

## **It's Your Party and I'll Cry If I Want To**

### **Parshat Vayigash - 5782**

In the 1950s and 1960's, one of the most popular shows on American TV was called "Queen for a Day." Each episode featured four women who had suffered recent hardship, such as loss of a spouse, a sick child, financial ruin or all of the above. They competed over which one was most miserable, determined at the end of the half-hour episode by measuring audience clapping. Prizes included such items as a refrigerator, a sewing machine or a vacation, and a product or service requested by the winner. In his new book, "The Sweet Spot: The Pleasures of Suffering and the Search for Meaning"<sup>1</sup>, author Paul Bloom suggests that this shameless attempt to exploit suffering is the precursor to somewhat more subtle current TV programs such as "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" or "American Idol," which play up the challenging background and human suffering of their contestants to gain audience sympathy. There is something fundamental in our nature that sees discomfort as a means to a reward, or as a redemptive learning experience. Bloom suggests that this is the reason people enjoy eating spicy hot wings doused in ghost pepper sauce, run ultra marathons, enjoy cold showers and believe in the notion of martyrdom.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/15/are-there-hidden-advantages-to-pain-and-suffering-hurts-so-good-leigh-cowart-the-sweet-spot-paul-bloom>

This week's parsha features an interview that could, *lehvadil*, have been conducted on the program Queen for a Day. When Yaakov meets Pharaoh for the first time, Pharaoh asks him how old he is. Yaakov responds with a long, uncharacteristic and unsolicited complaint:<sup>2</sup>

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-פַּרְעֹה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מְגֻרֵי שְׁלָשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה מָעֵט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי וְלֹא הִשְׁיגוּ אֶת-יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבֹתַי בְּיָמֵי מְגֻרֵיהֶם:

*And Jacob answered Pharaoh, "The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their lifetimes.*

The Rabbis criticized Yaakov for his response, saying that 33 years were shaved off his lifespan, corresponding to the 33 words contained in this dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

This seems like an unduly harsh interpretation. After all, Yaakov *did* live a life beset by one complication after another, marred by constant tragedy. As a young man, his life was threatened by his brother Esav, and he found refuge with his treacherous uncle Lavan. His marriage to Rachel was delayed and he was forced into a less than

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 47:9

<sup>3</sup> Daat Zekeinim ibid

fulfilling marriage to two sisters who couldn't get along. He contended with infertility in his favorite wife, who died during childbirth, and the children he did have fought openly with one another- and on top of all that, his daughter was violated by a local prince. If you think about it, every milestone he experienced in life- from the carefree years of childhood through the magic of love and courtship through the joys of parenthood- was compromised. At last he acknowledges the crushing reality that his life will never be easy, that the storybook ending he longed for will forever remain elusive. If anyone's pain deserves to be acknowledged and rewarded, it is the long-suffering Yaakov.

To be sure, there are Jewish thinkers throughout the years who have valorized suffering. Rav Shlomo HaKohen Rabinowitz, the Radumsker<sup>4</sup> suggests that Yaakov experienced relentless suffering as a way of ensuring the success of his offspring- an outcome that was repeated by his descendants in Egypt. Those who study the daf Yomi encountered the stories of Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa<sup>5</sup> this past week, praising the sage and his wife for their willingness to live in squalor and delay material pleasures until they arrive in the next world. But the notion that suffering is desirable, and a means of attaining reward- is far from a fundamental tenet of Jewish thought. *Tzadik ve'ra lo*, the suffering of the righteous, is a theological **problem**, not a desired

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<sup>4</sup> תפארת שלמה שמות פרשת שמות

<sup>5</sup> Taanit 24b-25a

outcome! One of the criticisms levied against the work of Mother Theresa in Calcutta was that she refused to alleviate the suffering of those under her care, glorifying it instead.<sup>6</sup> Realizing that suffering is not an ideal should leave us rooting for Yaakov. Doesn't he have the right to *krechitz* a bit after his difficult life?

Maybe the answer is that Yaakov's complaint is not the problem, per se. We aren't faulting him for holding on to the belief that he deserves the party he never got. We *are* faulting him for unloading on Pharaoh. All Pharaoh did was ask a simple, and maybe slightly invasive question. Instead of engaging in a lighthearted and innocuous banter, Yaakov darkens the mood for everyone there by launching into a litany of complaints- "You vanna know how old I am? You shouldn't know from my *tzoris*."

We mustn't create an environment in which everyone has to walk around on eggshells, due to the contagious negativity we radiate. Yes, Pharaoh's request was crass and insensitive, but Yaakov is held to a higher standard. Indeed, the Ramban offers a similar interpretation, when he is incredulous that Yaakov would share this information with a stranger like Pharaoh:

**רמב"ן בראשית פרק מז**

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<sup>6</sup> Hitchens, Christopher (1995). *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*. London: Verso. p. 82.

(ט) מעט ורעים היו ימי שני חיי - לא ידעתי טעם הזקן אבינו, מה מוסר הוא שיתאונן אל המלך, ומה טעם

לאמר ולא השיגו את ימי שני חיי אבותי

.It's not wrong to feel pain, not wrong to feel aggrieved, and not wrong to seek redress and reward for suffering. But, we need to know when and with whom to share our burden. Not everyone is worthy of being our confidant, and not everyone has asked for the privilege of carrying our emotional burden. When we have a day that triggers our anxieties, it is unfair to pass them on to others, be they colleagues, friends and children without their permission. It isn't *mentschlichkeit* to walk into a Bar Mitzvah or a wedding looking *fartracht*, even when we have ample reason to do so.

Just like Yaakov Avinu, many in our time have missed out on key milestones, whether it was a Bar Mitzvah took place via Zoom instead of in shul without a sign-in board or photographer, or a kallah who didn't have her grandparents in attendance or close friends to hold the arches in anticipation, as she and her husband ran into the room after an introduction to the music of the Final Countdown as they are announced for the first time ever as MR. AND MRS. ROSENCRANTZ!!!! Such people could be forgiven for feeling upset or cheated when they attend a bar mitzvah or a wedding now, where there are hundreds of people. This is especially true when we consider that the only difference between these events may be a few months on the calendar,

and the vagaries and challenges of public health policies. But when they dance with their friends and show love and support, even when they are in pain, they are showing amazing fortitude and strength of character- and no one will ever know, because they chose not to darken the mood by unloading their burden at the wrong time.

Next week, we will be completing Sefer Bereshit and with it the saga of Yaakov will come to a close. The parsha is entitled וַיַּחַי יַעֲקֹב - *and Jacob lived*. May we know from no more sorrow, not in our personal lives, not in our community and not in the world, and may we only have reason to share good news and good energy to others around us.