

Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt... and the days of Yaakov – the years of his life. (47:28)

The popular adage, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life,” rings true in the ears of the committed who are acutely aware of the meaning of every moment of G-d-given life. We have no guarantees. Life is short, and it is up to each and every one of us to make the most of every minute. This is unlike the attitude of some who believe that everything belongs to them.

Parashas Vayechi deals primarily with the last mortal days of Yaakov *Avinu*: how he prepared for death, and the blessings he gave his children before he left this world. It is, therefore, surprising that a *parsha* which deals with death should be called *Vayechi* – “And he lived!” **Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita**, suggests that the Torah alludes to the notion that the greatness of a *tzaddik* in life is his ability to focus on his own death. A great person understands that true life is not lived in this world, which is only a vestibule to *Olam Habba*, the World to Come. That is where life is lived – in the world of truth. Thus, Yaakov’s entire life was spent in preparation for the moment of death, when he would enter into true life.

This teaches us that true life is a life in which one prepares himself for his Heavenly meeting with the Almighty. One who lives without giving a second thought to his ultimate demise is not really considered to be living. Thus, the *parsha* which addresses Yaakov *Avinu*’s death is called, *Vayechi Yaakov*, “And Yaakov lived.”

When the Torah mentions Yaakov’s age, it says, *Vayehi yemei Yaakov – shnei chayav*, “And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life.” If the Torah is interested in relating Yaakov’s age, why does it mention the “days” of his life? Would not his age in “years” be more appropriate? *Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz* explains that the Torah is teaching us an important principle. Despite the Patriarch’s advanced age, every day of his life had great significance to him. Contrary to popular opinion, one should not question the value of “another day” once someone has attained longevity, since every day that one is granted by G-d is a precious treasure of incalculable value. It must be appreciated, valued and utilized appropriately.

Veritably, when a person reaches a point in life during which he begins to realize that his days are numbered, he becomes less focused on the affairs of this world, as he transitions to thinking primarily about his “future” in *Olam Habba*. *Rav Gamliel* quotes **Horav Gershon Shtamer, zl**, who says that a person thinks when he approaches old age and eventually takes leave of his mortal self, that this is his moment of death. The truth is, that from the very moment of birth, with every day that passes – another day of his life has died. Man dies daily! It is just that when the final moment arrives, his mortal remains are interred in the ground. This is his final moment, but, actually, we die a little every day. Yesterday is gone. We can do nothing about it. Time is a gift that, if wasted, can never be returned.

When writing about life and death, I feel it incumbent on me not to end on a somewhat morbid note. Thus, I take the liberty of quoting a story which, although it ends in death, is the kind of story that makes one proud to be *mizera ha'Yehudim*, a Jew. It was common knowledge that those who were sent on the transports to Auschwitz were forbidden to take any *seforim*, Hebrew books, with them. There was a certain Jew who obstinately refused to part with a small *Sefer Torah* that he kept with him, even as he was being taken to the transport train. When the Nazi fiend saw that this man was not giving up his scroll, and that he obviously was not smuggling in anything, he let him go. After all, he knew exactly where this Jew was going to end up.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, everyone was told to leave all of their possessions on the cattle cars which had served as their transport. This Jew was not waiting for them to search him, so he immediately ran off the train with his precious Torah scroll in his arms. He ran right into the furious opposition of a group of German officers. They reviled him, cursed him, beat and mocked him, but he seemed oblivious to everything. He completely ignored them, as he embraced the scroll in his arms.

At this point, another soldier came over, took out his revolver and pointed it at the man's heart, threatening to shoot him unless he gave up the Torah. The Jew continued ignoring him, absolutely refusing to be separated from his Torah. If he would be shot as a result of this – so be it. He was not frightened. Without the Torah, his life was not worth living. He was prepared to die. The soldiers looked at each other and shrugged, as if to say, "Let him keep his Torah. It will not be for much longer." Indeed, the *Sefer Torah* never left his embrace until he entered the gas chamber.

A Jew who had long been alienated from Torah and *mitzvos* viewed this scene and the impression left such an impact on him that, from that moment on, he changed his mind about the "Orthodox fanatics." He now understood why they would never forgo any point of the Torah. He joined the faith that he had reviled for most of his life, asking for his Creator's forgiveness for his errant ways and resolutely committed himself to a life of Torah and *mitzvos*.

One Jew died – one Jew returned to life: One Jew proudly left a world of falsehood and entered a world of truth; another Jew returned to the world of falsehood, armed with the truth.