

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת ויחי

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה וַיְהִי יָמָיו יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם חֲמִיִּשׁוֹ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים
וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה

“Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and Yaakov’s days, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty seven years” (47:28)

The Baal HaTurim points out that the numerical value of the word וַיְחִי is 34, hinting at the fact that the most enjoyable years of Yaakov’s life, the years when he lived at the highest level, were the 34 years that he shared with Yosef – 17 from Yosef’s birth until he was sold and 17 from when Yaakov came down to Egypt until his death. Likewise, at the beginning of Parshas Chayei Sarah, the Baal HaTurim comments that the numerical value of the word וַיְהִי in the phrase “the life of Sarah was 127 years” is 37. This teaches us that the 37 years that Sarah lived after the birth of her son Yitzchak were the most enjoyable years of her life.

וַיִּקְרְבוּ יָמָיו יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת וַיִּקְרָא לְבָנָו לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ
שִׁים נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֵל נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם

“When the time drew near for Yisrael to die, he called his son Yosef and said to him: If I have now found favor in your eyes, now place your hand beneath my thigh, and you shall deal with me with lovingkindness and truth; do not bury me now in Egypt” (47:29)

The sefer Kav HaYashar asks why the Torah focuses on days rather than years when describing the impending death of Yaakov Avinu by saying that “the days of Yaakov to die approached.” Additionally, in the previous posuk, the Torah says that “the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were 147 years.” Why are the days and years listed separately?

To answer this question, he cites the Zohar which says that with Yaakov’s impending death, the days of his life themselves were coming forward to testify that Yaakov had been productive on each of them. When a person’s time in this world ends, his days present themselves before Hashem for judgment. Every single day should be able to bear witness to

something good that we have accomplished. We should remember that each day of our lives counts and has the potential to be used for great things.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְּׂבֻעָה לִּי וַיִּשְׂבַּע לוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל רֹאשׁ הַמִּטָּה

“And he said: Swear to me. So he swore to him, and Yisrael prostrated himself on the head of the bed” (47:31)

Why did Yaakov ask Yosef to swear that he would bury him in Eretz Canaan if Yosef had already agreed to fulfill this request? Ramban writes that of course Yaakov did not suspect his beloved righteous son of reneging on his father’s request. His concern was that Pharaoh would not let Yosef leave the country or that he might insist on having Yaakov buried in Egypt. But if Yosef had sworn to do this, Yaakov trusted that Pharaoh would respect the binding nature of an oath. Additionally, once Yosef swore to do as Yaakov asked, he would work very hard to convince Pharaoh to let him go. This teaches us the importance of planning ahead to ensure that we are able to do good deeds. When anticipate potential pitfalls and set ourselves up for success, we are more likely to achieve our goals.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חָלָה וַיִּקַּח אֶת שְׁנֵי בָנָיו עִמּוֹ אֶת מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת אֶפְרַיִם

“Now it came to pass after these incidents that [someone] said to Yosef: Behold, your father is ill. So he took his two sons with him, Menashe and Ephraim” (48:1)

Chizkuni (13th century, France) wrote the following eloquent introduction to the section regarding Yaakov’s illness: “From the day that heaven and earth were created, no man would sneeze and recover. Instead, wherever he was – be it on the road or in the marketplace – if he sneezed, his soul would depart. This lasted until Yaakov came along and prayed about this. He said to Hashem, ‘Master of the world: Do not take my soul from me until I have given commands to my family, my children and my grandchildren.’ Hashem was receptive to his prayer. All the kings of the world trembled, for nothing like this had happened from the day that the world was created. Therefore, when one sneezes he is obligated to give thanks to Hashem who transformed it from death to life.”

וְעַתָּה לְשְׁנֵי בְנֵיךָ הַנּוֹלָדִים לְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַד בָּאִי אֵלַיךָ מִצְרַיִמָּה לִי הֵם אֶפְרַיִם
וּמְנַשֶּׁה כְּרַאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן יִהְיוּ לִי

“And now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt, until I came to you, to the land of Egypt they are mine. Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Reuven and Shimon” (48:5)

Why did Yaakov describe Ephraim and Menashe to Yosef as the sons “born to you”? Who else would Yosef’s children have been born to? The answer is that this description had nothing to do with their paternity. It meant that they were born to Yosef in the sense that they were as righteous as their father was. Just like Yosef, they had remained righteous despite spending their formative years in Egypt without extended family or community for spiritual support. Yaakov then went on to say that Ephraim and Menashe were the equals of Reuven and Shimon, indicating that it was this ability to remain righteous in spite of all challenges that earned them the elevation to the status of tribes in their own right. They earned this distinction by making the right choices.

אָרוּר אַפָּם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קִשְׁתָּה אַחֲלָקָם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאַפְיָצָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
“Cursed be their wrath for it is mighty, and their anger because it is harsh. I will separate them throughout Yaakov, and I will scatter them throughout Yisrael” (49:7)

Reuven, Shimon and Levi were rebuked rather than blessed because of things that they had done impetuously without first consulting Yaakov. While they had good intentions, they did the wrong thing. But why did Yaakov choose to deliver this rebuke at a time when he was blessing their brothers? How could he deprive them of their own blessings? The truth is that showing someone their mistakes in the right way is indeed a blessing because they will then be able to work on overcoming that character flaw. This is similar to the way that businesses hire consultants to point out what they are doing wrong so that they will not repeat their mistakes.

Shimon and Levi’s mistake was that they let their anger get a hold of them and interfere with their ability to think rationally. We are all able to control ourselves, but we must be careful not to put ourselves in situations where that becomes quite difficult.

לֹא יִסּוּר שֵׁבֶט מִיְהוּדָה וּמַחֲקֵק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו עַד כִּי יָבֹא שִׁילֹה וְלוֹ יִקָּהֵת עַמִּים
“The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the student of the law from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him will be a gathering of peoples” (49:10)

Rabbeinu Bachya writes: “If you look at this section of Yehuda’s blessing, you will find all the letters there except ז. The reason for this is that the word “zayin” means “weapon,” and the success of the Jewish monarchy, which comes from the tribe of Yehuda, is not primarily achieved through weaponry like the other nations. The sword is Eisav’s inheritance. But the Jewish monarchy does not conquer the world by the sword and does not depend on natural events or physical strength. It solely depends on the merit or punishment that is determined by Hashem.

“For this reason, you will notice that the name of Yehuda, from whom the monarchy descends, contains the full name of Hashem. When Yisrael fulfills the will of Hashem, they accomplish great things, their kingdom grows strong and Hashem is with them. Then they have no need for weapons. That is why the letter ז is omitted from the blessing of Yehuda.”

When Yaakov blessed Dan, focusing on the strength of his illustrious descendant Shimshon, he added the statement “I yearn for your salvation, Hashem.” Daas Zekainim makes a similar point to explain this addition: “When Yaakov foresaw the strength of Shimshon, he said: Even though this mighty man will be victorious, it is not proper to take pride in his strength. Therefore, he said that though Dan may be strong, the true salvation and victory comes from Hashem.” He supports this idea by pointing to the story of Shimshon’s defeat of the Pelishtim using the jawbone of the donkey as his sole weapon (see Shoftim 15:9-20). In the aftermath accomplishing this feat, he spoke proudly of his strength. But following his boastful words, Hashem caused him to become exceedingly faint and weak until he acknowledged Hashem as the true source of his success.

Perhaps this is why Dan is compared to a snake, the lowliest of the animal kingdom. It is a blessing that they should remain humble despite their great strength and power (suggested by Victor Fteha).

זְבוּלֹן לְחוּף יַמִּים יִשְׁכֵן וְהוּא לְחוּף אֲנִיּוֹת וַיִּרְכָּתוּ עַל צִידוֹן

“Zevulun will dwell on the coast of the seas; he will be at the harbor of the ships, and his boundary will be at Tzidon” (45:10)

Seforno notes that Zevulun was blessed before Yissachar despite being younger. Zevulun engaged in commerce and supported Yissachar financially while Yissachar studied Torah on a full-time basis. Through this partnership, he played a vital role in Yissachar’s Torah study because it is impossible to study Torah without having one’s basic physical needs met. When one provides for the needs of a Torah scholar and enables that intensive Torah study, he earns a share in the scholar’s Torah achievements for himself as well.

This was also the intent of the Torah’s requirement to give certain gifts to Kohanim and Leviyim. Hashem instituted an economic system that would enable every Jew to have a share in supporting the nation’s Torah scholars so that they could earn a portion of their share in the World to Come.

This concept is similar to the way people invest in a start-up company. The financial backers provide the necessary funds and then they receive a share of the profits that the company was able to bring in as a result of their investments. Similarly, when we support Torah study, not only do we get a mitzvah of tzedakah, we also share in the eternal reward that is given to those who study Torah.

וַיֵּרָא מְנוּחָה פִּי טוֹב וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ פִּי נְעֻמָּה וַיֵּט שִׁכְמוֹ לְסִבְלַן וַיְהִי לְמַס עֲבֵד

“He saw a resting place, that it was good, and the land, that it was pleasant, and he bent his shoulder to bear, and he became an indentured laborer” (48:15)

What is the “resting place” that Yissachar takes note of in the blessing that Yaakov gave him? Or HaChaim says that it refers to the World to Come, the eternal place of rest. Yissachar recognized the fleeting nature of leisure in this world and understood that this world is a place for action, a time to earn our rest in the World to Come. He weighed the pleasures of this world against the reward of the next world and understood what is really valuable. That is why Yissachar chose to devote his life to working day and

night in studying Torah. But, as the blessing continues, taking this path in life also includes assuming responsibilities for the community at large, which is the job of the Torah scholar.

We all have spare moments during our day when we can decide how to use our time. We should follow the example of Yissachar and use our downtime to work for our share in the next world. The name יששכר is a combination of the two words יש שכר, meaning “there is reward.” The greatness of this reward is described in the final Mishna in Shas (Uktzin 3:12) which says that Hashem will grant 310 worlds to the righteous in the future. R’ Ovadiah MiBartenura explains that this refers to the idea that the pleasure one will experience in the World to Come is 310 times all the pleasure that one can take from this world.

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