



From the Teachings of Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

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PARSHAT VAYEISHEV

JACOB'S MOURNING

Mourning and Repentance

After the sale of Joseph, when the brothers brought him Joseph's special robe, soaked with blood, Jacob understood that Joseph had been eaten by a wild animal. The Torah tells us about how Jacob coped with losing his beloved son: "He tied sackcloth around his waist and he mourned for his son for many days".

Mourning is not just about being upset. Actually, the misery of mourning provides a rectification. What did Jacob think when the brothers brought Joseph's coat covered in blood? Certainly, he blamed himself alone for what had happened. He probably also had an inner sense that somehow Judah was responsible for the whole story, but externally he placed all the blame on himself. He knew that the whole story was caused by the exceptional affection he had showed Joseph, setting him apart from his brothers. Jacob knew that everything we experience in life is by Divine providence and is meant to help us rectify our actions. So, when the brothers chose to tell him that Joseph died by showing him his blood-drenched robe, Jacob understood that this was Divine Providence guiding him in understanding the cause of Joseph's death. Thus, Jacob's mourning was at its core, *teshuva* –a repentance and rectification of his actions and earlier state of mind that had sequestered from his brothers and caused the "wild animal," i.e., Judah to devour him.

Let us see another point that highlights the relationship between mourning and repentance. One of the laws of mourning is that, generally speaking, a mourner is prohibited from learning Torah. However, this raises a question: learning Torah is one of the 613 commandments of the Torah (*de'orayta*), while mourning is a rabbinical commandment (*derabbanan*). How then can mourning override learning Torah?

The answer is that since the essence of mourning is to bring the mourner to rectification through repentance and repentance is a commandment from

the Torah, it can indeed displace, during the mourning period, the commandment to learn Torah. Jacob is described as, "An earnest man, dwelling in tents [of study]." Jacob is considered the pillar of Torah and it is specifically he that can teach us about the need to nullify his very essence, his essential state as the pillar of the Torah and its study, all in order to mourn for many days and to repent.

Indeed, the Hebrew word for "mourning" (**אבלות**) appears in the statement made later by Joseph's brother when they came to accept responsibility for their actions, "But, indeed we are guilty" (**אבל אשמים**). From this interesting allusion we learn that one of the purposes of mourning is to bring us to the point where we can accept responsibility. Our inherent lowliness is meant to apply specifically in our relationship with other Jews—i.e., within our people. But, this is not the case when dealing with other nations. There, our inherent lowliness fosters a regal and holy attitude that highlights our having been elevated and made responsible by the Almighty for bringing peace and goodness to all of humanity.

Rectifying Hatred and Jealousy

Jacob's mourning began with, "He tied a sackcloth around his waist" (**וישם שק בְּמַתְּנֵי**), which in Hebrew phonetically alludes (*notarikon*) to the word *Vayeishev* (**וישב**), the name of our parshah. This is the first and therefore most essential occurrence of the word "sackcloth" (**שק**) in the Torah. The Hebrew word for "sackcloth" is pronounced "sack," clearly indicating that the English word, "sack" is a word borrowed from Hebrew.

What is the connection between wearing sackcloth and Jacob's mourning, as explained above? The two letters that comprise the word "sack" in Hebrew are the initials of the two words "hatred" (**שנאה**) and "jealousy" (**קנאה**), referring to the same hate and jealousy between Joseph and his brothers that Jacob saw himself as the cause for.

Let us take a closer look at how the brother's hatred for Joseph developed into jealousy. In discussing the relationship between the brothers and Joseph, the Torah mentions their hate for him three times. Later, it states once that they were jealous of him.

The first time, when the brothers saw that, "their father loved him [Joseph] over all his brothers,"¹ their reaction was, "His brothers hated him and they could speak peacefully with him."

The second mention of their hatred occurs when Joseph tells them that he dreamt about them. Even before he has a chance to tell them the content of his dream, the Torah describes that, "They hated him even more."² Why was their hatred intensified merely because Joseph had dreamt about them? Dreams can be a form of dominance. If someone says, "I dreamt about you," it can certainly be interpreted as condescending and emphasizing their control over you. It is as if the person told you that, "You are nothing more than part of my dream; I am the real reality and you are just a dream in my reality."

Joseph then proceeded to relate the dream after which we hear that, "their hatred for him increased further because of his dreams and his words."³ The content of the dream had indeed verified for his brothers that Joseph sought to rule over them.

After the third description of the brother's hatred for Joseph, the Torah does not mention it again. Instead it noted that, "they were jealous of him."⁴ Their jealousy was an outgrowth of their hatred. Their hatred developed into jealousy.

One way of thinking about jealousy is that it is the opposite of diligence. Being diligent requires us

to have faith that through hard work and effort it is possible to achieve anything. But, we become jealous of someone when they seem to possess something that which we do not. The brother's were not jealous of Joseph because he was wealthier or more beautiful than they. They were jealous because he had indeed attained a higher spiritual level, thanks perhaps to Jacob's endearing mentorship. But, the truth is that every Jew should feel that, "the world was created for my sake," and therefore every one of us can truthfully attain the highest spiritual level, the greatest relationship with the Almighty and be knowledgeable of the entire Torah. We have to have faith that this success only depends on our effort, both physical and spiritual. So diligence is the opposite state of mind from jealousy. We become jealous because we are not diligent; otherwise, we would have worked hard and succeeded as did the person we are jealous of. The Torah's message is that by expending the effort diligently you can acquire all that you truly desire!

Thus, when Jacob mourned and repented he began by putting on a sack, alluding to hatred and jealousy. He tied the sack around his loins because the loins are a symbol for diligence. The area of the body most associated with a diligent attitude is the waist. Jacob's message to himself and to his children was that one should serve God with diligence.

(Based upon the lecture of Kislev 20, 5769)

Notes: 1. Genesis 37:4. 2. Ibid. verse 5. 3. Ibid. verse 8. 4. Ibid. verse 11.

THE REDEMPTION GROWS NEARER...

"Because the Jewish people are destined to eat from the Tree of Life, which is the Book of the Zohar, they will be extracted from their exile with mercy." These words were spoken by the *Raya Mehemna* (the faithful Sheppard) to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. This promise by the *Raya Mehemna* are a clear example of how the beginning of the redemption—fueled by our engaging the secrets of the Torah, an initial taste of the "Torah of Mashiach"—is enveloped in the redemption's end. At that time, the Mashiach, in his role as *Raya Mehemna*, will reach his highest level

(from *Be'ectah Acheeshenah*, p. 45)