

Vayigash, Rabbi David Mahler

Have you ever wondered what it must be like to be present at a meeting of great leaders? What must it be like to be a fly on the wall in the White House, The Kremlin or the Palace of Westminster when presidents and prime ministers discuss their agendas? Imagine being privy to some of those conversations!

The *Torah* allows us access to one of the great meetings in human history.

After *Yosef* reveals himself to his brothers and that part of the story unfolds, the brothers return to Israel to pack their belongings and together, with their elderly father, make the trek down to Egypt to relocate in *Goshen*.

Upon entry, *Yaakov* meets with *Paroh* – perhaps the two greatest leaders of the time. Imagine these two great world leaders meeting face to face. What are they going to discuss? What will be the topic of conversation? Theology? World politics? The future of the world?

At one side, you have *Yaakov*, the spiritual giant conversing with, on the other side, *Paroh*, the most powerful man in the universe. It's the ultimate encounter!

Yet, sadly, the conversation is somewhat underwhelming and disappointing. In short, *Yaakov* blesses *Paroh* and then *Paroh* asks *Yaakov* how old he is. *Yaakov* responds to *Paroh* that he is 130 and that his life has been a difficult one. That's it! That is their entire encounter. What a letdown!

There must be more.

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, the *K'sav V'kabbala*, sees more in this conversation than meets the eye. He writes that they were making small talk. There was a little chit-chat about seemingly inconsequential things but they were really laying the groundwork for future conversations.

Moreover, he notes something interesting about relationships. Small talk *is* important. They are the building blocks for more substantial conversations. When people can only converse with people when there's *tachlis* – you only care about the *tachlis* – that specific agenda. It's not about the personal interaction. He writes that what affirms your commitment and investment in a relationship is the fact that you can shoot the breeze. That's how you build relationships. It is, at the very least, a crucial starting point.

However, it's possible that their conversation, and more acutely, Yaakov's statement, had more depth. (This is not my own thought but something I once remember hearing. I do not recall from whom I initially learned this idea).

Yaakov and *Paroh* were engaged in a theological conversation. *Paroh* asked *Yaakov* his age because he looked old and worn. He looked tired and harried. This is not the image of *Yaakov*, the holy man, he expected to see. *Paroh* was looking forward to meeting an angel on earth who looked alive, vibrant and energetic. After seeing *Yaakov*, he wondered how is it that bad things can happen to righteous individuals.

Paroh must've heard from *Yosef* that his saintly father molded him into this brilliant, wise and handsome man, yet the elderly patriarch standing before him was far from what he had envisioned.

Yaakov's response is important. He tells the king that you must not make the mistake that subscribing to a life of loyalty and commitment to G-d will be smooth sailing. Once you sign on to a life dictated by the *Torah*, there is no guarantee that everything will be peaches and cream. I, *Yaakov*, am proof of that.

Yaakov's message is "yes, my life has been difficult", yet my fidelity to my G-d has allowed me to tackle, handle, and navigate through every crisis. My faith has not been shaken because that's what faith is.

A correlation between my lifestyle, virtues and merits and the guarantee that everything will be smooth sailing is not what *Torah* is about. *Torah* is about how faith and direction can help me tread through those waters and come out on the other side.

A seeking Jew was once learning more and more about *yiddishkeit* and he was told by a rabbi that if he begins to keep *Shabbos* and *Kashrus* more carefully, his life will be so much better. The man quickly agreed to alter his lifestyle. A few years later, he and his wife had great difficulty conceiving. They went to speak to another rav. The second rav said the first rabbi was guilty of malpractice.

The only guarantee there is that the *Torah* will illuminate one's life. It will motivate you to live a more meaningful, mission-driven and genuinely productive life which will help one navigate through divorce, fertility issues, mental health challenges, death, rejection and life's countless other curveballs.

When a light is turned on in a dark room, one now has the ability to steer and tread on course. That's the promise the *Torah* makes. It empowers one to navigate the challenges and difficulties I encounter.

Yaakov subtly preaches and teaches *Paroh* - I've had my challenges yet I've been faithful nonetheless. I've survived each and every single one of them because I continue to have faith in Him.

Imagine if after 120 years we can all make that statement.

Shabbat Shalom!