

“The days of the years of my sojourns have been a hundred and thirty years. Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.” (47:9)

Daas Zekeinim m’Baalei HaTosfos quotes the *Mishnah* that says Yaakov *Avinu* was punished for making the above statement, condemning the years of his life as being “few and bad.” As a result of the Patriarch’s “complaint,” his life was shortened thirty-three years, which coincides with the thirty-three words (*Pesukim* 8-9) expressing this. The question is obvious and glaring: How could Yaakov have made such a statement? The Patriarch was an individual who served the Almighty with all of his heart and soul. How could he declare that his years were “few and bad”?

Furthermore, to have made such a statement to a pagan like Pharaoh is beyond belief! There is one more question that must be addressed – which, incidentally, the commentators seem to accept as fact. To state that his years were few is understandable. After all, he did live thirty-three years fewer than Yitzchak *Avinu*. However, how could he say that his years had been bad? What was really so difficult about Yaakov’s life? Until age seventy-three, he had done nothing all day but learn Torah. The first fifteen years he had served his grandfather, Avraham *Avinu*; the following fifty years he served Shem *ben* Noach. What is so bad about that? During this time, he was living at home with Yitzchak *Avinu* and Rivkah *Imeinu*. What is there not to like about such an arrangement? Even after he was compelled to leave out of fear for his life, he stopped for fourteen years to study in *yeshivah*. In other words, out of the one hundred and thirty years of his life, Yaakov spent the majority (seventy-six years) in a calm, idyllic Torah setting. Can anyone complain about that?

Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl, explains that for a *tzaddik*, righteous person, to be relegated to live in the proximity of a *rasha*, evil person, and also be compelled to offer him respect is misery at its nadir. Yaakov lived in the exalted home of his parents – together with Eisav. From early on in his youth, Yaakov was acutely aware of his father’s love for Eisav. Thus, out of respect for his father, Yaakov felt obligated to respect Eisav. Can we even begin to imagine how painful it must have been for him – Yaakov, who was the embodiment of the attribute of *emes*, truth, at its zenith – to live under such circumstances? Enduring such a tension-filled environment is what provoked Yaakov to feel that his life had been bad.

Additionally, we may suggest that although Yaakov was free to live as he pleased, the sword of Eisav constantly hung over his head. This idea applies in any situation in which a person is uncomfortable, never knowing when his position of favor will suddenly change, leaving him out in the cold. An individual can have a well-paying job, but if his boss is fickle and he never knows where he stands with him, then his position is not secure. For centuries, Jews in Germany went to *shul* and to the *bais ha’medrash*, never knowing at what point the gentiles surrounding them would decide to kill a few Jews just for fun. This is how they lived. It surely was not pleasant. Yet, they continued *davening*, learning, and persevering as observant Jews – even at great risk to their well-being.

Perhaps this is what shocked Pharaoh. Before him stood a man whose countenance bespoke an individual who was quite aged. Yet, in speaking to him, Yaakov came across as being much younger than his appearance indicated. Pharaoh was incredulous: Was Yaakov old or very old? To this the Patriarch replied, "I am not so old. What you see are the effects of a life of tension and fear." Yaakov reflected the image of the *galus* Jew. Living in exile is not pretty. One perseveres and continues on, despite the hardships that accompany him at every juncture. There is, however, one thing worse than being in exile: Not knowing that he is in exile.

Yaakov *Avinu* taught us that there is nothing "wrong" with "few and bad." It is how one reacts to such a life that determines the extent of its adversity.