roles, the anomaly that surrounds Yosef is the statement issued by *Chazal: Hu Yosef mitchilah v’ad sof*, “He is Yosef from beginning to end.” (*Sifri Devarim*, cited by *Rashi Shemos* 1:5) This means that Yosef *HaTzaddik* maintained his saintliness, his pristine character, from the time he was at home, as his father’s *chavrusa*, study partner, throughout the various ordeals in his life, until he became viceroy in Egypt; he was consistently the same Yosef!

Let us analyze this statement. Yosef, the son of royalty, the son of Yaakov, the apex of aristocracy, was sold as chattel to a group of Arabs. He was then sold as a menial slave to a common Egyptian. If this would have happened to the average person, he might have begun questioning his faith. How could this have happened to him? He was a *tzaddik* who had done nothing wrong. To be treated in such a crass manner is bad enough, but, when one is taken from such a spiritual summit and placed as a slave in a base and immoral environment, it is a difficult challenge to one’s faith. Yet, Yosef remained the same righteous Jew in Egypt as when he had been a shepherd living an idyllic Torah life.

Furthermore, when, as viceroy, Yosef was exposed to the fame and glitter of Egyptian society, he was not blinded by the blandishments of wealth and fame; it

did not go to his head. After all of life's troubles, Yosef was blessed with two sons. One would think that some of his embitterment would have crept into the naming of his sons. Absolutely not. The name that he gave to each son expressed his gratitude to Hashem.

The average person might counter that this is why Yosef was called a *tzaddik*. He was able to maintain his spiritual stature despite the various challenges. That would be true if he had been called a *tzaddik* only at the end of his life. What *Chazal* teach us is that he remained the same *tzaddik* after enduring all of these troubles and challenges as when he was young. What gave him the fortitude to not only withstand everything that had been thrown at him, but to go on to offer gratitude to Hashem?

It was his mother. Rachel *Imeinu* had two children, but raised only one: Yosef. Our Matriarch had a similar life, except for the ending. She did not become viceroy of Egypt; she did not ascend to fame and fortune. She finally gave birth to her second child – and died. At first, things appeared to be going her way. She was destined to marry Yaakov. At the very last minute, in her attempt to shield her sister Leah *Imeinu* from disgrace, Rachel switched and gave Leah the opportunity to become Yaakov's wife. One would think that this act of selflessness would have incurred incredibly good fortune for her. At least, she should have had a houseful of children, but that did not happen. In fact, she was barren, while her sister had six sons! In the end, Rachel did not even gain entrance to the *Meoras HaMachpelah*. That was, however, Rachel's distinction. Did Rachel complain? Was her cheerful demeanor impugned? No, she was Rachel *Imeinu*, she accepted everything that came her way as an expression of Hashem's will. This is how she lived, and this is how she died. It was this form of spiritual equanimity which she conveyed to her son, Yosef. Everything is Hashem's will: the (what appears as) good, as well as (what appears as) bad. We take it as it comes and accept it, because this is the will of Hashem. Rachel *Imeinu* taught her son well.

וישמע ראובן ויצילהו מידם

Reuven heard, and he received him from their hand.

(37:21)

Reuven had much to gain if Yosef were to be out of the picture. He was the firstborn. Yosef was a threat to his position, since he, too, was a firstborn. The *shevatim* rendered a *halachic* decision, finding Yosef guilty of being a *redifah*, a pursuer, who was bent on destroying them. Reuven attempted to dissuade them for one purpose: so that he could return later and release Yosef from the pit, thereby saving his life. *Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, zl*, observes the incredible level of *atzilus*, nobility, that was manifest by Reuven's actions. As far as the *shevatim* were concerned, either Yosef or Reuven would be the *bechor*, the aristocrat of the *shevatim*. Reuven was the only one who would benefit from Yosef's "displacement," since he had previously been considered to be the *bechor*, but, due to his impulsivity, he had lost that status to Yosef.

Nonetheless, Reuven took a position with regard to Yosef. He may no longer have been the *bechor*, which meant that the firstborn fringe benefits were no longer his. He did not care. As far as he was concerned, however, he was the *bechor* in assuming responsibility. He knew that a stand had to be taken, and, as the *bechor*, he should be the responsible party, the one to assume that stand. He may no longer have had firstborn rights, but he still retained firstborn responsibilities, which he could now execute. He could overrule his brothers.

All too often we spend most of our time seeking excuses to validate our lack of participation with regard to helping others. Reuven teaches us that small people avoid responsibility. A true leader does what must be done; he assumes responsibility, no matter the consequences.

והבור רק אין בו מים

The pit was empty, no water was in it. (37:24)

How sad it is when someone considers himself worthy of the appellation *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, but does not really warrant this title. Heaven help the person who has the audacity to point out this person's deficiency. He will be abused for lacking *kavod haTorah*, the honor due to the Torah, and its representatives. I wrote the word, "sad," because this person is in a situation which, of course, he brought upon himself, and which he can survive as long as he does not press the wrong buttons. Otherwise, one day, someone who is far from being a scholar will unfortunately put him in his place. This could be a very debasing and sobering experience. Obviously, everyone should maintain a sense of humility, regardless of his level of scholarship, since humility just happens to be one of the criteria of a *talmid chacham*.

The Torah relates that the pit in which Yosef was thrown was empty. *Rashi* qualifies the meaning of "empty," in that there was no water in it, but it was infested with snakes and scorpions, creatures that present a greater and more imminent danger than the lack of water. The *Talmud Yoma* 23a teaches, "Any *talmid chacham* who does not take revenge like a *nachash*, serpent, is not a *talmid chacham*." Are we to believe that the determining factor in deciding one's level of Torah wisdom is his ability to take revenge like a serpent? Obviously, *Chazal's* statement holds deeper meaning.

Many a would-be *talmid chacham* has employed this *Chazal* to allow himself license to disparage those who have crossed him. Revenge is an insecure excuse for getting back at people one either envies or has somehow convinced himself have hurt him. The Torah prohibits revenge. To use the appellation of Torah scholar to justify such inappropriate behavior is reprehensible.

Yalkut HaGershuni renders this *Chazal* homiletically. *Mayim ein bo*; There is no water in it (the pit). Consider a person who is void of water, which is a metaphor for Torah (which is compared to water), but *nechashim v'akrabim yeish bo*, concerning

the laws of *nekamah*, revenge. He thinks of himself as a serpent, i.e., allowing himself the dispensation to take revenge. This is false piety, for he is using whatever little he might have learned in his life to justify his revenge.

Our Sages teach (*Taanis* 10a) that, when rain does not descend after *Succos* and the people fear that there might be a drought, the *yechidim*, individuals (of repute) should begin to fast. Perhaps in their merit, rain will descend. Rabbi Huna explains that the term *yechidim* applies to *talmidei chachamim*. They should be the first ones to assume responsibility for the community. *Horav Shlomo Levinstein, Shlita*, adds, that when the situation involves fasting (and any other form of sacrifice) one should consider himself a Torah scholar, but when it comes to the dispensation of taking revenge, one should defer the title of *talmid chacham* to those who are sincerely worthy of it.

אין שר בית הסהר ראה את כל מאומה בידו באשר ד' אתו

The prison warden did not scrutinize anything that was in his charge inasmuch as Hashem was with him. (39:23)

Prison is not a happy place. It is usually reserved for the dregs of society. Many are there because they were unable to defend themselves against the prevailing circumstantial evidence. Others just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yosef was accused of a crime which he did not commit, but, in Egypt, as in most countries, this does not prevent the ruling class from disposing one into a system where he is lost – often forever. Yosef was admired and revered by the warden, as well as by the prisoners. They saw that something was special about him. Hashem was with him; thus, Yosef succeeded at whatever task he undertook. All of this was the result of the Egyptians' recognition that Yosef was not alone.

Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl, makes an insightful observation from this statement. It is possible for Hashem to be with a person even when that person finds himself in an environment that is non-conducive to spiritual refinement and growth. Even if one finds himself in an environment that is secular in nature, antagonistic to religious belief or hedonistic in action, he must never forget that he is never alone. Yes – even within the confines of spiritual filth in which he finds himself, Hashem is present with him. Yosef was a slave in a forlorn dungeon, surrounded by Egypt's lowest of the low, pagans who had descended to the depths of immorality, who had fallen to the nadir of depravity; yet, the Torah informs us that Hashem was with him.

Thus, says the *Mashgiach*, one can seek excuses to justify slacking off in his commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*. He cannot say, "Well, I am alone; Hashem has forsaken me." This is not true; Hashem can be found anywhere.

"Where is G-d found?" asked *Horav Menachem Mendel, zl, m'Kotzk*. His reply is classic: "Wherever He is given entry!" The *Berditchever, zl*, was wont to say, "One can say he is for Hashem; one can say he is not for Hashem; but one can never say that he is without Hashem!" Hashem never forsakes

us. He is right there, waiting to be invited in. How does Hashem enter? Through *emunah*, faith. When we believe in Hashem, we have already allowed Him into our lives.

Rav Wolbe states (*Ali Shur*), "*Emunah* is a reality; it is not a concept." When we were kids we all sang the popular song, "Hashem is here, Hashem is there; Hashem is truly everywhere." We must take the juvenile entrancement of Hashem is here and transform it into the mature reality of *emunah*, of believing that Hashem is here. Sadly, many sang this wonderful melody as children, but – with regard to the reality of the words – remained mere children!

Emunah is not blind faith. It is reality. It is clarity. It is feeling. A living connection exists between us and Hashem. The *maamin*, believer, firmly believes unequivocally that Hashem is here, there and everywhere. To him, *emunah* is palpable, but, as the *Kotzker* said, we must allow Him in. If we do not "see" Him, we can hardly invite Him into our lives. The individual who is afflicted with spiritual blindness, or even weakened by spiritual myopia, does not see Hashem. If he does not see Him in every place, he will sadly not see him in any place.

Rav Wolbe once attended a seminar in Sweden. During the lecture, the speaker mentioned that "the very atmosphere of Sweden is *treif* (*unkosher*, unholy)." *Rav Wolbe* took umbrage with this statement and wanted to vehemently protest, because it implied that Hashem was not in Sweden! How can one make such a pejorative statement? *Melo kol haaretz Kevodo*, "His glory fills the entire world" (*Yeshayah* 6:3). Hashem can be found in the most far-flung, desolate places. Our problem is that we do not look for Him. If we make the effort, we will see Him beyond a shadow of a doubt – everywhere.

The surroundings in which we find ourselves do not always support our service to Hashem. In the course of our daily endeavor, either in the pursuit of our daily bread or in the spiritual work that we do, we might find ourselves in areas that are quite distant from the spiritual utopia in which many of us had the good fortune to grow up. Does that mean that we are alone, that Hashem is not with us at every step? No! We are never alone. We just have to open our eyes and see how everything around us "seems" to be working with us. If we believe, we will see. Without *emunah*, we have no eyesight.

We must remember that life will not always be a rose garden. As we encounter life's ups and downs, we will confront challenges and difficulties – some that have the ability to leave us shattered, but, through the spectrum of *emunah* vision, we are enabled a path through the obstacles, a path called hope. Even then, when our vision lights up the path of hope, we might stumble, so we stretch out our hand and place it in the hands of the Almighty, Who will either walk us through, or, in some cases, even carry us.

The following vignette is a story related by Rabbi Fishel Shachter. I use it because it represents everyone's story. I, too, was born to Holocaust