

## **Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. (47:28)**

After (what seemed to be) a life of difficulty, Yaakov *Avinu* arrived in Egypt to spend the last seventeen years of his mortal existence. The tranquility, joy and harmony that he enjoyed in some way ameliorated what he had endured in the past. While there can be no tradeoff for the pain and sorrow that our Patriarch experienced, we do know that the last seventeen years of his life were reasonably calm and filled with *nachas*. *Chazal* (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Kesubos 65b, Bereishis Rabbah 96:5*) teach that Yaakov *Avinu* and Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* were intrinsically joined. This matter was not unknown to the *Tanna*, who, when he read, “Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years,” would attribute those years to his own life. The last seventeen years of *Rebbe’s* life were spent in Tzipori, where he merited to produce his greatest spiritual achievements. Indeed, *Chazal* teach that, during this time, all of *Klal Yisrael* enjoyed unparalleled happiness, blessing and health.

In *Pri Tzaddik (Vayechi 2) Horav Tzadok HaKohen, zl, m’Lublin*, reveals a number of the parallels between the life of the *Tanna* and that of his predecessor, Yaakov *Avinu*: A) both were paradigmatic examples of Torah study at the highest levels; B) both had reached such unprecedented levels of spiritual perfection that obviated the need for death; C) they were both referred to as *kadosh*, the holy one (*Kadosh Yaakov; Rabbeinu HaKadosh*); D) they both experienced extreme suffering in their lives.

*Rav Tzadok* posits that Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi’s neshamah*, soul, was a *nitzutz*, spark, of the soul of Yaakov *Avinu*. The esoteric aspect of this phenomenon came into play during *Rebbe’s* seventeen years in Tzipori. It was in Tzipori that he was engaged in the same type of spiritual endeavors as Yaakov *Avinu* had been. He illuminates this after focusing on and explaining the divergence between Yaakov’s two names. After the Patriarch struggled with and bested Eisav’s guardian angel, he was catapulted to an even higher spiritual level. This victory over the angel led to an even more significant victory: Vanquishing the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, within him. At this point, the Patriarch had achieved personal perfection – as reflected in his name, Yisrael, which personifies strength and domination. The Patriarch had essentially completed his mission on this world. He could now devote himself solely to the physical and spiritual welfare of others.

One would expect that, after the seventeen years Yaakov spent in Egypt, which, from the point of tranquility, were his best years, the Torah would refer to him as Yisrael, the name associated with strength. Ironically, the Torah refers to him as Yaakov at this point in time. This begs elucidation.

I will attempt to encapsulate *Rav Tzadok’s* explanation in an unambiguous, straightforward way, without delving into the esoteric nature of his comments. Yaakov *Avinu* was to be the father of the entire nation, having produced the twelve tribes which comprise the foundation of our nation. As the father, he is responsible for the totality of all the people and for the nation’s mission to disseminate Torah throughout the world. As such, every Jew, regardless of his background and level of erudition, plays a vital role. This is our national destiny, and national means everyone. The

ordinary people, however, were the source of Yaakov's concern. How would they survive the pressures and trials of the long *galus*, exile, in Egypt? Thus, he, "Yaakov," devoted himself to seeing to it that the spiritual level of the *amcha Yid* would not be impeded.

Why "Yaakov," rather than "Yisrael"? *Rav Tzadok* explains that the name Yaakov is related to *eikav*, heel, the bottom of the body which is covered by a layer of desensitized skin. The sole is a metaphor for the common Jew who requires spiritual support.

Prior to descending to the spiritually bankrupt society that pervaded Egypt, Hashem spoke to Yaakov and assured him that his descendants would survive and develop into a great nation. Indeed, it was only by living in a country whose culture was so dark, that Yaakov's light would shine brighter. The splendor of sanctity and purity radiates best against a backdrop of darkness. The sole, which is at the bottom of the body, must connect to – and be guided by – the head, which is at the top. Metaphorically, this means that the profane is elevated to the sacred, and darkness transforms into light. This transition marks the successful completion of the mission.

The name Yisrael refers to the Patriarch's personal level of perfection. The name Yaakov addresses his mission to lift up the "soles," individuals who require a spiritual lift. This was Yaakov's mission in Egypt during the last seventeen years of his life. We may add that the *gematria*, numerical equivalent, of seventeen is *tov* – good.

Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* devoted the last seventeen years of his life to working diligently to perpetuate and inspire every strata of the Jewish people – even those on the lowest rung of the spiritual ladder, in order to lift them up to the top. His greatest achievement, the redaction to the *Mishnah*, continues to inspire all of *Klal Yisrael* to this very day. Indeed, it is the foundation of Jewish law and culture. Tzipori was not Yerushalayim, and the spiritual level of its inhabitants contrasted those in Yerushalayim. Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* spent his last years like Yaakov *Avinu* – connecting "Yaakov" to "Yisrael." These were the *tov* – finest years of his life.

While it is true that we are neither Yaakov nor Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi*, it does not preclude us from emulating them and turning their mission into our mission. Our energies must be devoted to enhancing the spiritual level of all Jews. This can be done only if we create an inclusive, welcoming environment, so that we enable those who do not have the background, or have experienced difficulty earlier in life, to return and reconnect.

Some individuals who have had solid, concrete beginnings, both in their background and education, encounter something along the way – something that breaks them and, in some instances, even shatters their lives, leaving them broken shards of their original self. Through no fault of their own, they were left without an anchor in a sea of confusion. This is where "Yaakov" has a significant role.

The challenges against which "Yaakov" must endeavor are never simple. Every situation is

different and demands its own unique strategy. One of the most difficult times confronting *Klal Yisrael* was the aftermath of the Holocaust, when thousands of shell-shocked, broken survivors were compelled to deal with not only physical travail, but also the spiritual and existential questions. The nature of humanity, the existence of evil, faith in the face of unimaginable suffering are just some of the pressing issues that caused some to question their conviction, to reconcile their beliefs with the horrors they witnessed. While some found solace in their faith, others became despondent and struggled with their unanswered questions.

The *Klausenberger Rebbe, zl*, was an individual whose faith, commitment and encyclopedic knowledge of all areas of Torah were only surpassed by his love of all Jews. As such, he became a one-man *kiruv* organization, father and mother to hundreds of orphans, confidante and friend to the broken shards who survived the Holocaust and wandered aimlessly around the Displaced Person's Camp – looking for answers and seeking love and comfort. He was present for everyone. He rebuilt lives and guided people back to their faith in Hashem. The *Rebbe's* powers of persuasion were extraordinary, because he first established trust with the survivors. He, too, had suffered as they had, losing his wife and eleven children to the Nazi murderers. He was nonjudgmental, encouraging the survivors to “be themselves,” get it out of their systems. He saw the inner spark in all of these lost souls, and, with patience, he nurtured them back to reality and emotional health.

The *Rebbe* had a special place in the hearts of the many young orphans that drifted around aimlessly in the camp. They had lost everything. As such, he felt it was his obligation to care for their physical, as well as spiritual, needs – as if they were his own children. Fifty years later, after the *Rebbe's neshamah* had passed on to its rightful place in *Gan Eden*, his family was visited during the *Shivah*, seven-day mourning period, by a woman who had been one of the young orphans in the *Rebbe's* care. She told the family how, as a young girl, she had been so poor that she walked around the camp with no socks. Upon seeing her one day, the *Rebbe* removed his own socks in the middle of the street and gave them to her saying, “It is unbecoming for a Jewish girl to have to walk around this way.”

Years later, the *Rebbe* was asked what motivated him to be so active and determined to help, when he himself was suffering physically and emotionally. He responded with his signature humility, “I saw piles of corpses around me. How could I not bring them to a proper burial? All around were sick people, people who had suffered immeasurably. How could I not care for them? Hundreds of orphans wandered around the camps, surely someone had to gather them together and establish a home for them. How could I have stood by and done nothing?”

We all have our moments and our responsibilities. At times, they fall under the rubric of “Yisrael.” Other opportunities and circumstances fall under the category of “Yaakov.” All are equally important.