

He fell on his neck, and he continued to cry on his neck. (46:29)

The meeting of father and son was certainly an emotionally-powered reunion. The love they manifested towards one another was unusual. This, coupled with the twenty-two year forced separation, created a situation in which their first encounter was a heightened opportunity for intense expression of love. This is why *Rashi* quotes *Chazal*, who say that it was only Yosef who hugged and kissed his father. Yaakov *Avinu*, at that exalted moment – instead of embracing his son – was reciting *Shema Yisrael*. Then Yaakov concluded the meeting with, *Amussa ha'paam, acharei re'osi es panecha*, “Now that I have seen your face I can die” (ibid 30). This statement is inspirational. Surely, Yaakov could have found another time to recite *Krias Shema*. Obviously, something was unique about this moment which was best expressed through the recitation of *Krias Shema*. How are we to understand this?

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, quotes a beautiful explanation he heard from his venerable *Rebbe, Horav Shlomo Breuer, zl*. We must bear in mind that, for the duration of the twenty-two years that Yosef was separated from Yaakov, the Patriarch was in a state of ceaseless mourning. He dressed in sackcloth and cried over what he thought was the inconsolable loss of his beloved son, Yosef. Thus, Yaakov's life had little value to him. A life beset with grief is a life of pain and anxiety. The reader should not misunderstand this statement. It is not that Yaakov did not value his G-d-given life. A gift from G-d is invaluable. It is just that when he recited *Krias Shema* and articulated the words: *V'ahavta es Hashem Elokecha b'chol... nafshecha*, “Love Hashem, Your G-d, will all... of your soul,” he had a problem. It was not much of a challenge for Yaakov to offer up his life for Hashem. In his present state, he felt that he was not giving up much. Life as it was was almost worthless to him. He was not giving up anything enviable. His life was almost totally spiritual. The physical dimension was tragically torn from him with Yosef's loss.

Now, however, after seeing that not only was Yosef physically alive and well, but also equally spiritually healthy, he was ecstatic. His son was wearing the crown of viceroy of Egypt, with all the pomp and glory that accompanied this position. He was totally committed to Hashem, and he had raised an observant family. Yaakov's life once again was treasured. It was precious. Every minute with Yosef was dear to him. It was precisely at this exalted moment, a moment during which his life transitioned, a moment when life had taken on a new and greater meaning and value, that he chose to offer it to Hashem. It was now necessary to recite *Krias Shema*, because *b'chol nafshecha*, “with all of your soul,” had taken on new meaning. This is why the Patriarch declared, *Amussa ha'paam*, “I am now prepared to offer everything” – even my precious life – to Hashem – if the need arises.

Veritably, every life is a gift from G-d, regardless of how fortunate one seems to be, or how difficult the life is. Does the above explanation suggest that a wretched life filled with troubles is any less precious than one which is filled with good fortune and joy? Is the value of Hashem's gift of life to

be measured by how much joy, health and welfare one has? Is *b'chol nafshecha* measured by how one feels about his life? Indeed, the opposite may be derived from the above *p'shat*, explanation.

Yaakov *Avinu* was readily prepared to relinquish his life for Hashem. He felt, however, that his life had very little value, because it was filled with such emotional pain. He wanted to give “more” to Hashem than a life replete with troubles and pain. In other words, the Patriarch felt that perhaps his contribution was not as “worthy” as that of others – who had so much more.

In his *Pirkei Machashavah*, **Horav Ezriel Tauber, Shlita**, aptly describes the meaning of *chaim birtzono*, life in accordance with Hashem's will. Imagine, an elderly Jew of one-hundred years, who is on a respirator. He is being kept alive by machines. Otherwise, he is not functioning; his mind is no longer working; he is not aware of anything that is taking place in his proximity. The patient has had a very good life and has amassed an incredible fortune of one hundred million dollars. He has one son, a *ben Torah b'm'lo muvan ha'milah*, in the fullest extent of the word, deeply committed to *halachah* and someone, who will apply a large amount of his future inheritance to *tzedakah*, charitable endeavors. Indeed, he has in his mind many Torah institutions which stand to benefit from his impending inheritance. His goal is singular and simple: *l'harbos kavod Shomayim b'olam*, to increase the glory of Heaven in the world.

At that moment, Eliyahu *HaNavi* reveals himself to him, to inform him that his father will pass from this world in two more days. He even gives him the time of death. One thing, however, can circumvent his father's demise for one extra minute: the son must be willing to relinquish his entire inheritance! All the charity which he had planned on giving – every act of lovingkindness for which the money would have been used – all goes down the drain. There will be no money; all this in exchange for one more minute of life on the respirator. Now, what will the son reply? What will he say to Eliyahu *HaNavi*? All the *tzedakah* and *chesed* that can be achieved in exchange for what? Life on a respirator with no knowledge of anything? This is clearly what the son will respond, “Do it! Allow my father to leave the world as was originally predestined.”

The Torah, however, does not agree with this. Not only must everything be done to keep the patient alive, if gentiles were to threaten to kill out an entire city if they do not kill this man – it would be patently prohibited. Even if all of *Klal Yisrael* hung in the balance, it would still be prohibited to allow the patient to die before his time – and if his “life” could be somehow extended by even one minute, and it is not – it is tantamount to murder! This is the value of life.

Rav Tauber relates how his own father was suffering greatly during the twilight years of his life. A man who in his youth had been healthy and vigorous, leading a robust life of devotion to Torah study and dissemination; a man who reached out to many Jews, whose home was the central address for acts of *chesed*, had become ill and physically frail, wheelchair bound, and totally incapable of caring for himself. He required assistance on a constant basis, which deprived him of his dignity, wreaking havoc on his self-esteem. Needless to say, his father was in a pitiful state, both physically and emotionally.

One day, his son came to visit and took one look at his father, and he realized that he must say something that would have a heartening effect on his condition. Fortunately, the right words came to mind. “*Abba*, Father, you agree that Hashem created you perfectly.” No response. “Father,” he asked, “what is the most significant *mitzvah* for a Jew to observe?” His father continued his silence momentarily and then murmured, “*V’chai ba’hem*, ‘And you should live by them.’ Every *mitzvah* in the Torah is exempted when it comes up against the negation of human life. [One must give up his life when he must decide between living and transgressing the three cardinal sins of murder, adultery and idol worship, because to commit one of these sins is simply not living]. Clearly *V’chai ba’hem* must be the primary *mitzvah* of the Torah. Now, let me ask you: It is axiomatic that every *mitzvah* of the Torah must be carried out *lishmah*, for its sake, for the sake of the *mitzvah*, because this is the will of Hashem. The *mitzvah* of *V’chai ba’hem* is probably the most difficult *mitzvah* to execute, solely because it is Hashem’s will. There is always an ulterior motive, albeit positive, like Torah study, acts of lovingkindness, areas of service to others for which ‘life’ is a prerequisite.

“Now, Hashem has placed you in a wheelchair which precludes your ability to do any of the myriad *chesed* activities for which you have previously been noted. You are physically limited in many ways. Indeed, your life is totally devoted to Hashem. You live for Hashem – and only for Hashem! The Almighty wants you to do nothing else but live only for Him; this is *v’chai ba’hem* at its apex!”

These words assuaged his father’s mood and gave him the *chizuk*, strength and encouragement, to carry on. It also teaches us an important lesson about life as a Jew: it is sacrosanct. It is Hashem’s greatest gift to us. We must value and appreciate it as such and be willing to relinquish it for Him when the need arises. This is what is meant by *b’chol nafshecha*, “with all of your soul.”