

Parshat Vayechi

Essential Lessons for the Jewish Future.

“And Jacob called all his sons.
He said ‘Come together that I may tell you what
is to befall you in the end of days.
Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob; hearken
to your father.” (49:1-2)

These formal and poetic words of invitation form an opening, a prelude, to the chapter of the “blessings.” Yaakov invites his sons to listen to his final will and testament. In the verses that follow, he gives each of his sons a parting message; of praise, critique, and blessing, delivered in rich poetic language¹.

These few lines of introduction have aroused the attention and curiosity of the commentators.

First there is the problem of the repetitive, double phraseology here. They are told first to “Come together,” and then they are told to “assemble”. Why two phrases, two expressions for the same thing?

END OF DAYS

But a second query relates to Yaakov's intent when he expresses his intent to reveal that “which is to befall you in the end of days.”

First, what is the “end of days?” Should this be translated as, “the future,” or alternatively, “the end of time” i.e. the Messianic era?

Now this can be clearly checked. We can check the verse of the Berachot – Yaakov's last communiqué to his sons – and see what he talks about! If we are looking for futuristic predictions, when we do check the text we are hard pushed to see Yaakov revealing any hidden secrets. Whereas some of the Berachot might relate to futuristic events, many of Yaakov's comments relate to the past! And there are few phrases that could relate to Messianic, eschatological events. What “end of time” is Yaakov referring to in his usage of this expression?

THE ABSENCE OF HOPE

Let us focus for a few moments upon Rashi's commentary. Rashi resolves the problems in an ingenious but enigmatic manner. He suggests that :

“Jacob wished to divulge the time of the “End²” (The Final Redemption.) The Shechina (Divine presence) suddenly left him. He then began to talk about other matters.”

¹ For more on this topic, see my shiur:

www.yehatzvi.org/shiurim/parasha/Vayechi%20-Blessings_01_07.rtf

² in Hebrew “Ketz,” referring to the prediction of the advent of the Messiah.

Let us understand Rashi.

- Rashi understands the phrase “End of Days” as referring to Messianic times. Indeed that is the way in which this phrase is used later in Tanach³.
- Rashi observes that the Berachot fail to contain any Messianic references.

Hence Rashi concludes that Yaakov had intended to reveal the advent of the Messiah, but his mind went blank! Yaakov invited his sons to listen in on the secret of secrets, the end of History, the future redemption. However God was unprepared to allow Yaakov to divulge that “classified” information. Hence, he had a memory lapse; his mind failed him. He began, therefore, to talk to his children about other things.

As for the double introduction, the repetition represents two attempts to transmit a final message. The first failed; the second succeeded.

Now, of course Rashi's explanation solves the problem technically, but it is somewhat unsatisfactory from a narrative perspective. From a textual angle, it solves the problem – it explains why there is no mention of the messianic End of Days, and it gives a reason for the unusual introduction. However, the reader is left wondering; did Yaakov truly want to reveal the secret of the coming of the Messiah, to his children? And why did God intervene here? Moreover, why does the Torah inform us of Yaakov's failed plan? Why not simply skip Verse 1 absolutely?

The Sefat Emet (Vayechi 5635 : The Rebbe from Gur 1847-1905) has a beautiful reading here. First he says that what Yaakov wished to impart was NOT the ultimate redemption. It was in fact something to do with the Egyptian exile which the Children of Yaakov were imminently facing. Yaakov wanted to reveal the “end.” The end of what? **He wanted his children to know that their exile in Egypt would have an end.** As the fledgling Israelite nation drift into Galut, at the brink of his children's descent into unknown slavery and long years of exile, Jacob wished to transmit to his children that there is an end to their Egyptian sojourn, that there will be a limit placed upon their suffering, that there is a Historic future beyond the slavery of Egypt. In other words, he wanted to tell them that there is room for hope. There is a sense of order, that there is a plan.

But interestingly we find that even this was denied to Jacob. Why? The Sefat Emet, with tremendous psychological insight, suggests that an essential ingredient, indeed the very definition of the exile experience, is precisely the hopelessness and the sense of despair. Exile is a psychological state as much as it is a national-physical condition. God prevented Jacob from giving his children even the basic comfort of the knowledge that the future would be a brighter one. For were they to know that their suffering was limited, they would feel a sense of relief.

PERSONAL OR NATIONAL?

But by now, Rashi has shifted the balance of the text for us. Traditionally, we view the parsha of the Berachot as an opportunity for Yaakov, the aged Patriarch, to depart from each of his sons with a wise life-message. He will encourage, praise, critique, leaving each of his sons with a personal lesson that will assist them in their future.

Rashi tells us that a “personal” good-bye was not the primary

³ See Isaiah 2:2, Yirmiyahu 49:39, Yechezkel 28:16 and possibly Devarim 4:30

thing on Yaakov's mind at all. Yaakov realised that his death signalled the advent of Galut⁴. He was not so much focused on his personal connection with his family as on the covenantal future of the Jewish People, on their survival intact through the Galut. Am Yisrael was that which dominated his consciousness at this specific hour.

LESSONS FOR EXILE

It is in this vein that the Midrashim interpret the verses here. We shall study a few of these Midrashic passages together:

"He said 'Come together' etc : 'Come together' from Egypt, and 'assemble' in Ramses; 'Come together' from the ten tribes, 'assemble' together with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin
.... The Rabbis offered a different interpretation: He commanded them as regards factionalism and family conflict. He said to them, Be a single "collective" ("Asepha)." That is the meaning of the prophecy (Ezekiel 37): 'Take one piece of wood and write on it to Judah and to the children of Israel his friends' ... When the Children of Israel become a unified group they have prepared themselves for the redemption" (Mid. Rabba 98:2)

Midrash needs to be de-coded. One of the classic techniques of the Midrashic method is the use of Biblical parallel. By linking words and phrases, the scholars of Midrash succeed in drawing connections, parallels with other parshiot in Tanach. In creating these links, these points of contact, they redraw the original parsha in a new dimension, a new matrix, shedding fresh light upon the original verses.

FIRST READING: **The Awareness of Redemption.**

This particular Midrash here offers two new readings of our textual difficulty; the double introduction to the parsha. The backdrop to them both is the notion of "end of days" i.e. Redemption.

"He said 'Come together' etc : 'Come together' from Egypt, and 'assemble' in Ramses;

This first explanation has Jacob reminding his children to associate with their people. He reminds them - "In future times we will be spread far and wide, we will take on new identities. Do not forget to join your people at the crucial moment." In the Exodus from Egypt the Jewish people were to gather together at the rallying point of Ramses (Exodus 12:37). Jacob warns them to abandon Egypt and to convene with their nation: "Come together from Egypt and assemble in Ramses". Jews have always found it easy to feel comfortable in their various exilic abodes. Jacob reminds them: From Ramses the Exodus will begin. Don't get left behind in Egypt! In essence, Jacob urges them that at the critical moment they should know when to get out! They may not to forget their true identity; When the redemption arrives, Jews must know where they truly belong.

At what Historic juncture are we standing for the Children of Israel? At the start of an era of Galut - exile. Jacob realises that his death will herald the formidable Egyptian exile. His last lesson to his sons as a group is that a Jew must know not only how to live in exile, but he must also understand how to extract himself from it. We must always know when it is time to pull ourselves out of the exilic mud and to reunite with our people.

⁴ See the opening Rashi to the Parsha

SECOND READING. **Jewish unity**

But the Midrash refers to another possible resonance of the words, "gather" and "collect yourselves." The Midrash states:

"Come together from the ten tribes and assemble with Judah and Benjamin."

During the First Temple period, the kingdom split to Judah and Benjamin on one side and ten tribes on the other⁵. The ten tribes were later exiled. The hope is that they will return some day. Jacob is urging them to return, to turn the clock back and return to a united nation rather than a fragmented one. This too is a prophecy of the "end of days". And it is most beautifully expressed in the prophecy of Yechezkel⁶. Yechezkel lived in Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple, and the great Babylonian Exile. He knows that for 300 years, there have been two states: Yehuda (allied with Binyamin and Levi,) and Efrayim (the Northern Kingdom – the 10 tribes.) Yechezkel predicts a period of redemption and reunification.

The word of God came to me to say, "You, Son of Man⁷, take one piece of wood and write on it, 'For Yehudah and the Children of Israel, his friends,' and one piece of wood and write on it, 'For Yosef, the wood of Ephraim and the entire House of Israel, his friends.' Bring them together each to the other to become one piece of wood, and they will become one in your hands. When they say to you, your people, 'What does this mean?' Tell them, so says G-d, 'Behold, I will take the tree of Yosef which is in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Yisrael, his friends, and I will put on them the tree of Yehudah and make them one tree, and they will become one in My hand' " (Yechezkel 37:15-20)

What does this symbolism mean? God explains:

"I am going to take the Israelite people from amongst the nations that they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter and bring them to their own land. I will make them ONE nation in the land on the hills of Israel and ONE king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms." (37:21-23)

Now this Midrash works at two levels. In the narrative of Yaakov's family we are just recovering from the schism of the sale of Yosef. Just like in later History, there is a family split. Yaakov lies on his death bed and sees the family united. He encourages continued family unity: "gather," "join together."

But the Midrash, drawing on Yaakov's intent to inform us of the formula for the "end of days" sees this as the assurance of future redemption. (And this is the intent of Sefer Yechezkel.) Yaakov's lesson then is simple: "When the Children of Israel become a unified group they have prepared themselves for the redemption". The Midrash here picks up on the dual use of verbs of conciliation and togetherness: "Gather together" and "assemble" or one could translate "become a single group", "reconcile yourselves". For a family who have suffered from inner jealousies, hatred, rivalry, this message is one of the most crucial that Jacob could ever leave his children. That the key to redemption - and redemption indicates harmony, national success, peace, religious fulfilment - is togetherness.

⁵ See Melachim I ch.12

⁶ The Haftara from Parshat Vayigash – last week.

⁷ This is the way God addresses Yechezkel.

SHEMA YISRAEL. Faith under Adversity.

We shall examine one final Midrash, which has always attracted my attention. However I am still unsure as what to make of it. I'll let you consider this one over Shabbat.

"Elazar ben Achoi said, From here Israel merited Kriyat Shema. When Yaakov was about to leave this world, he called his twelve sons and said to them: Listen! (Shim'u): Is the God of Israel your father? They replied: "Hear O Israel" (Devarim 6:4) Dear father! Just as you have no doubts (lit. divisions, arguments) about God, similarly, we have no doubts. He (responded and) whispered the words: Barukh Shem Kevod Malchuto Le'Olam Va'ed." (Midrash Rabba 98:3)

Shema – the classic formulation of Jewish faith – is what Yaakov concerns himself with as he dies. This wonderful Midrash portrays Yaakov and his sons initiating Kriyat Shema as they surround Yaakov's death-bed. At one level, we note Yaakov's religious focus, that in his final moments Yaakov's concern is that his sons' faith be firm, intact. At a second level this Midrash might be the source-text for the age-old tradition that a Jew recite the Shema on their death-bed!

Now clearly this Midrash originates as a word-play on 49:2 where there is a clearly superfluous phrase:

"Gather and **Listen** O children of Jacob!
And **listen** to Israel your father."

Why the word listen – Shimu – twice? Why "Jacob" and then "Israel"? The Midrash re-reads the second phrase as a question: "El Yisrael Avikhem?" - Is the God of Israel YOUR God?

But there is a deeper philosophy here. It is not merely about language. Let us ask; did Yaakov truly doubt his sons' faith? Was he concerned about his sons belief in God? Maybe not. But then, what might the Midrash be attempting to transmit here? I would like to suggest that the writers of Midrash, who lived under Roman oppression, knew precisely what Shema meant. They knew that the sovereignty of a foreign nation was synonymous with a regime of religious persecution and a ban upon the Jewish faith. We simply have to recall the Midrash of Rabbi Akiva reciting the Shema as he was tortured to death. (Berachot 61a) It wasn't so easy to say Shema under Roman oppression! As Yaakov's family descends into the murky depths of exile, he teaches them the secret of Shema - That in the face of adversity, of crushing persecution, we still know that "Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad." We persist in our belief and faith.

Interestingly, this isn't the first Yaakov-Shema connection. In another enigmatic comment by Rashi, Rashi proposes that at the moment in which Yaakov met Yosef after 20 years of separation, Yaakov recited the Shema. Rashi is puzzled by the language of the verse in which at their moment of reunification, Yosef cries but Yaakov is silent⁸. Yaakov didn't cry. We see no reaction. The sages are puzzled. What was Yaakov thinking about as he met his son Yosef? It is here that Rashi makes a rather strange and peculiar comment. That while hugging Yosef, Yaakov Avinu was reciting Shema. What is it with Yaakov and Shema?

Now this is not simply a family rendezvous. It is also the moment in which Yaakov treads upon Egyptian soil. I would like to suggest that whereas for Yosef this was a reunion

after 20 years of separation from his beloved father, and hence Yosef saw his father and wept; for Yaakov, this was a genuinely frightening moment. Yaakov was fully aware that he was leading his sons, his family, into a Galut of 400 years⁹! He knew that in the slavery and persecution of exile, faith is sorely tested.

Yaakov recites Shema when he meets his son as he accepts upon himself the yoke of the Egyptian exile. He knows that only with strong faith will a person, a nation, endure Exile. Now on his deathbed, he passes on that message of faith. If we remain true to our belief in God, then we will survive the tribulations of Galut.

Shabbat Shalom

(Written 5765)

⁸ Bereshit 46:29 and see Rashi on that passuk.

⁹ Bereshit 15:13