

Parshat Vayeishev 5777

In the first passuk of this week's parsha Yaakov settles in the land of Canaan where his father sojourned. Rashi¹ comments that Yaakov wished to live for the rest of his life in peace and tranquillity after suffering for so many years in Lavan's house. Yaakov believed that his return with much wealth after years of exile fulfilled the covenant Hashem made with Avraham at Brit ben Habetarim² in which Hashem promised him that his descendants would be exiled to a foreign land and serve the foreigners and be afflicted by them but then we would leave with great wealth and settle in peace with our forefathers. Yaakov, a descendant of Avraham, had been exiled to a foreign land where he worked for and was tormented by Lavan. He returns to Canaan, albeit after a much shorter period than was decreed, and he now expects to live in peace. However, Rashi explains that "the fury of Yosef pounced on him."³ What is this fury?

The Midrash highlights the similarities between Yaakov and Yosef. Not only do they look similar, everything that occurs to Yaakov happens to Yosef: they are both hated by their brothers, both exiled, both become great through having dreams, and die in Egypt...⁴

The reason Yaakov cannot rest and enjoy a peaceful life is because his mission is unfinished. He had to establish the House of Israel, the beginnings of the nation but this cannot be completed without unity and harmony within the family. And of course as we see in this week's parasha Yosef's brothers hate him to the point that they want to kill him. There is no unity.

So Yaakov sends Yosef on a mission to establish the wellbeing of his brothers and of their flocks. His mission is twofold; to foster brotherhood within the family and ensure economic wellbeing. This is actually the point of his dreams: the sheaves of wheat relate to the economic welfare which will be his responsibility and the dream of the sun and moon refers to the bonds within the family with Yosef at the centre.

So Yosef goes in search of his brothers and a man directs him to Dotan saying that "They have journeyed on from here"⁵ ('mizeh' lit. 'from this'). Rashi comments "they moved themselves away from brotherhood."⁶ In other words forget about unity, your brothers hate you and it is unobtainable; but Yosef persists. When the brothers see him approaching, they

do not see their brother but the 'man of dreams'⁷ and as their enemy, not their brother, they decide to kill him. They do not want to identify him as their brother as it is so much harder to kill a brother rather than an unidentified individual.

Yaakov's mission to build a home continues with Yosef's mission to bring unity to the family. Yaakov shows us that we have the strength to stand up to Eisav even if we end up limping but if we loosen the bonds that link us together we can then be destroyed. Yosef has to ensure there is unity and the way he manipulates his brothers until he finally reveals himself to them is aimed to foster feelings of familial love and responsibility. Through their dealings with the unrecognisable Yosef in Egypt, they have to wrestle with leaving Shimon alone imprisoned in a foreign land, dealing with their father's grief at losing Benjamin in addition to Yosef and understanding that their predicament stems from their mistreatment of Yosef.⁸

Finally, albeit in exile again, this time in Goshen, Yaakov achieves the peace that he desired with his family reunited in harmony. Together with the rest of Egypt, Yosef ensures their economic survival fulfilling the second part of his mission as well. But this mission is not over and continues after Yosef's death. On his deathbed he charges the children of Israel with the task of taking his bones out of Egypt at the time of redemption. "Then Joseph made the children of Israel swear saying: When God will indeed remember you, then you must bring up my bones from here (mizeh)⁹."

Yosef's last word is "mizeh". He is making all of the children of Israel, in every generation, take an oath to continue the pursuit of "zeh" which has a gematria of 12¹⁰ signifying the twelve tribes united. If we want redemption, if we want Hashem to remember us in our exile than we have to repair the internal bonds between ourselves and achieve unity.

This message is very apt on the eve of Chanukah. The Hashmonaim united the nation against the Greeks and therefore had the strength to overcome them. Just like Yaakov overcame Eisav. However, it was not long before internal strife and *sinat hinam* (pointless hatred) led to the weakening of our nation which allowed the might of the Romans to prevail, just as disunity amongst the brothers allowed Yosef to be sold to the Ishmaelites and eventually to Potiphar.

Today we are blessed with the home that Yaakov strived for but to enjoy it in peace we have to fulfil Yosef's mission and show love and establish harmony between all of Am Yisrael no matter how much we disagree - something that appears so hard to achieve.

¹ Rashi 37:2

² Bereishit 15:13-16

³ Rashi 37:2

⁴ Bereishit Rabba 84:6

⁵ Bereishit 37:17

⁶ *ibid* Rashi

⁷ *ibid* v19

⁸ Bereishit 42:21

⁹ Bereishit 50:25

¹⁰ zayin = 7 heh = 5