

Vayechi - Rabbi Lerner - January 1, 2012

Birchas Yaacov

47:28: **Rashi**: Asks the famous question of why is this a closed parsha? Instead of starting with a new paragraph to begin the parsha, or even leaving a space of nine letters, there is only one space that is always present between words. Why is it completely closed? Because from the point of Yaacov's death, the hearts and eyes of Bnei Yisrael became closed up because of the servitude. Also, because Yaacov wanted to reveal the end of days, but it was closed from him.

Ramban: it was the end of days, the date of the moshiach's coming that he wanted to reveal.

According to Rashi's first answer, does this mean that the slavery began right at this point in time? **Sifsei Chachamim**: it wasn't actual slavery, but the beginnings and hint of slavery began. We know that the word for hard labor - *Ferach* - can mean *Pe Rach* - they began things with a soft tongue. They began to ask of the Jews menial tasks; they placed verbal pressure on them, with a soft, gentle touch. They did not start with slave labor - that happened after the death of the last of the brothers - that is when the heavy duty persecution actually came into full force.

Rav Yaacov Kaminetsky: How do we know at the end of Yaacov's life there was the beginning of slavery? In 49:33-50:6, Yaacov died and after the 40 days of mourning past, it says that Yosef spoke to the House of Pharaoh and asked them to plead his case to Pharaoh, saying that Yaacov made Yosef swear to bring his father's body up for burial in Chevron in Me'Aros Hamachpelah. Why doesn't Yosef go directly to Pharaoh by himself - he was the second in command? After the death of Yaacov, he was not as influential - Yaacov was the source of Yosef's success and power. As soon as Yaacov died, the Egyptians seemed to have forgotten Yosef's saving Egypt and elevating them to be an incredible world power. Yosef depended on his father's aura and could no longer approach Pharaoh directly. In addition, the Egyptians were becoming fearful of the Jewish people, with how numerous they were becoming. So they began to introduce the concept of servitude to them.

49:1: *Yaacov summons his sons, telling them to gather together so that he could tell them what will happen to them at the end of days.* **Rashbam**: What does *Hey'asfu* - gather together - mean? They were 70 people when they arrived in Egypt, but after just these 17 years until Yaacov died, they were already a large, populous nation - they were already 600,000. He'Asfu was to gather all 600,000 together. But if the medrash says that it was when they were suffering and the Egyptians tried to kill them that they multiplied so miraculously, then they shouldn't have reproduced so miraculously until hard slavery began? But this word *He'asfu* teaches us that their incredible success, including this miraculous population explosion, was all due to the aura of Yaacov.

49:2: *Gather you sons of Yaacov listen to the words of Yisrael your father.* **Rabbeinu Bachya**: it includes both names of Yaacov because when they were all born, he only had the name of Yaacov - that is why they are first referred to as Yaacov. But he has become a powerful individual who can take on cosmic forces - God blessed him to be invincible, and he is passing on a message that his descendants will be an invincible people who will survive until the end of time.

Rabbeinu Bachya: Why is there this double language in the two pasukim of gathering together? It is a remez to two gatherings of the Jewish people. The first word refers to the first redemption - they will be saved and gathered together from the first period of slavery, that of Egypt - he first has to instill them with hope for the immediate future - they will be gathered

together to leave this galus. But he is also referring to the final ge'ulah, the one that will come much much later on in history. Because these two verbs refer to the first and last ge'ulah, and not all of the intermediate ones, they are matched up, are similar to one another. It is a mesorah handed down to all of the neviim - the way they got out of the first galus, that is how we will get out of the last galus. The two words, He'asfu and Hikabtzu, share in common that these two had complete ge'ulah - all of the Jews will be redeemed, not just part of them. But didn't the Egyptian ge'ulah actually only consist of a small percentage of the Jews? It means all of those who wanted to come out, who had a sense of Jewish identity, all of those came out, and in the future, all those who wish to come out and ascend to Eretz Yisrael will be able to. After galus Bavel only slightly more than 42,000 left to begin the second commonwealth - the majority stayed behind in Bavel and had no interest in going back. Only two times in history will there be a complete clean sweep with all Jews who identify themselves as Jews returning.

How do we understand Yaacov's gathering his sons together supposedly to bless them? **Ibn Ezra**: all those meforshim who say these are brachos from Yaacov for his children are mistaken. What mislead them is the final pasuk at the end, in 49:28, where it says *that this is what their father blessed them with their specific, individual blessing*. But they were not brachos. Certainly we see this with Reuven, Shimon and Levi - all the words are caustic and filled with anger and sarcasm; Reuven should have been rewarded with the kingship, should have been given the kehunah, should have gotten the double portion - but he blew it all because of his impetuous behavior - he went and "disheveled the bed of his father" after the death of Rachel. Yaacov was furious at him for this; this was the trademark of the tribe of Reuven - we see this again when his tribe jumps at taking possession of the land on the opposite side of the Jordan; Moshe was horrified at this, and because they settled outside the land of Israel, they were the first tribe to be exiled and lost. "They are impetuous as water." Shimon and Levi are even worse - "their weapons are weapons of violence", they killed the town of Shechem in a chillul Hashem; he cursed their anger and fierceness. The first three are certainly not blessed. So this whole section is not about brachos - these are nevu'os of what will happen in the future. What the Torah says at the end about Yaacov 's blessing them actually happened after Yaacov finished these words of rebuke and prophecy - those words of blessings are not recorded in the Torah. He ends with words of encouragement, but only after first throwing the book at them.

Kli Yakar: these are actually all brachos. Even with all of the negative words, there are positive words as well. Reuven could have been better, but he is characterized as Yaacov's strength and vigor. Shimon and Levi are *Achim* - brothers - these are words of shevach - they had incredible sense of allegiance to their family which induced them to liberate their captive sister. There are words of good in even these comments on the first three brothers. Something positive was said to each and every one of the brothers.

Abarbanel: Yaacov had only one purpose in mind here - it was not blessing them, it was not about future ne'vuos, it was not about rebuking them. At the time of his death, Yaacov wanted to discuss with them the idea of succession, from which tribe the ultimate power and leadership will come. Yaacov was critically affected by what happened with the rivalry between he and his brother. He is concerned about the infighting amongst his children. He needs to say from whom the kingship will come before he dies. Yaacov is down on the first three children, and then he is positive about Yehudah and all of the others. The first three were the competitors for leadership - they were the eldest who should have come before Yehudah; Yaacov has to describe what was deficient in each of the three that disqualified them from the meluchah. Yaacov does not want to see a repeat on the global, tribal scale, of what happened on the

individual scale with the brothers. The purpose of this section was not to tell how high and mighty they will become in the land, or to give brachos or rebuke - it was to tell them who will be the king. Unfortunately, Yaacov's attempt to stave off machlokes didn't work that well; David and Shlomo had some degree of peace and unity, but then it all falls apart after the death of Shlomo with a split of the kingdom - it so weakened them and ultimately led to both being lost. Yaacov tries to avoid this ultimate event. But why just because of the faults of the individuals, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, should all of their future generations suffer, even if the children are tzadikim? Particularly, the children of Levi who become the kohanim and perform the avodah in the Bais Hamikdash? This decision was not from Yaacov - he would have chosen Yosef to be the king, or even Binyamin - they had special advantages - they were from Rachel, his favorite. But, they are not chosen for kingship - he even ends up giving more brachah to Dan than to Binyamin. Why? It clearly came from Hakadosh Barach Hu that Yehudah should be the one for malchus. And if we still think that the descendants should not be punished because of the faults of their fathers, in fact, these first three tribes caused more trouble to the people in the future than all others. Korach was from Levi; Dasan and Aviram were from Reuven. The ones who joined Korach were mostly from Levi. Those who were part of the sin and resultant plague of Zimri, who were involved in the sins with the daughters at Shittim, were mostly from Shimon. These character faults reverberated through their children.