

## PARSHAS VAYIGASH

I In פרשת ויגש the narrative of יוסף's life reaches its dramatic climax. יהודה intercedes on behalf of בנימין, putting his own life on the line, knowing that failure to return the beloved youngest son to his father יעקב would be unbearable. Seeing the lesson to have been learnt, יוסף reveals himself to his brothers. There is huge reason to celebrate - יוסף is reunited with his brothers! But another reunion is also to occur - יעקב comes down to Egypt and embraces his beloved יוסף after 22 years apart. One might think that all should now be happy, but a less obvious yet troubling event has also occurred. The בני ישראל have begun their exile. Although initially life was pleasant and comfortable in Goshen it will become the first Jewish ghetto and their ordeal will become one of anguish and desperation, continuing for 210 years. יעקב realised this, hence his prayer before meeting with יוסף. Hence also the huge importance of בני ישראל being reunited before the dark night of exile set in.

II always follows פרשת ויגש, when besides the miracle of the oil, we publicise חסד ה' in granting victory to the small group of תורה adherent Jews, led by מתתיהו הכהן גדול, over the anti-תורה Hellenistic Jews and their Seleucid Greek backers. The *kulturkampf* pursued by the Hellenists is summed up in מעוז צור in the succinct phrase 'they rendered impure all the oil'. The Greek approach was to pollute the philosophy and beliefs of the Jews rather than to physically destroy them.

The 9a מגילה in גמרא tells of another episode at a similar time involving the Greeks. Ptolemy Philadelphus, one of the successors of Alexander the Great, ordered 72 of the elders of Israel, each in a separate cubicle from his colleagues, to translate the תורה into Greek. All 72 scholars independently changed the text to come up with exactly the same version in Greek (The Septuagint), including six particular instances in which, to prevent misunderstanding, they 'mistranslated' the Hebrew text. Despite the obvious miracle involve, חז"ל (מגילת תענית ח) regarded the episode, which occurred on 8<sup>th</sup> Teves, as bringing darkness into the world for three days. The event was regarded as a major disaster (1.8 מסכת סופרים) akin to the worship of the golden calf. Why so? There are obvious reasons, including loss of all the nuances, subtleties and cross references that are intrinsic to the תורה שבתב and its relationship to פה שבעל פה. The differences between the original and the translation are starker than between a real person and his or her image in a black and white photograph. The Greeks may have thought that they had 'captured' the תורה but they ended up with something without intrinsic substance, just as the golden calf had no intrinsic power or holiness.

This was, in a way, emblematic of a fundamental difference between the Greek and Jewish cultures; the former's pre-occupation with externals - external truth; and

superficial beauty as an end in itself, (e.g. the requirement for Olympic gymnasts to compete naked), in contrast with Judaism's concern for essences and the idea of covering beauty (בת מלך פנימה כבודה).

Interestingly, חז"ל, although highly mistrustful of חכמה יוונית, appreciated the beauty of the Greek language. The 8b מגילה in משנה notes that the only language other than עברית in which scrolls of תורה could be written, is Greek: אף בספרים לא התירו שיכתבו אלא יוונית:

One view in the גמרא on the following דף suggests that this refers only to the תורה and not תורה. The גמרא concludes with a rationale for the acceptability of the Greek language - because the תורה itself write 'יפת אלוקים ליפת' (May G'd beautify Yafet); שם (the beauty of Yafet shall be in the tents of Shem).

Rav SR Hirsch expands at length on this (Commentary on 9:26), considering the potential for raw sensuality (חם) to be wrapped in a cloak of beauty and respectability (יפת) but amounting to nothing of worth unless in the frame of moral and ethical values that characterise the tent of שם.

III There is an interesting parallel between the material of section II and the extent to which יוסף integrated into Egyptian society yet kept his Jewish identity. יוסף was the forerunner of every Jew who seeks to live in גלות and strives to remain truly Jewish in thought, deed and in the ability to transmit his Judaism to the generations that follow.

In the הגדה we read the בני ישראל's solution for not getting too integrated in Egypt; they were 'distinct in dress, names and language' (פסיקתא דרב כהנא) - מצינים שם. As regards the name, the שם, this is the essence of the person. How do they consider themselves? An Egyptian who happens to be a Jew or a Jew who happens to sojourn in Egypt? Although פרעה had called יוסף 'צפנת פענח', we find no other reference to this, he is still called יוסף every time afterwards. (e.g. באו אחי יוסף etc). For language, there is the necessity of the complete and immediate access to the תורה הקדושה that allows. The clothes are also highly significant - besides the surface meaning that their dress was different, making the Jews recognisable, to each other and to their Egyptian hosts, there is also a likely an allusion to the צניעות of the Jews in contrast to the debauched host culture, as well as another possible meaning, as clothes are often related to מידות.

Although these episodes described are respectively about two and three and a half thousand years before our day, the message is timeless.