

Vayechi, 5781  
Rabbi Zev Wiener

Parashat Vayechi concludes Sefer Bereishit -- a book typified by stories of conflict, pain, and strife -- on a note that is uncharacteristically harmonious. While Yosef had every right to seek revenge from his brothers, he instead chooses relinquishment over exactation and grace over entitlement. He senses the futility of wasting the short time he has to spend in this world holding on to rancor and bitterness, and instead chooses to focus on the myriad of blessings that he has received. This is the way of truly happy people in this world. Indeed, immediately after the lofty exchange between Yosef and his brothers, the Torah insinuates that Yosef went on to live out his days peacefully and without significant discord, being blessed to enjoy a close relationship with children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

Yosef merits the descriptor of “בן פורת,” which Rashi explains as “בן חן” -- *a son of grace* (49:22). One of the many lessons that we can learn from young children is the ability to gracefully let go of the past. If one observes young children closely, one sees that tempestuous tantrums can instantly transform into captivated amusement when the right distraction is presented, and that children who fought only a few minutes earlier can shortly afterwards resume playing wholeheartedly as the best of friends. Somewhere along the line, though, our capacity to let go seems to diminish. Like snow in a blizzard that eventually begins to stick and accumulate on the ground, negative experiences begin to take hold within us. They seem to shape us and our worldview. We choose to visit and revisit prior slights, mistakes, and shortcomings in our mind, and find ourselves mired in darkness and frustration, even when the objective situation in front of us is actually quite fine.

We all hold onto things that we should not. And it is our stubborn refusal to let go that causes suffering. Not letting go of wrongs that others have committed against us fills us with anger and resentment. Not letting go of past relationships that did not work out prevents us from experiencing real love in our lives. Not letting go of painful fantasies of how life might have turned out better had we made wiser decisions renders us oblivious to the Divine purpose endowed within our present life. Not letting go of our own prior unfixable mistakes leaves us in a whirlwind of doubt and self-contempt. Through such obstinancies, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to truly live -- to experience genuine prosperity through the blessings that the Almighty is showering upon us in this very

moment. Chronic negativity and resentment are toxic to both body and soul, and may begin to affect our physical health and our physical appearance. By contrast, I have met Torah scholars who lived a simple life focused on basic values -- Torah wisdom, family, and kindness -- letting go of all the superfluous *narishkeit* that so many of us tend to get hung up on. Unencumbered by this weighty emotional baggage, they appeared to enjoy a sense of vitality, tranquility, and joy that is rarely seen in modern society.

The value of letting go is central to life as a Torah Jew. The Halacha requires that when asked for forgiveness, a person should not be “אכזרי מלמחול” -- *cruel to grant forgiveness* (OC 606:1) and we are encouraged, “לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז” -- *one should always be pliable like a reed and not rigid like a cedar* in granting forgiveness to others (Taanit 20b). The Talmud says that it is this specific property symbolized by the reed that warranted its selection as the scribe’s pen for writing a Torah, suggesting the foundational nature of this virtue to all of Torah. The importance of relinquishment applies not only to others, but towards ourselves as well. The Rambam understands the Rabbinic teaching “אל תהי רשע בפני עצמך” -- *do not be a wicked person in your eyes* (Avot 2:13) -- as teaching that a person must not see him or herself as wicked. What we can learn from our own mistakes and rectify, we absolutely must. But fruitless self-condemnation and regret over past events that are presently unchangeable accomplish nothing, other than spinning our wheels in neutral and leading us to even lower depths.

Letting go of the unhelpful aspects of the past -- whether our own past or the past of those we love -- is undeniably a virtue that does not come easily to most of us. Yosef himself, however, reveals the secret of his remarkable ability: “ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלקים” -- *you intended to do evil against me, but G-d intended it for the good* (50:20). The more that we cultivate a deep-rooted belief in the direct providence of our loving G-d, the easier a time we will have letting go, and feeling His direct involvement with us in whatever situation we happen to find ourselves in. Only by opening our clenched fists that grip the past so tightly do we provide the opportunity for G-d to place new, greater blessings into our palms. May we each merit this blessing in our lives.