

Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt. (47:28)

There is a general rule concerning the placement of a new *parshah/sidrah* in a Torah scroll: The new *Sidrah* either: begins on a new line, or it is separated from the previous *parshah* by a nine-letter space. *Parashas Vayechi* is unique in that no extra space exists between it and *Parashas Vayigash* – the preceding *parshah*. Thus, *Rashi* calls *Parashas Vayechi* a *parshah setumah*, closed *parshah*. Since nothing happens in a vacuum, *Rashi* explains why *Vayechi* is “closed.” It teaches us that at the time of his passing, the mood of Yaakov *Avinu’s* children was “closed.” They were acutely aware that with the Patriarch’s passing, the suffering and persecution of the impending Egyptian exile would slowly and subtly begin. Although the physical bondage did not commence until all of the *shevatim*, Tribes/brothers, had died, the spiritual endangerment which is a major part of exile began with Yaakov’s passing.

Another reason given for the “closed” nature of *Parashas Vayechi* is that Yaakov sought to reveal the “end” of our *tzaros*, troubles, i.e. when *Moshiach Tzidkeinu* will finally appear. He was prevented from making this revelation because his prophetic vision was suddenly halted. It had become “closed.”

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, offers an insightful understanding of the term “closed” with regard to Yaakov, the *Shevatim* and, by extension, us. Life is an entity which we, human beings, do not understand. Indeed, it is certainly not predictable and it is often mysterious; it is essentially a “closed” book. Its final chapters – the story’s ending – are carefully concealed from the “reader.” We are left to wonder: How will it all end? Will it be a good ending? What is the status of continuity? Likewise, when we are in a period of distress we pray, supplicating Hashem for a positive response. From where will deliverance materialize? Will we extricate ourselves from this *tzarah*, trouble? Good might spring forth from the least expected source. What appears to have been “bad,” suddenly becomes “good.” In other words, life is filled with ambiguity, the greatest obscurity being when and how will it all end? We know not from where and when deliverance and salvation will emerge. What keeps us going? How do we maintain a sense of equanimity, despite the many doubts that surround us? How do we grasp some form of “opening” to the “closed” book of life?

Vayechi Yaakov b’eretz Mitzrayim, “Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt.” It does not state *vayehi* – “and Yaakov was” (in the land of Egypt). The Torah underscores the fact that he lived. Did the Patriarch even dream that his best years, the years that he had lived, would be the years that he had spent living in Egypt? Did he even imagine that he would see Yosef again? Did he even begin to dream that if he would have a reconciliation, Yosef would have remained *frum*, observant, a *tzaddik*, his righteous personality and character intact?

Life is filled with surprises. Yaakov can attest to this reality. To say that Yaakov’s life had its rough spots is an understatement. At the end of the day, however, except when he was in Lavan’s home, he was in a spiritually correct environment, away from the moral perversion that prevailed in the pagan world. Now he was in Egypt, the capital of decadence. Who would think that it was

specifically during these last years, during this relative tranquility from trouble, that Yaakov would have attained true life. Our Patriarch remained immune to – and unaffected by – the environment. He did not allow the corruption around him to deter him from ascending the ladder of spirituality.

Life is filled with its stunning moments. *Rav Alpert* explains that this idea is alluded to by the word *olam*, Hebrew for world. *Olam* shares a root with *he'e'lam*, hidden/concealment. We will never know what will happen. It is beyond us. Thus, it is *he'elam – olam*.

Horav Yaakov Meir Shechter, Shlita, teaches that the primary skill in this world is to be able to relate to Hashem in all situations. Thus, one who has been born without the ability to rise to an exceptional spiritual height in his service to Hashem should not become disenchanted. He should serve Him simply and wholeheartedly: studying easy and uncomplicated subjects in Torah, and praying in a simple, straightforward manner. He will, thus, realize that Hashem is to be found even in the simple places. The true test of a Jew's commitment to Hashem is how he behaves when he is feeling uninspired and low.

Furthermore, as *Horav Nachman Breslover, zl*, teaches, the Jewish perspective on serving Hashem varies greatly from that of the non-Jew. A Jew has *emunah*, faith. With faith, one has hope. When one has hope, he is willing to wait patiently for salvation. *Rav Nachman* offers an insightful analogy that not only delineates the variance between Jew and gentile, but I think also defines Jewish faith. The faith of the individual who does not maintain such a level of trust in the Almighty, his faith is questionable. It is easy to have faith when everything is rosy. It is when life throws us a curve that we see who truly believes and who simply pays lip service.

Now for the story. Two beggars – one Jewish, one gentile – found themselves in a Jewish community on *Erev Pesach*. *Pesach* is a time when food is plentiful and hearts are open. The Jewish beggar taught his gentile friend how to “act” like a Jew, so that they would be invited to a *seder* and receive a hearty meal. The two men were invited to different families. The gentile had never been inside a Jewish home; he had been subsisting on the meager pennies he would get from begging on street corners. How thrilled he was to enter a beautifully lit and decorated home.

It was *Yom Tov*, and the Jewish family went all out to celebrate its good fortune in having been redeemed from Egypt. He was shown to his place at an exquisitely set table.

The beggar sat down and waited for what he expected would be a sumptuous and lavish meal, but he received nothing of the sort. He was given a Hebrew book (*Haggadah*) and forced to listen and listen to expositions and stories. Even the children spoke words of Hebrew! Meanwhile, while everyone else was aglow with Torah thought, he was getting hungrier and hungrier. These people were insane. How could they talk and talk, while the aroma of delicious food was wafting through the air? Finally, they brought out the food! What food it was! Dry crackers (*matzoh*) and horseradish? Bitter tasting horseradish whose smell was sufficiently potent to destroy a person. This is what these Jews were finally serving after two hours of stories! He took one bite of the

matzoh and horseradish and almost choked. This was too much. He would return to begging by the *goyim*! He got up from the table, kicked away his chair, and left the house in a rage.

Meanwhile, his Jewish friend, having been schooled in Jewish tradition as a youth, waited patiently for the real meal, which he knew was coming. The lesson, explains the *Breslover*, is simple: A Jew knows (or at least should know) how to accept the bitterness of the world with patience and love. He knows that the true feast will follow later. We serve Hashem in all situations, under all circumstances, because we understand that they are all temporary.

We forget that we are nothing more than playing a part in the play called "life." Each of us has a different role; some roles are fortunate at first, but change as the scenes unfold. Others, vice-versa. At the end, we all end up before the Heavenly Tribunal where we receive our due based upon the manner in which we have played our role. Some do better than others. It all depends upon our understanding of "our role." Stories abound which extol the *middos*, attributes, of *emunah* and *bitachon*. The following is a classic from which a number of lessons may be gleaned. I will leave that part up to the reader.

By nature, Jewish people are giving, wanting to share their good fortune with others. Yosef was a wealthy man who was miserable, because he had no one with whom to share his wealth. He had no family. "What enduring charitable act can I make? What lasting accomplishment can I achieve?" he wondered. Finally, he came upon an original idea that was quite generous. He would look for a poor man who was so down on his luck that he had entirely given up hope. He searched and "interviewed" a number of down and out men, but each one had someone who was helping him. Finally, he met a man who looked like he was in seriously bad shape. "I have finally found someone who has no one," he declared. Hearing this, the poor man responded, "Who says? Perhaps there is no one in this world who can help me, but there is Hashem Who helps all creatures. I certainly can rely upon Him! If you want someone who has given up all hope, go to the cemetery. That is a hopeless place!"

The man thought a moment and realized that it really was not a bad idea. He went to the cemetery and buried his large sack of money, so that it would remain hidden until he found someone whom he could help. Several years passed, and the man's fortune reversed itself. All of his properties and investments had tanked. He was now penniless and destitute. He started thinking and remembered that he had buried a fortune in gold in the cemetery. He took a shovel and proceeded to the cemetery to retrieve what was his.

In the midst of his digging, he was apprehended by the police who claimed he was digging up stolen goods. It was difficult to prove otherwise, so he was taken to jail to await trial by the mayor. The mayor read the charges against him and asked, "Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Our hero began to recount his long story, how after being unable to find anyone to take his money, he buried it in the cemetery. He was digging up what was rightfully his. "I am aware that my story sounds far-fetched, but every word of it is true," he said.

“Oh,” said the mayor, “I believe every word of your story. You do not recognize me, do you?” he asked. “Wait, now I know who you are,” the defendant said. “You are the poor man who told me to bury my money.” “You are correct,” said the mayor. “I hail from a distinguished lineage, and when the town’s mayor died, I was appointed to serve in his place. I am now a wealthy man. I told you that all one must do is place his trust in Hashem.”

The mayor invited Yosef to live with him in his mansion, an invitation which Yosef readily accepted. He had learned an invaluable lesson. A Jew is never alone. A Jew never gives up hope. We have Hashem to Whom we should *daven* for everything. Only He has the power to elevate a person from the lowest depths to the greatest heights – and vice versa.