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LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch, by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Tears — Then and Now

“And Yosef harnessed his chariot, and he went up to meet Israel, his father, to Goshen; he appeared to him, and he fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck for a long time.” Bereishis 46:29

The long-awaited reunion between Yaakov and Yosef is most unusual in one regard: Yosef cries; Yaakov does not.

Through all the years of Yosef’s absence, Yaakov mourned. The few sentences recorded in the Torah during this time show the grief that occupied his heart and mind. Yosef, on the other hand, led a most eventful life in Egypt. We do not see him mourning his own loss. In naming his first child, Yosef seems to evidence even gratitude for his losses: he names his first child *Menasheh* — “*for Hashem has ‘nashani’ all of my troubles and all of my father’s house.*” This verse is ordinarily translated as “Hashem made me *forget* all my trouble and all my father’s house.”

Rav Hirsch, however, shudders at the suggestion that Yosef is *grateful* for the ability to forget his aged father and his entire father’s family. That rendition could lead us to conclude that Yosef was a heartless man who took no interest in his father’s fate. Instead, Rav Hirsch understands the word *nashanai* in its alternate sense — to be a creditor — rendering the statement as “*Hashem has turned all of my trouble and all of my father’s household into my creditors.*” Misfortune and tragedy was transformed by Hashem into an instrument to shape my happiness, so that I find myself deeply indebted to my trouble and to my family.

This attitude accompanies Yosef throughout his travails in Egypt, and upon the first opportunity he expresses this to his brothers:

“Do not be troubled... that you sold me here, for Hashem sent me ahead of you, to preserve life... Hashem sent me ahead of you to establish for you a remnant in the land, to preserve it for you, for your great deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here but Hashem! And He has appointed me as a father to Pharaoh, master of his entire household and ruler of the whole land of Egypt.” (Gen. 45:5-8)

But here, in our verse, Yosef weeps. We see his pent-up sadness pouring out as he surrenders completely to the pain of separation from his father. Only now, in his father's embrace, did he feel all the pain of the separation, reliving the more than twenty years that had passed.

§ Sources: *Commentary Bereishet* 46:29; 41:51

PARSHA OVERVIEW

With the discovery of the goblet in Binyamin's sack, the brothers are confused. Yehuda alone steps forward and eloquently but firmly petitions Yosef for Binyamin's release, offering himself instead. As a result of this act of total selflessness, Yosef finally has irrefutable proof that his brothers are different people from the ones who cast him into the pit, and so he now reveals to them that he is none other than their brother. The brothers shrink from him in shame, but Yosef consoles them, telling them that everything has been part of Hashem's plan. He sends them back to their father Yaakov with a message to come and reside in the land of Goshen. At first, Yaakov cannot accept the news, but when he recognizes hidden signs in the message which positively identify the sender as his son Yosef, his spirit is revived.

Yaakov, together with all his family and possessions, sets out for Goshen. Hashem communicates with Yaakov in a vision at night. He tells him not to fear going down to Egypt and its negative spiritual consequences, because it is there that Hashem will establish the Children of Israel as a great nation although they will be dwelling in a land steeped in immorality and corruption.

The Torah lists Yaakov's offspring and hints to the birth of Yocheved, who will be the mother of Moshe Rabbeinu. Seventy souls in total descend into Egypt, where Yosef is reunited with his father after 22 years of separation. He embraces his father and weeps, overflowing with joy. Yosef secures the settlement of his family in Goshen. Yosef takes his father Yaakov and five of the least threatening of his brothers to be presented to Pharaoh, and Yaakov blesses Pharaoh. Yosef instructs that, in return for grain, all the people of Egypt must give everything to Pharaoh, including themselves as his slaves. Yosef then redistributes the population, except for the Egyptian priests, who are directly supported by a stipend from Pharaoh. The Children of Israel become settled, and their numbers multiply greatly.

Q & A

Questions

1. What threatening words did Yehuda say to Yosef?
2. Why did Yehuda say his missing brother died?
3. Why was Yehuda the one to plead for Binyamin?
4. What do we learn from Yosef telling his brothers, "Go up to my father"?
5. What two things did the brothers see that helped prove that he was really Yosef?
6. Why did Binyamin weep on Yosef's neck?
7. Why did Yosef send old wine to Yaakov?
8. What did Yosef mean when he said, "Don't dispute on the way"?
9. What happened to Yaakov when he realized Yosef was alive?
10. Why did G-d tell Yaakov, "Don't fear going down to Egypt"?
11. "I will bring you up" from Egypt. To what did this allude?
12. What happened to the property that Yaakov acquired in Padan Aram?
13. Who was the mother of Shaul ben HaCanaanit?
14. When listing Yaakov's children, the verse refers to Rachel as "Rachel, wife of Yaakov." Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah are not referred to as Yaakov's wives. Why?
15. Yosef harnessed his own chariot instead of letting a servant do it. Why?
16. Why were shepherds abhorrent to the Egyptians?
17. Why did Yosef pick the weakest brothers to stand before Pharaoh?
18. What blessing did Yaakov give Pharaoh when he left his presence?
19. Yosef resettled the land of Egypt, moving the people from city to city. What were his two motives for this?
20. Whose fields were not bought by Yosef?

Answers

1. 44:18 - He threatened that Yosef would be stricken with leprosy, like Pharaoh when he took Sarah from Avraham. Alternatively, Yehuda threatened to kill Yosef and Pharaoh.
2. 44:20 - Yehuda feared that if he said his missing brother was alive, Yosef would demand to see him.
3. 44:32 - He was the one who took "soul" responsibility for him.
4. 45:9 - We learn that *Eretz Yisrael* is higher than all other lands.
5. 45:12 - He was circumcised like they were, and he spoke *lashon hakodesh*.
6. 45:14 - Binyamin wept for the destruction of Mishkan Shilo built in Yosef's territory.
7. 45:23 - Elderly people appreciate old wine.
8. 45:24 - He warned that if they engage in halachic disputes, they might not be alert to possible travel dangers.
9. 45:27 - His *ruach hakodesh* (prophetic spirit) returned.
10. 46:3 - Because Yaakov was grieved to leave *Eretz Canaan*.
11. 46:4 - That Yaakov would be buried in *Eretz Canaan*.
12. 46:6 - He traded it for Esav's portion in the Cave of Machpelah.
13. 46:10 - Dina bat Yaakov.
14. 46:19 - Rachel was regarded as the mainstay of the family.
15. 46:29 - Yosef wanted to hasten to honor his father.
16. 46:34 - Because the Egyptians worshipped sheep.
17. 47:2 - So Pharaoh wouldn't see their strength and draft them.
18. 47:10 - That the waters of the Nile should rise to greet Pharaoh.
19. 47:21 - In order to remind them that they no longer owned the land, and to help his family by removing the stigma of being strangers.
20. 47:22 - The Egyptian priests.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Mevarchim HaChodesh
Blessing the New Month (Part 8)

*“The greatest darkness comes just before dawn –
but most people give up one minute before the light.”*
Ba'al Shem Tov

Afterword

A year is composed of twelve individual months. It sounds deceptively simple. But our Sages teach that a year is far more complex than just twelve months. Each month releases its own exclusive spiritual force, and as the months progress, their unique capacities fuse together to establish the Jewish year. Accordingly, the months are not just periods of time that bring us back full circle to the same place we were a year earlier; rather, each month contains enormous possibilities, and the entire year is replete with the potential that each individual month incorporates into it.

To access the spiritual energy that each month generates, we need to allow ourselves to be mindful of its potency. Without proper preparation, our ability to appreciate and internalize what the month has to offer is lacking.

That is why we prelude each month with the beautiful Tefillot of *Mevarchim HaChodesh*, as a deliberate reminder that we are about to step into a new month, completely different from the one before it, a month with its own singular dynamic and potential. *Mevarchim HaChodesh* teaches us that, in order to gain maximum benefit from the approaching month, we need an awareness of the spiritual influence that it has on the entire year.

It is no coincidence, then, that the word for *month* - “*CHoDeSH*” - and the word for *new* - “*CHaDaSH*” - are spelled with exactly the same letters (שׁוׁוּח־chet-dalet-shin)! Because each month is something new. Something different. With its potential stretching off into eternity.

As each *Mevarchim HaChodesh* rolls around, we become exposed - not only to the unlimited potential contained within the forthcoming month - but also to the way that each month connects to the previous month and to the following month; and, all together, the most beautiful mosaic that is our year unfolds.

What are these celestial energies? Beginning with Nissan (because the Torah designates Nissan as the first month of the Jewish year - see for example, *Shemot* 40:2) Kabbalistic sources teach as follows:

- *Nissan* is redemption
- *Iyar* is individual growth
- *Sivan* is national growth
- *Tammuz* is foresight and the internalization that only through darkness can light be appreciated
- *Av* is understanding that within destruction are the seeds of reconstruction
- *Elul* is preparation and repentance
- *Tishrei* is renewal
- *Cheshvan* is reflection
- *Kislev* is dedicating ourselves to serving Hashem
- *Tevet* is perseverance and control
- *Shevat* is unlocking the Divine blessings found within the physical world
- *Adar* is joy and expectation

And, as we recite *Mevarchim HaChodesh*, we turn to Hashem and ask for everything that we could possibly want. And by doing so we acknowledge that Hashem is the only Entity that can furnish us with all of our needs and desires.

There is a striking idea attributed to Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), an English poet and painter: “*The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank.*”

What a sublime moment *Mevarchim HaChodesh* is! An unparalleled opportunity each month to request whatever our heart’s desire. But also, a moment of reflection. To be thankful that we recognize Who we have to ask it from.

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TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

RETURNING TO EGYPT

Mitzvah 500

In *Parashas Vayigash*, the Jewish People descend to Egypt and enter a period of national suffering and subjugation; but worse, their pure beliefs and firm traditions become corrupted by the influence of their Egyptian neighbors, and even the land itself had a negative spiritual influence (see *Alshich, Bereishis* 45:10). The Jewish People strived to remain as distinct as possible by retaining their traditional names and their language. Time took its toll, however, and when Hashem came to redeem them two centuries later, many Jews had adopted idolatrous practices. This is clear from the prophecy that Aharon conveyed to them during that period: “Remove the detestable [idols] from before his eyes, and do not contaminate yourselves with the abominable [idols] of Egypt” (*Yechezkel* 20:7 with *Rashi*).

As long as they were involved with idolatry they could not be redeemed, so before the Exodus Moshe instructed them to withdraw from idolatry entirely (*Rashi* to *Shemos* 12:6). Their sorry spiritual state was a direct consequence of living in Egypt.

After the miraculous redemption, Hashem commands the Jewish People to never again return to live in Egypt. *Sefer HaChinuch* explains:

“The Egyptians were wicked and sinful. Hashem redeemed us from their hands and took us out of Egypt in His kindness in order to make us righteous and lead us along the path of truth. Therefore, He commanded us never to return there and become contaminated by learning from their heretical beliefs, so that we should not follow a way of life that runs counter to the moral standard of our perfect Torah.”

Radvaz adds that even *after* the Assyrian king Sancherev exiled the Egyptians and replaced Egypt’s residents with other exiles, the prohibition remains, because the land *itself* has a negative influence.

This prohibition applies only to Egypt. There is another prohibition, however, for a resident of *Eretz Yisrael* to leave it and move to any other country (*Rambam, Hil. Melachim* 5:9). Halachic details and exceptions to this prohibition will not be discussed in this brief article (see *Teshuvos VeHanhagos*, vol. I, §900, and vol. III, 393). As to the reason for this prohibition, *Meiri* explains (*Kesubos* 111a):

“Generally speaking, wisdom and fear of sin are not common outside Eretz Yisrael because of the difficulties of the Exile that the Jewish people suffer there. By contrast, generally speaking, wisdom and fear of sin are common in Eretz Yisrael, to the point that its residents perceive the glory of the Creator and merit to bask in the radiance of the Divine Presence.”

No land can compare to the beneficial spiritual influence of *Eretz Yisrael*, and no people can compare to righteous Jews who dedicate their lives to Hashem there (see *Kesubos* 75a). The above Mitzvos indicate that even a person whose circumstances do not allow him to live in *Eretz Yisrael* should strive to live in a Torah-observant community. Even in the digital age, the influence of society cannot be underestimated, as the Sages advise in *Pirkei Avos* (2:9), attach yourself to a good neighbor and distance yourself from a bad neighbor.