



PARASHAT VAYECHI

JACOB'S GOOD YEARS

This week's *parashah*, *Vayechi*, concludes the Book of *Bereishit* and the Torah's account of Jacob's life and describes the final 17 years of Jacob's life in Egypt. 17 is the value of the word "good" (טוֹב) and indeed these were the best 17 years of Jacob's life. [In fact, the *gematria* of the name of the *parashah*, *Vayechi* (וַיַּחֲיוּ), is 34, also a multiple of 17.]

How is it possible that Jacob's best years were spent in exile in Egypt? After all, Jacob was forced to leave the Holy land for Egypt, the most impure of all lands, the land that was to enslave his children. How could he live the best years of his life there, of all places?¹

The answer usually given to this question is that at the end of his very difficult life, Jacob merited seeing his family united, with love and brotherhood between Joseph and his brothers. This was certainly not the case when they lived in the Holy land, seeming to imply, as Nachmanides wrote in a letter from the Holy land, "the holier it is, the more it is destroyed"—the impetus for infighting and disagreement was much stronger in the Holy land than it was in Egypt.

Joseph's Collected Sparks Add Life

From an inner perspective, if we look at the final verse of last week's *parashah*, *Vayigash*, which reads, "Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they were established there and were fruitful and multiplied greatly,"² we find that its numerical value is $2794 = 11 \cdot 254$. But, since the verse contains exactly 11 words, this means that the average value of each word is 254, the exact value of the very central phrase, "Joseph still lives!"³ (עוֹד יוֹסֵף חַי), the words exclaimed by Jacob when he first received news of his beloved son after 22 years!

Externally, the words, "Joseph still lives" refer to Joseph's physical existence. But, their inner aspect refers to Joseph's "still" (עוֹד). In Hebrew, this word has many meanings, of which the most important for our purpose is "more." With these words, Jacob was alluding to the sparks Joseph had gathered, the "more" he had added to holiness during his time in

Egypt. Joseph had the unique ability to identify, collect, and elevate the sparks of holiness trapped even in Egypt, the most impure of all lands. And he had collected them in incredible numbers, like the grains of sand on the seashore.

Joseph's elevation of the sparks in Egypt was the fulfillment of the prophecy made by his mother Rachel upon his birth. In her prophetic insight, Rachel named him Joseph, explaining that "God will grant me an-other son."⁴ Joseph's power is to grant his mother Rachel, a symbol of the domain of holiness, "an additional son" by collecting that which previously had been swallowed by the side of otherness (the feeling that one is an other, one is disconnected from the All, from God) and pulling it over to the side of holiness. Joseph was continually successful in "extracting the precious from that which had devoured it,"⁵ by taking the other—that which is distant from holiness—and transforming it into "an additional son."

Moreover, the wondrous fruitfulness of the Children of Israel in Egypt was the result and outcome of Joseph having collected the sparks of holiness in Egypt. Indeed, as the Torah states, "These are the descendants of Jacob, Joseph..."⁶ meaning that all of Jacob's offspring, throughout the generations, are due to Joseph.

Jacob Never Dies

The exile in Egypt was the first and therefore archetypal exile. All the subsequent exiles, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, and our present exile, the Edomite-Roman resemble it. The sages reveal that "The Jewish people are exiled only for the sake of accumulating [יְתוּסְפִין], stemming from the same root as "Joseph"] converts."⁷ Indeed, Jacob was privileged to see the end (the purpose) of the exile at its outset; he saw the sparks that Joseph had accumulated in Egypt and seeing this enlivened him with an inner sense of purpose, granting him the best 17 years of his life.

Jacob's life is intrinsically linked with the propagation of his offspring as the sages declare,

“Jacob never died, for as long as his offspring is alive, he too remains alive.”⁸

The increase in Jacob’s liveliness due to the sparks collected by Joseph and his multiplying offspring was also noted by the prophet Isaiah,

Therefore, thus said God to the house of Jacob that redeemed Abraham: “Now, Jacob shall not be ashamed nor shall his face pale. For as he sees his children, the toil of My hands in him, they will sanctify My Name; and, they will sanctify the Holy of Jacob give dominion to the God of Israel.”⁹

The joy, i.e., the liveliness, that gives Jacob life comes from seeing that that his offspring are all true; all are righteous and dedicated to his path from generation to generation. And the most life-giving vision is seeing how they maintain their spiritual integrity even in their exile in Egypt.

A Sweet Answer to a Classic Question

Everything that we have discussed offers a new explanation for the unique textual phenomenon found in this week’s *parashah*. Every *parashah* in the Pentateuch is separated from the one before it by a break. In the Torah scroll, the break is prominent as white-space separating the two *parashahot*. The one exception is our *parashah*, *Vayechi*, which is not separated from *Vayigash*.

In his commentary, *Rashi* gives two reasons for the lack of a break. He writes,

“And Jacob lived...”: Why is this *parashah* sealed [i.e., there is no gap between it and the previous *parashah*]? Because when Jacob passed on, the Jewish people’s eyes and hearts were sealed due to the difficulty of the enslavement they were beginning to be enslaved with. Alternatively, [Jacob] sought to reveal the end of times to his sons, but it was sealed from him.

One of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s most important models for understanding and analyzing the

relationship between differing explanations is that of *submission*, *separation*, and *sweetening*. When different answers are given by the sages to the same answer, each answer reflects one particular element aspect of this model.

The two answers offered by *Rashi* clearly correspond to submission and separation. The first answer he cites—Jacob having passed on—reflects submission in the Jewish people’s attitude caused by the loss of their patriarch, making them susceptible to enslavement. The second answer reflects separation, which is always linked with a change of consciousness, as the sages say, “If there is no consciousness there is no ability to separate [to distinguish].”¹⁰ Though Jacob sought to reveal the secret of the end of days, God concealed/separated it from his consciousness (preserving it in Jacob’s super-conscious, passed down to us; another meaning of “Jacob never dies”).

Complementing *Rashi*’s two explanations is the third explanation based on all that we have discussed. This third answer represents sweetening. The two *parashot*, *Vayigash* and *Vayechi* are not separated because the fact that, “Jacob lived in the land of Egypt,” that he was able to enjoy the best years of his life there was a direct consequence of how, “Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they were established there and were fruitful and multiplied greatly.” Jacob’s final years in Egypt were sweetened by Joseph’s ability to gather the sparks, which led to all his children thriving together in unity, following his path with integrity.

(based on Daily Dvar Torah for Vayechi)

Notes: **1.** See *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 10, pp. 160ff. **2.** Genesis 47:27. **3.** Ibid. 45:28 **4.** Ibid. 30:24 **5.** Jeremiah 15:19 **6.** Genesis 37:2 **7.** *Pesachim* 87b **8.** *Ta’anit* 5b **9.** Isaiah 29:22-3. **10.** *Berachot* 33a.

THE REDEMPTION GROWS NEAR

[About the Mashiach, the prophet says,] “And my servant David—their prince forever.” The Hebrew word for “prince” (מֶלֶךְ) stems from the root that means to carry, or to elevate. The Mashiach is not just a prince over the people, he is a prince, for the people, for he is entrusted with guiding and elevating the souls of Israel. The Mashiach is a shepherd, leading the nation. But the faithful shepherd’s purpose is to lead his flock, to elevate them, so that they can reach the Infinite. The Mashiach’s ability to carry opposites together reveals that he has an aspect of Joseph. About Joseph, Rachel said, “May G-d grant me another son”; Joseph has the ability to take an individual who is an “other” and make him into a “son.” Still, there are those who are not just “others,” they are altogether “opposite,” they oppose holiness. The Mashiach will be able to carry opposites—to carry, to elevate even those who are opposite, higher and higher, without end.

(based on a lecture given on 9 Tevet, 5769)