

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYIGASH: From Crisis to Connection: The Hidden Ascent

From Yaakov to Yisrael

Hidden beneath the narrative of Parashat Vayigash – the reunion of Yosef with his family and the descent of the Jewish people to Egypt – is a theme that encapsulates Yaakov's life: spiritual connection born through challenges. In a sense, this theme is captured in the verse that describes Yaakov's reaction to hearing the news that Yosef was still alive. The verse says that, for a while, Yaakov refused to believe what he was hearing, and that '*vayafag libo* – his heart stopped' (45:26). The Ramban explains that Yaakov was so overwhelmed by the news that he entered a state of shock, nearly fainting, until he was persuaded that it was indeed true. At that point, the verse says, '*Vatechi ruach Yaakov* – The spirit of Yaakov revived'. According to Targum Onkelos, this means that not only was he physically revived, but for the first time since Yosef left, the Divine inspiration rested on Yaakov. After so many years of mourning and sadness, Yaakov finally reaches the place where he is joyous enough to connect spiritually and receive prophecy once again.

Following this theme, a remarkable insight can be gleaned from examining which of Yaakov's names are used in the ensuing narrative of his descent to Egypt. Throughout the entire episode of Yosef's disappearance, the name Yaakov is used consistently, with only one exception (43:6-11). This name, Rav Hirsch (d.1888) explains, is based on the root *akev*, heel, and represents the lower aspect of Yaakov's personality – his sense of being dependent upon and led by events instead of taking the lead himself.

Now, as he readies himself to travel, the name Yisrael is used again, signifying – *sar*, prince – his lofty character and aspirations. But then, on the journey, while staying at night in Be'er Sheva, Yaakov has a vision: 'And Hashem said to Yisrael ... "*Yaakov, Yaakov, do not be afraid*"'. Despite the joyous circumstances, Yaakov is clearly anxious to leave Eretz Yisrael and travel to Egypt. The Seforno (d.1550) explains that by using the name Yaakov, the verse is sensitive to these premonitions of the exile, but Hashem is nevertheless speaking to the Yisrael side of Yaakov, telling him that the descent to Egypt is actually an elevated mission. In Canaan, the Seforno writes, there is a danger that the soon-to-be Jewish nation would become assimilated, whereas the Egyptians would always reject them, leaving them free to grow without disturbance. Descent to Egypt, Yaakov was being taught, will be a challenge, but Egypt is the crucible from which the Jewish nation would be born [YK1.1]. Upon hearing this, the verse continues, '*vyis'u Bnei Yisrael et Yaakov avihem* – the children of Yisrael carried Yaakov, their father'. Fully cognisant of the Yaakov motif, the challenges and the darkness of the exile to come, the tribes, appearing here for the first time as the 'Children of Israel', confidently carried their father forward towards Egypt.

Living Life

Yaakov finally arrives in Egypt and reunites with his long-lost son. As father of the viceroy, he is granted an audience with Pharaoh, who unexpectedly asks him his age. Yaakov, instead of responding with a



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

number, gives Pharaoh a rather depressing overview of his life: 'The years of my life have been few and bad, and have not reached the age of my fathers' (47:8-10). Aside from the curious exchange itself, the choice of words here also needs an explanation: both Pharaoh's question and Yaakov's response use the term 'the days of the years of life'. Explaining this term, the Netziv (d.1893) gives a powerful perspective on the message that Yaakov was giving to Pharaoh. When Pharaoh first saw Yaakov, he was confused. On the one hand, Yaakov looked old and haggard, indicating that his life had not been easy. On the other hand, Pharaoh was seeing Yaakov as the pinnacle of success; unlike everyone around them, Yaakov's family was intact and thriving despite the famine, his children were strong and productive, and his son was the one of the most powerful people in the world. Pharaoh, like so many of the nations of the world throughout history wanted to know the secret of Jewish success: how many years of life – the real, successful years of positive 'living' – had Yaakov experienced? Yaakov, knowing that his children and grandchildren were about to enter servitude and exile, used the opportunity to teach Pharaoh an eternal lesson. He told Pharaoh that although his family was currently thriving, his life had not always been comfortable. But the Jewish people are not dependent on predestined fortune – our success is dependent only upon Divine providence. At the very first introduction of the Egyptians to the Jewish nation, Yaakov was conveying a remarkable expression of faith: throughout the vicissitudes of life – for the good or for the bad – we are a people who see our lives governed by the Hand of Hashem.

Spiritual Anchor

Another comment of the Netziv, explaining the last verse of the parshah, reflects a further key aspect of Yaakov's message to Pharaoh. After recounting how Yaakov's family settled in Egypt, the verse, by way of summary, says, '*Vayeishev Yisrael b'Eretz Mitzrayim b'Eretz Goshen* – And Yisrael dwelled in the land of Egypt in the land of Goshen' (47:27). The syntax here is difficult to follow – Goshen was a district in Egypt, so the verse should really have mentioned these places in the opposite order, saying that they dwelled in Goshen, which was in the land of Egypt. The Netziv cites the Targum Yonatan, who understands that the verse is describing two different forms of settlement: their dwelling places – where they lived – was in Egypt in general, but they also 'dwelled' figuratively in their *batei midrash*, their places of Torah learning, which were in Goshen. Physically, they were dispersed all over the land of Egypt, but their sanctity and their commitment to their heritage was rooted in Goshen specifically. Through the next two hundred years, the Jewish people were able to cope with all the troubles that they were to face by connecting themselves to their hallowed mission of one day becoming the Bnei Yisrael.

**Next Week - VAYECHI: Eternal Blessings,
Enduring Responsibility**

**TIMELESS TORAH WILL RESUME IN
PERSON ON WEDNESDAY 7TH JANUARY AT
8.00pm**