

## *Va Yechi Yaakov: The Source of Yaakov's Vitality in Egypt*

Rabbi Daniel Fridman

At the outset of our sedra, the Netziv observes that the term *Va'Yechi Ya'akov* connotes a life of satisfaction and vitality for Yaakov in Egypt, beyond that which he had experienced in the Land of Israel.

This vitality is surprising in at least three senses. First, Yaakov dreaded the idea of leaving Eretz Yisrael as the locus of the *shechina* itself, as recorded in *VaYigash*. Second, upon meeting Pharaoh, Ya'akov refers to his life as one of suffering and travail, *me'at v'rai'im*, giving no indication that things could or might change. Third, on multiple occasions, Yaakov indicates that his descent into Egypt is not to live, as connoted by the word *VaYechi*, but rather, to die. For example, Yaakov indicates, immediately upon discovering that Yosef is alive, *elcha v'erenu b'terem amut*. To more fully appreciate the vitality and quality of Yaakov's life in Egypt, it is necessary to return to the preceding parshah.

In what is unquestionably one of the Torah's most dramatic moments, Yosef and Yaakov are reunited after a separation of over two decades. Yosef's movements and response are tracked closely by the Torah, from his noteworthy preparation of his own chariot, *'va'ye'esor Yosef merkavto*, to his traveling in the direction of his father, *va'ya'al likrat Yisrael aviv*, to the actual visualization, *va'yera elav*, to Yosef's collapse into his father's arms, *va'yipol al tzavarav va'yevkh al tzavarav od*. Noting Yaakov's sheer silence, or inaction, throughout the dramatic encounter, Rashi<sup>2</sup> cites the rabbinic tradition that Yaakov was reciting the Shema.

In attempting to discern the meaning of this Midrash, it is perhaps the most straightforward approach to note that Yaakov thought that he was truly about to die from this heightened emotional state, and thus recited the Shema in the context of his anticipated demise. After all, in the very next verse, Yaakov indeed does say that he is prepared to die, *amuta ba'pa'ah acharei reoti et panekha*<sup>3</sup>.

While Yaakov may simply have been saying something to the effect that he may not die in peace, that he has seen his beloved Yosef, it is entirely possible that the Midrash read Yaakov's words with more of a literal interpretation. In further support of this particular interpretation of the Midrash, when Yaakov first learns that Yosef is alive, Ramban maintains that he suffered a major cardiac

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<sup>1</sup> בראשית מו:כט

<sup>2</sup> פרש"י בשם מדרש אגדה (שם)

<sup>3</sup> בראשית מו:ל

arrest, *va'yafog libo*. That incident is then followed by the aforementioned assertion, on Yaakov's part, that he would go to Egypt to see Yosef before he died, *elkha v'ereni b'terem amut*.

## II.

The Rav, however, opted for an entirely different reading of this Midrash. Noting that the first paragraph of Keriat Shema is not merely a statement of faith in Divine unity, the mandate to love God, but also to study the Torah with one's children, *v'shinantam l'vanekha*, the Rav argued that Yaakov was engaged in a moment of profound recognition that he would be able to resume this sacred endeavor with Yosef. After all, the first seventeen years of Yosef's life were marked by, according to the Rabbinic tradition, immersive study with Yaakov, as father poured into his extremely talented and gifted son<sup>4</sup> all of the *mesorah* which he had absorbed<sup>5</sup>.

In support of the Rav's view, Chazal<sup>6</sup> relate that Yaakov was only convinced that Yosef was actually alive when he saw the royal wagons which Yosef had sent to transport him back to Egypt, *va'yar et ha'agalot asher shalach Yosef*. The Talmud explains that Yaakov understood that it in fact had to be Yosef, and no one else, who sent these, as only Yosef could have known that the final sugya which they had studied together was the topic of the *eglah arufah*.

According to the Rav's approach, however, it is not merely that Yosef was sending Yaakov an ironclad proof that he was still alive, but communicating to his father something of far greater import. Yosef was suggesting to Yaakov that he was, in effect, ready to pick up from the same sugya.

Life may have cast him into the role of the ruler of Egypt, but, as far as Yosef was concerned, he never ceased being his father's devoted son-talmid. It was this very self-understanding as his father's son and talmid which carried Yosef through the most challenging moments of his exile in Egypt, *nirata lo dmut d'yokno shel aviv*<sup>7</sup>. Yaakov's response to Yosef's message takes on an entirely new significance, in light of this approach: *rav, od Yosef **beni** chai*<sup>8</sup>. It is not merely that Yosef is alive, but Yosef my son, my partner in the transmission of the mesorah, *v'shanantam l'vanekha*.

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<sup>4</sup> עיין תרגום אונקלוס ופרש"י לבראשית לז:ג

<sup>5</sup> עיין רש"י שם.

<sup>6</sup> בראשית רבה (וילנא) צד:ג

<sup>7</sup> תלמוד בבלי סוטה לו:

<sup>8</sup> בראשית מה:כח

### III.

Yet, according to the Rav's approach, one must ask a basic question: is it indeed the case that Yaakov and Yosef resumed their Talmud Torah? It seems, from the simple reading of the Torah, that the answer is no. Yosef continued to administrate the government from the capital, while Yaakov was insulated with the family in the friendly confines of Goshen<sup>9</sup>. Yosef is deeply devoted to Yaakov, provides sustenance for him and his brothers, and rushes to his father's side when he hears Yaakov is not well. Yet, one does not get the impression that there was a great deal of daily interaction. Did Yaakov actually resume the project of v'shanantam l'vanekha with Yosef? In the direct sense, it seems that he did not.

Yet, in a larger sense, he certainly did. In next week's sedra, Rashi quotes the rabbinic tradition that it was Ephraim who informed Yosef that Yaakov was sick, Ephraim hayah ragil lifnei Yaakov b'talmud<sup>10</sup>. The seventeen years during which Yaakov poured the mesorah of Avraham, Yitzchak, Shem and Ever into Yosef were matched, to the year, by the seventeen years which Yaakov had with Ephraim in Egypt.

While one might argue that the fact that Yaakov learned with Ephraim is considered a distinct mitzvah than his learning with Yosef, due to the disparate nature of the mitzvah of Talmud Torah with one's child as opposed to one's grandchild<sup>11</sup>, Rambam considers them part of the same קיום in the mitzvah of Talmud Torah:

קטן אביו חייב ללמדו תורה שנאמר ולמדתם אותם את בניכם לדבר בם... כשם שחייב אדם ללמד את בנו כך הוא חייב ללמד את בן בנו שנאמר והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך (רמב"ם הלכות תלמוד תורה א:א-ב)

The Rambam's use of the telltale terms k'shem and kach clearly indicate that Rambam's view is not merely that one is obligated to learn with one's grandchild, just as one is obligated to learn with one's own son, in the sense of two distinct obligations.

On the basis of the gemara in Kiddushin<sup>12</sup>, Rambam uniquely understood that the mitzvah to learn with one's grandchild is both an intrinsic element of learning with one's son, and a natural extension of the father-son learning commitment. In light of this Rambam, then, the Rav's approach takes on new vitality. While Yaakov may not have resumed his learning directly with Yosef, he certainly

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<sup>9</sup> בראשית מה"י, מז"ז, מז"ח

<sup>10</sup> פרש"י בראשית מח"א

<sup>11</sup> עיין השגות הרמב"ן על ספר המצוות לרמב"ם שכחת הלאוין ב' שמגדיר לימוד עם הנכדים כלימוד אמונת התורה. מאידך, הוא מושה את זה ללימוד התורה עצמה.

<sup>12</sup> עיין שם תלמוד בבלי מסכת קידושין ל'. "הוא דאמר כי האי תנא; דתניא: ולמדתם אותם את בניכם - אין לי אלא בניכם, בני בניכם מניין? ת"ל: והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך; א"כ, מה ת"ל בניכם? בניכם - ולא בנותיכם".

merited reactivating that very same *kiyum*, which would be actualized through his learning with Ephraim.

In that moment of dramatic encounter between father and son, after twenty two years, Yaakov recited the Shema, internalizing the reactivation of his role as *ba'al mesorah*. Yaakov's *raison d'être* in Egypt would be to ensure that the truths of his father and grandfather would be conveyed forward to the next generation, and the generation which would follow. In his twilight years, Yaakov succeeded in bridging the world of Avraham and Yitzchak with those of his Egyptian born grandchildren, *vi'yikare bahem shemi v'shem avotai Avraham V'Yitzchak*.

Perhaps the observation of the Netziv regarding the vitality of Yaaakov in Egypt, surprising as it was, can be traced directly to this reality. True, Yaakov was dislocated from Eretz Yisrael. And yet, *l'olam lo eshkach pikudekha, ki vam chitani*, immersion in pikudei Hashem with his beloved Ephraim brought Yaakov unmatched *chiyut*, deep personal satisfaction and vitality.

In transmitting the mesorah to Ephraim, his beloved son's son, Yaakov demonstrated the eternal nature of the *mesorah*, its capacity to inform, illuminate, and inspire in every context, geographic location, and surrounding cultural milieu.