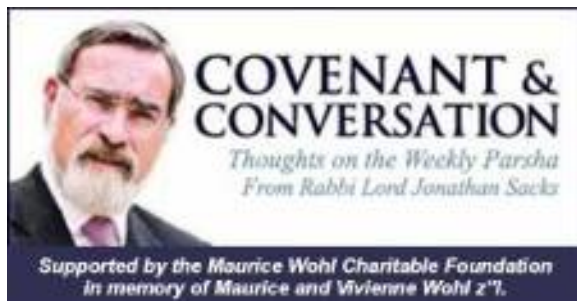


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Generations Forget and Remember

The drama of younger and older brothers, which haunts the book of Bereishit from Cain and Abel onwards, reaches a strange climax in the story of Joseph's children. Jacob/Israel is nearing the end of his life. Joseph visits him, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. It is the only scene of grandfather and grandchildren in the book. Jacob asks Joseph to bring them near so that he can bless them. What follows next is described in painstaking detail:

Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel's right, and brought them near him. But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn. . . . When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to him, "No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your

right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations." He blessed them that day, saying: "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. (48:13-14, 17-20).

It is not difficult to understand the care Joseph took to ensure that Jacob would bless the firstborn first. Three times his father had set the younger before the elder, and each time it had resulted in tragedy. He, the younger, had sought to supplant his elder brother Esau. He favoured the younger sister Rachel over Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Joseph and Benjamin, over the elder Reuben, Shimon and Levi. The consequences were catastrophic: estrangement from Esau, tension between the two sisters, and hostility among his sons. Joseph himself bore the scars: thrown into a well by his brothers, who initially planned to kill him and eventually sold him into Egypt as a slave. Had his father not learned?

Or did he think that Ephraim - whom Joseph held in his right hand - was the elder? Did Jacob know what he was doing? Did he not realise that he was risking extending the family feuds into the next generation? Besides which, what possible reason could he have for favouring the younger of his grandchildren over the elder? He had not seen them before. He knew nothing about them. None of the factors that led to the earlier episodes were operative here. Why did Jacob favour Ephraim over Manasseh?

Jacob knew two things, and it is here that the explanation lies. He knew that the stay of his family in Egypt would not be a short one. Before leaving Canaan to see Joseph, God had appeared to him in a vision:

Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes. (46:3-4)

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This was, in other words, the start of the long exile which God had told Abraham would be the fate of his children (a vision the Torah describes as accompanied by "a deep and dreadful darkness" - 15:12). The other thing Jacob knew was his grandsons' names, Manasseh and Ephraim. The combination of these two facts was enough.

When Joseph finally emerged from prison to become prime minister of Egypt, he married and had two sons. This is how the Torah describes their birth:

Before the years of the famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh, saying, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim, saying, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." (41:50-52)

With the utmost brevity the Torah intimates an experience of exile that was to be repeated many times across the centuries. At first, Joseph felt relief. The years as a slave, then a prisoner, were over. He had risen to greatness. In Canaan, he had been the youngest of eleven brothers in a nomadic family of shepherds. Now, in Egypt, he was at the centre of the greatest civilization of the ancient world, second only to Pharaoh in rank and power. No one reminded him of his background. With his royal robes and ring and chariot, he was an Egyptian prince (as Moses was later to be). The past was a bitter memory he sought to remove from his mind. Manasseh means "forgetting."

But as time passed, Joseph began to feel quite different emotions. Yes, he had arrived. But this people was not his; nor was its culture. To be sure, his family was, in any worldly terms, undistinguished, unsophisticated. Yet they remained his family. They were the matrix of who he was. Though they were no more than shepherds (a class the Egyptians despised), they had been spoken to by God - not the gods of the sun, the river and death, the Egyptian pantheon - but God, the creator of heaven and earth, who did not make His home in temples and pyramids and panoplies of power, but who spoke in the human heart as a voice, lifting a simple family to moral greatness. By the time his second son was born, Joseph had undergone a profound change of

heart. To be sure, he had all the trappings of earthly success - "God has made me fruitful" - but Egypt had become "the land of my affliction." Why? Because it was exile.

There is a sociological observation about immigrant groups, known as Hansen's Law: "The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget." Joseph went through this transformation very quickly. It was already complete by the time his second son was born. By calling him Ephraim, he was remembering what, when Manasseh was born, he was trying to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh had nothing to do with their ages and everything to do with their names. Knowing that these were the first two children of his family to be born in exile, knowing too that the exile would be prolonged and at times difficult and dark, Jacob sought to signal to all future generations that there would be a constant tension between the desire to forget (to assimilate, acculturate, anaesthetise the hope of a return) and the promptings of memory (the knowledge that this is "exile," that we are part of another story, that ultimate home is somewhere else). The child of forgetting (Manasseh) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part.



Conclusions

As we approach the conclusion of Bereishit an episode that we believed was resolved, returns.

And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'Yosef will perhaps hate us, and will certainly pay us back for all the evil we did to him.'

Despite all the years that had passed, the brothers still did not trust Yosef, and felt that he harbored ill will

toward them for the pain they had caused him. While we recognize the enormity of the outrage they had perpetrated, we would have hoped that after all these years they would have become reconciled.

The text continues:

And they sent a messenger to Yosef, saying, 'Your father did command before he died, saying, So shall you say to Yosef: Forgive, I beg you now, the trespass of your brothers, and their sin; for they did to you evil; and now, we beg you, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.' And Yosef wept when they spoke to him. And his brothers also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we are your servants.

The description is tragic. The brothers feel that they must offer themselves as slaves, apparently fearing an even more sinister fate awaited them and that they deserved slavery. Moreover, according to the Talmud Ya'akov had never uttered the words his sons attributed to him, and did not instruct his children to implore Yosef to forgive them. The brothers "invented" Ya'akov's deathbed speech; they lied out of fear.

"Your father commanded": they changed (lied) for the sake of peace, for Ya'akov had not commanded them thus, for he did not suspect Yosef. (Rashi on Bereishit 50:16)

While the ethics of truth and lies is certainly a subject for debate, apparently the brothers saw this as a case of life and death, and lied to save their lives. They feared that Yosef had been biding his time all those years, waiting for the opportunity to kill them and have his revenge.

And Yosef said to them, Fear not; for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore do not fear; I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he

comforted them, and spoke kindly to them.

Yosef placates them and the issue is put to rest; nonetheless, we sense something is missing. Had Yosef wanted to kill them, he could have done so years earlier. Had he wanted to enslave them he could have had them shackled as soon as they arrived in Egypt years before. Our understanding is that Yosef acted magnanimously in his relationship with his brothers: He cared for them, provided them land and food, and took responsibility for all of their needs. Why was there so much fear and distrust? The answer lies in the intricacy of the relationship that unfolded years earlier, when they confront one another for the first time in Egypt. That encounter leaves us with a number of questions regarding Yosef's behavior and strategy. From the moment that Yosef sets eyes on his brothers who have come seeking food, he torments them and puts them through an emotional roller-coaster ride. Does he have a plan, or is he subject to capricious mood swings? Is it simply revenge that he seeks? There are a number of approaches found in the commentaries to this question. Apparently, the first to articulate the question was the Ramban, whose question is of a similar nature: Why, despite ample opportunity, does Yosef never attempt to contact his father? When we consider their special relationship, the mutual love, and the long years of grief their separation caused them both, the question seems even more pointed. Interestingly, the Ramban allows that a desire for revenge on Yosef's part would be understandable, had it not been for the fact that this would necessarily cause his father such terrible suffering. The Ramban answers, instead, that it was Yosef's dreams which motivated him. He knew that the dreams must come true; he accepted his fate and waited for them to unfold. When the brothers come and prostrate themselves before him, Yosef sees how close the first dream is to fruition. He devises a plot to have Binyamin come and bow as well, which will complete the first dream. Thus, when Yosef finally reveals himself to his brothers, he is described as being unable to contain himself any longer:

Then Yosef could not refrain himself before all those who stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Yosef made himself known to his brothers. (Genesis 45:1)

Apparently Yosef had wanted to hold out a bit more, but could not. What was he after? Yosef wanted the second dream to be realized, to complete the entire cycle, as it were, but he was unable to hold back any further.

Other commentaries are uncomfortable with this approach: Dreams are in the realm of God, whereas man's mandate is to do that which is ethical. Neither revenge nor self-fulfilling prophecies motivate Yosef's behavior toward his brothers. Rather, Yosef's sole desire is to rehabilitate his brothers and to lead them, even force them, to repent for the inequities perpetrated against him.

In order to fully appreciate Yosef's plan, let us consider the details of his behavior.

THE ACCUSATION

When the brothers arrive in Egypt, the text informs us that Yosef remembers the dreams; this would support the Ramban's approach. The narrative then recounts how Yosef accuses the brothers of being spies.

And Yosef knew his brothers, but they knew not him. And Yosef remembered the dreams he dreamed of them, and said to them, 'You are spies; to see the nakedness of the land you have come,. And they said to him, 'No, my lord, your servants came to buy food. We are all one man's sons; we are honest men, your servants are no spies,. And he said to them, 'No, to see the nakedness of the land you have come'. And they said, 'Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is not.' And Yosef said to them, 'Of this (or, of him) I spoke to you, saying, You are spies'. (Genesis 42:8-14)

The text is obscure. It sounds as if Yosef actually hopes the brothers will admit they are spies on some sort of mission. One senses that had the brothers said they were searching for a brother lost years ago, Yosef would have revealed his identity immediately, satisfied that they had learned from the errors of their youth and were now repentant. Alas, the brothers

insist that they are seeking out nothing other than food. Rabbinic sources insist that they were, indeed, searching for Yosef, and had therefore entered Egypt from ten different gates, but we are hard pressed to find any such admission in the text. The brothers deny seeking Yosef even when the question is put to them directly:

...and one is not. And Yosef said to them, 'Of this (or, of him) I spoke to you, saying, You are spies. (Genesis 42:8-14)

Yosef's response is telling: He places them in prison for three days, to await the return of the brother sent to fetch Binyamin.

The time in prison has the desired affect; they emerge subdued, defeated, aware of their iniquity:

And they said one to another, we are truly guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us. And Reuven answered them, saying, 'Did I not speak to you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? Therefore, behold, also his blood is required'. (Genesis 42:21,22)

The prison reminds them of the sale; incarceration and loss of their basic liberties reminds them of the brother they sold. Moreover, the same word is used interchangeably for prison and pit (37:24, 40:15). This ironic use of language is probably not lost on the brothers, and helps heighten their existential awareness, and deepen their crisis. They now know what their brother experienced - not in an abstract or theoretical way, but practically, physically, viscerally. Can we possibly imagine that Yosef merely sought revenge? Certainly, had revenge been his motive, he had no reason to release them. A person seeking revenge would have said let them spend some twenty years in prison in order to appreciate the full impact of the experience. Yosef could have subjected them to any sort of unpleasantness he chose, but they were incarcerated, and nothing more, for three days.

Another subtlety should not go unnoticed: Originally, all were to remain and one return to Canaan for Binyamin, but Yosef changes the plan and has one

remain behind while nine leave. This was probably not lost on the brothers either: the last time this happened was when Yosef was sold. He was left behind while the other nine went home.

And Yosef said to them the third day, 'This do, and live; for I fear God. If you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in the house of your prison; you go, carry grain for the famine of your houses. But bring your youngest brother to me; so shall your words be verified, and you shall not die. And they did so. (Genesis 42:18-20)

On their way back home, the brothers probably do think of Yosef, and the error of their ways. By his next action we see that Yosef does not allow them to lose that thought:

Then Yosef commanded to fill their sacks with grain, and to restore every man's money into his sack, and to give them provision for the way; and thus did he to them. And they loaded their donkeys with the grain, and departed from there. And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey provender in the inn, he saw his money; for, behold, it was in his sack's mouth. And he said to his brothers, My money is restored; and, lo, it is in my sack; and their heart failed them, and they were afraid, saying one to another, What is this that God has done to us? (Genesis 42:25-28)

Presumably, the last time the brothers had ill-gotten money in their hands was as a result of the sale of Yosef. The money they received was surely perceived as blood money. Now, years later, seeing this money in their bags, knowing that it was not rightfully theirs, must have dredged up that same sinking feeling.

If revenge was his motive, it would have been incongruous to have returned the money. If it is the dreams that inspire Yosef, then again the money is unrelated. Apparently Yosef is trying to create a cathartic experience, to have the brothers relive elements of the sale so that they may truly and fully repent.

We see this theme repeated when the brothers return with Binyamin. Yosef has them all sit to dine. The Egyptians exit, as does Yosef, leaving the brothers alone to break bread:

And they served him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, who ate with him, by themselves; because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked at one another in amazement. (Genesis 43:32,33)

The reason for the brothers' amazement was the precise seating arrangement. Yet again there may be a subtext: Prior to the sale, while Yosef languished in the pit, the brothers sat and ate bread!

And it came to pass, when Yosef came to his brothers, that they stripped Yosef of his coat, his coat of colors that was on him. And they took him, and threw him into a pit; and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat bread; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing gum, balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. (Genesis 37:23:25)

Now in Egypt, having returned the illicit money, the brothers sit and are bidden to eat bread, in seeming reversal of the events of the sale, when they first ate bread and later received the money. Here, too, neither dreams nor revenge would explain this behavior. All the brothers, including Binyamin, had bowed to Yosef prior to this meal, fulfilling the first dream. What could Yosef hope to accomplish by having them break bread at this point? Apparently, he wants them to relive the horrific meal they ate when Yosef's screams could be heard in the background. This time, Yosef again weeps, but he muffles the sound (v. 30).

The brothers begin their journey home. They believe their terrible ordeal has come to an end: Soon they will be back in the Promised Land, reunited with their father. The family will soon be whole again. Of

course, deep inside they know that someone is missing, and Yosef makes sure they don't forget. Again, he returns their money, and has his royal goblet placed in Binyamin's bag. While this has nothing to do directly with the sale it may relate to events which serve as the background for the sale.

Yosef's stewards accost them, accusing them of treachery and mean-spiritedness. Their bags are searched. They feel helpless and humiliated. A scene from their childhood must now come to mind: On their way to their ancestral homeland for the very first time, they are caught on the road, their bags searched. In that episode, it was their own grandfather Lavan who was the perpetrator, and Rachel who was the culprit. The stage was now set for the brothers to turn their backs on Binyamin, to accuse him of the crime and forsake him in order to save themselves. It would have been so easy to theorize that he, like his mother, had "sticky fingers" and could not resist taking what was not his.

This is the moment of truth. Will the brothers display fidelity to their brother ? the son of Rachel ? or abandon him as they did Yosef all those years before?

Yosef, in his wisdom, had been hard at work behind the scenes, almost assuring the proper conclusion. Rachel was no thief. Stealing her father's idols was heroic, reminiscent of the iconoclasm of Avraham. Furthermore, by this point each of the brothers has now already twice experienced the bizarre feeling of finding something in their own bags which they knew they had not placed there. Had Yosef not set the stage in this manner, perhaps they would have more readily accused Binyamin. They must have considered that the strange Egyptian prince seated them with precision, each in his own place according to age, at that meal in the palace. He knew who each one was; he could have placed the cup in the bag of the youngest.

The brothers rally around Binyamin, son of Rachel. They will not abandon him. It is at this point that Yosef breaks down and reveals himself.

Then Yosef could not restrain himself before all those who stood by him; and he cried, 'Cause every man to go out from me.' And there stood no man with him, while Yosef made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud; and the Egyptians and the house of Par'oh heard. And Yosef said to his

brothers, 'I am Yosef; does my father still live?' And his brothers could not answer him; for they were troubled by his presence.

The realization that this was Yosef terrified the brothers. They could not speak. Yosef seems swept up in uncontrollable emotions. What more, then, must be accomplished? Had he been able to control himself, what would have been his next move, the next part of the plan? If Yosef was motivated by the desire to rehabilitate his brothers, what was still missing? The text says that Yosef was unable to "restrain himself before all those who stood by him" and had them removed. He did not want them to witness the moment of his confrontation with his brothers?apparently, Yosef had a gift for "P.R." When the Egyptians are told later that Yosef's brothers have arrived, they are overjoyed to hear the news. The spin doctor has pre-empted the need to correct a bad first impression.

When Yosef confronts his brothers he says only five words (in Hebrew): *Ani Yosef; ha'od avi hai?* "I am Yosef; does my father still live"?

The brothers are shocked. Yosef had many years to rehearse these words; certainly in the days immediately prior, he knew that the confrontation was imminent. What the Torah does not reveal to us is Yosef's tone of voice. Is it sad? Full of remorse? Is he solemn? The Talmud and Midrash understand that his words were heard as an incredible chastisement:

Another comment on And Yosef said unto his brethren: Come near to me, I pray you, etc. (Genesis 44:4), R. Eleazar b. 'Azariah said: Woe to us in the day of judgment, and woe to us in the day of rebuke. Yosef was but mere flesh and blood, yet when he rebuked his brothers they could not withstand his rebuke. How much less, then, will man of flesh and blood be able to withstand the rebuke of the Holy One, blessed be He, who is Judge and Prosecutor, and who sits on the Throne of Judgment and judges every single person! (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 93:11)

Following this approach a number of commentaries see Yosef's words as being cynical and rhetorical. Yehuda had just finished pleading that Binyamin

must be returned to his father, for Ya'akov loves him dearly and would die without him. To that Yosef responds, 'I am Yosef. Is my father still alive? Did he die when you took me away from him? Did you care about him then? (See Seforno and HaAmeck Davar)

The brothers are rendered speechless. Their inconsistency has been hurled back at them, their iniquity placed directly in before their eyes. There is no place to hide; there is only complete humiliation.

Then, having had his word, Yosef pulls them closer and attempts reconciliation, telling them that everything was part of God's larger plan for them to have arrived in Egypt.

And Yosef said to his brothers, 'Come near me, I beg you.' And they came near. And he said, 'I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years has the famine been in the land; and yet there are five years, when there shall neither be plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

Now we can return to the brothers' fear when Ya'akov dies. The brothers fully understood Yosef's rebuke "I am Yosef; does my father yet live?" Yosef focused not on the suffering he himself endured at their hands, but on their father's pain and heartbreak. When he uttered those five words, he was saying "I understand that you hated me ? but how can you have been so heartless to your father"?

Prior to Yosef's rebuke, the brothers had offered themselves as slaves. Yosef rejected the offer. They understood that when Yosef said "I am Yosef ? is my father still alive?" he also meant: "I would not behave as you did and take revenge and hurt my father."

Now Ya'akov is dead, so they again offer themselves as slaves. Now, nothing holds Yosef back from exacting his revenge. His father will no longer suffer if the sons hate one another, betray one another, abandon one another. The real tragedy, then, is that while Yosef was clearly motivated by a desire for his brothers to do Teshuva, to repent, they perceived him as petty and vengeful.

Despite Yosef's various sincere attempts at reconciliation, there is one thing we find lacking in Yosef's words. He never says, "I forgive you". Rather, he speaks of God having a plan and he and the brothers being players in that plan ? but he never offers his forgiveness, and perhaps it was the absence of the forgiveness which frightened the brothers, and caused them never to feel completely comfortable with Yosef.

Rabbenu Bachya cites the famous teaching that the ten martyrs are seen as a recompense for the sale of Yosef. This theme is found in the Midrash and has entered into the liturgy of Yom Kippur. Rabbenu Bachya asks why there were ten martyrs, if only nine brothers were involved in the sale. Binyamin was at home, Yosef was a victim, and Reuven left prior to the sale. He suggests that Yosef had some responsibility for his own plight, having caused the enmity at home, and therefore atonement for his sins is exacted by the death of a martyr. Alternatively he suggests that Reuven accounts for the tenth martyr, as a punishment for Reuven's own peccadillo.

Perhaps we can suggest a different answer: Yosef himself was the tenth protagonist because he never forgave his brothers completely. He, too, bore guilt. Had he managed to control himself longer, perhaps he would have been able to arrive at a point of complete reconciliation. Yet we see that the brothers and Yosef lived in Egypt together many more years, and, tragically, they remained afraid of him. Scars from the sale remained, unhealed, and later generations experienced the wrath of those unhealed scars of an incomplete family.

CHAZAK CHAZAK V'NITCHAZEK!



The Precious Final Moments

The messenger came from Goshen and reported to Yosef, "Behold, your father is sick" (Genesis, 48:1). It would seem that this was a fairly commonplace message, especially regarding elderly people, but in

actuality, it was a very remarkable statement, an unheard-of statement.

According to *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, there had never been illness in the world before this time. Death never came as the culmination of a long illness. A person would be fit as a fiddle one moment and dead the next. He would just sneeze, and his soul would depart through his nostrils.

Yaakov, however, prayed to Hashem that people should become ill so that they should have some inkling that death is imminent. "Please do not take my soul," he prayed, "before I have the opportunity to leave instructions for my children and my household."

Hashem accepted Yaakov's prayer. He became sick. And the messenger came to report to Yosef about the amazing thing that had happened in Goshen. "Behold, your father is sick." It was sensational news.

I once heard a radio newscaster comment on an air disaster, "Thank Heaven, they never knew what hit them. When a bomb goes off on an aircraft at thirty thousand feet, there is no time to think. You're just dead in an instant. They never had a chance to think, 'Yikes, I'm about to die.' They were spared the pain and the anguish of looking death in the face. Boom, and they were dead. Just like that."

Well, I suppose that is one way of looking at it, but it is not the Jewish way. The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* describes the Jewish way. Terminal diseases may be painful, but at least they give a person a warning that he is about to depart from this world. He is forewarned that he must tie up the loose ends.

A person leaving this world must make a *cheshbon hanefesh*, taking spiritual stock of his life, what he has accomplished and what he has failed to accomplish. He must do *teshuvah* for his transgressions and shortcomings and prepare his soul for the next world. He must review all his outstanding obligations and make sure he has discharged them properly. He must leave instructions to his children and his household. He must make sure he is not leaving a mess for someone else to clean up. A lifetime of activity calls for a lot of wrapping up. A person who is struck by a bus and never knows what hit him will never have the opportunity to bring his life to a fitting conclusion. He misses out on a very great blessing.

When the *Challenger* shuttle exploded, there was much speculation about whether the crew members were aware that they were about to die. When they

finally found the tapes, they heard some of them say, "Uh oh!" This caused a great uproar. Their attorneys wanted to sue NASA for the additional trauma of their having known about the impending disaster.

"Does it necessarily follow," wrote a gentile columnist at the time, "that it would have been more merciful that death come so instantaneously that the final conscious emotion was a sense of exhilaration? Or does such an end rob a person of the right to reflect, even if only for a few precious moments, on those things that make life worth living?"

For those who believe that death is the end, blissful ignorance at the moment of death is perhaps preferable to a few moments of agony. But for those who believe in the immortality of the soul, in punishment and reward in the next world, in an eternal afterlife, a few precious moments of preparation are priceless indeed.



Living for the Entire World

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In this week's portion, Jacob is on his deathbed and tells his children: "*Gather around, and I will tell you what will happen at the End of Days*" (Genesis 49:1). However, this information is never disclosed! Instead, Jacob blesses each one of his sons, and no further mention is made of the prophetic vision he promised to reveal.

According to Rashi, the Divine Presence left Jacob as he was about to tell his sons what would happen at the End of Days. Since Jacob was unable to prophesy without Divine assistance, he blessed his children instead. But why would the Divine Presence depart from Jacob precisely at this time?

Rabbi Naftali of Rupshitz suggests that once Jacob looked into the future, he saw all the pain that the Jewish people would have to endure until the end of time, and this saddened him so much that the Divine Presence left him. The Talmud teaches (Shabbat 30b) that sadness prevents a person from being able to

receive prophesy. Therefore, once Jacob was overwhelmed with sorrow for the Jewish people, he no longer had clarity about future events.

This teaches us a powerful lesson about what it means to feel the pain of others.

A story told about Rav Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev is instructive. Rav Levi Yitzhak once visited an ill person who was very worried about whether he would receive a place in the World to Come. Upon hearing the man's concern, Rav Levi Yitzhak called over some of his students to act as witnesses, whereupon he drew up a document transferring his own portion in the Next World to the ill man. His students signed the document, and a few moments later the man died.

The students were shocked by their rabbi's behavior, and they asked him why he had acted in such a manner. Rav Levi Yitzhak replied, "To make a Jew who is suffering feel calm and at ease, even for one moment, is worth more than the entire World to Come."

(It seems possible that the reward Rav Levi Yitzhak received for this great act of compassion far outweighed the reward that he signed over to the dying man!)

ALL THREE WORLDS

These examples show that holy people do not live for themselves; they live for others. We see this in the Torah when it states, "*And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt*" (Genesis 47:28). The Meshech Chochma explains that Jacob did not merely live in the land of Egypt for his own sake; his "life" was for everyone! His care for others, including the Egyptians, affected the entire world - since, at the time, the whole world depended on Egypt for their food supply. Thus, Jacob's complete lack of self-centeredness had a positive impact on the entire world.

We see this as well in the verse where Jacob tells Joseph, **shchem** (Genesis 48:22). What is the meaning of the word *shchem*? On a literal level, it means "portion." Rashi understands it to refer to the city of Shchem, which Jacob describes as conquering with his sword and his bow.

Onkelos, in his Aramaic translation, defines "*my sword and my bow*" as "my prayer and my requests."

According to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (Likutei Maharan), these prayers had an effect on all three worlds: the lower world (*shafel*) in which we live; the middle world (*kochavim*) of outer space and galaxies;

and the highest world (*malachim*), which is the realm of the angels. The acronym of these three Hebrew words (*SH-afel, K-ochavim, M-alachim*) spells **SHCHEM!**

Thus we see again that Jacob did not live only for himself or his family. He did not pray only on his own behalf, or on behalf of the people and cities in his immediate surroundings. Jacob prayed for the acronym of Shchem - for everyone in all three worlds.

As we conclude the Book of Genesis, we should reflect on the lessons it teaches us. Over and over we see an emphasis on empathy for others - shifting the focus away from our individual, self-centered concerns in order to be as sensitive as possible to the needs of others. Our patriarchs and matriarchs exemplify this quality. It is a necessary foundation - a prerequisite that must be integrated into the Jewish national character before we can appreciate the redemption of the Book of Exodus.

May we integrate this lesson into our own lives and be blessed to develop unity, camaraderie, and compassion for each other, so that we merit the ultimate redemption, soon in our days.