

Last week's *Parashah* ended, "Va'yeishev Yisrael / [the family of] Yisrael settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen. They acquired property in it, and they were fruitful and multiplied greatly." The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 106a) quotes the Sage, Rabbi Yochanan, who says: "Wherever it says 'Va'yeishev,' pain follows. Thus, we read at the beginning of our *Parashah*, 'The time approached for Yisrael (*i.e.*, Yaakov) to die.'" [Until here from the *Gemara*. Additional examples of "Va'yeishev" being followed by pain are discussed below.]

R' Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg *shlita* (*Tolna Rebbe* in Yerushalayim) asks: Why should "Va'yeishev," settling in comfortably, lead to pain? Moreover, is it right to describe Yaakov's approaching death as "painful"? Everyone dies eventually, and Yaakov was a very old man!

The *Tolna Rebbe* explains: "Settling in" implies a lack of action or initiative. At the beginning of *Parashat Va'yeishev*, we read, "Va'yeishev Yaakov / Yaakov settled in the land where his father sojourned, in the land of Canaan. These are the chronicles of Yaakov: Yosef was seventeen . . ." *Rashi z"l* comments about the flow of the verses: "Yaakov wished to live at ease, but trouble in connection with Yosef suddenly came upon him." Yaakov thought that he could take a break from spiritual growth, so *Hashem* taught him in a painful way, says *Rashi*, that the time to sit at ease is in the World-to-Come; this world is for constant growth. (This "Va'yeishev" is another example cited by Rabbi Yochanan in the above *Gemara*.)

- Continued inside -

Shabbat

This year, we have been discussing *Shabbat* in this space. This week, we introduce the topic again, from a new source, to remind ourselves what we hope to gain through this effort.

R' Eliyahu E. Dessler *shlita* (*Mashgiach Ruchani* of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak; not to be confused with his cousin and namesake, the *Michtav M'Eliyahu*) writes: We know that *Shabbat* is a "great and holy day," as we say in *Birkat Ha'mazon*. More than that, however, we must know that, on *Shabbat*, every single person has the potential to rise to great heights.

Of course, this cannot come about without investment on our part. Attaining these spiritual heights requires making ourselves into receptacles to receive what *Shabbat* offers.

For some reason, R' Dessler continues, even those who spend a substantial amount of time preparing for the festivals--studying the laws of *Teshuvah* or *Megillat Esther* or the *Pesach Haggadah*, for example--spend little or no time preparing for *Shabbat*. The fact that *Shabbat* comes every week tends to lessen its specialness in our minds.

Let us stop a moment and think, suggests R' Dessler.

- Aside from studying *Shabbat's* many laws, which certainly is our first obligation, have we ever asked ourselves: What exactly does the Torah want from me when it tells me to refrain from work on *Shabbat*?
- Have we ever asked ourselves whether we are satisfied with *Shabbat*-observance habits we have developed since childhood, or whether more is expected of us?
- Do we know what tools we have with which to invest in *Shabbat*?
- Do we really know how different *Shabbat* is from other days?

These are some of the questions we must examine.

(*Sha'arei Ha'zemanim: Shabbat* p.5)

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(Yaakov Shlomo ben Yosef Nosson a"h - 19 Tevet),

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“He blessed Yosef and he said, ‘The *Elokim* before Whom my forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked--*Elokim* Who shepherds me from my inception until this day. May the angel who redeems me from all evil bless the lads . . .” (48:15-16)

Midrash Rabbah comments: “Just as redemption involves *Pela'im* / wonders, so receiving sustenance involves *Pela'im*.”

R' Bezalel Ashkenazi z"l (1520-1594; Chief Rabbi of Egypt; author of the *Talmud* commentary, *Shitah Mekubetzet*) asks: Why did the *Midrash* use the word “*Pela'im*” / “wonders” instead of saying that it is a “*Nes*” / “miracle”? He answers: Just as the redemption from Egypt involved many miracles, as we say in the *Pesach Haggadah* (“*Kamah ma'alot tovot la'Makom aleinu. . .*”), so it is with our sustenance, though it may seem to come naturally. We read (*Tehilim* 147:8-9), “[G-d,] Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who prepares rain for the earth, Who makes mountains sprout with grass. He is the One gives to an animal its food, to young ravens that cry out.” It is a miracle that clouds appear in the sky. But, not all clouds produce rain, so rain, too, is a miracle. And, not all rain helps crops grow (“makes the mountains sprout with grass”)--another miracle. If there are not enough crops for both animals and humans, there will be competition, but--another miracle--He gives animals their food. He even feeds the helpless baby ravens, a fifth miracle. So many wonders! R' Ashkenazi adds: Those who earn their living through trades, rather than farming, also can find multiple wonders in their sustenance. (*Derashot Rabbi Bezalel*)



“Shimon and Levi are comrades, their weaponry is a stolen craft. Into their conspiracy, may my soul not enter! . . . For in their rage they murdered people . . . Accursed is their rage for it is intense, and their wrath for it is harsh . . .” (49:5-7)

“For in their rage they murdered people,” refers to the killing of the people of Shechem, about which Yaakov Avinu says, “Accursed is their rage for it is intense, and their wrath for it is harsh.” And, yet, *Midrash Rabbah* relates that the flag of the tribe of Shimon portrayed the city of Shechem! How can this be?

R' Uri Weisblum *shlita* (*Mashiach Ruchani* of Yeshivat Nachalat Ha'levi'im in Haifa, Israel) explains: Yaakov criticized Shimon and Levi because he felt they acted irresponsibly and endangered his entire family (see *Bereishit* 34:30). Nevertheless, Shimon and Levi's underlying motivation, their willingness to sacrifice their lives for their sister's and their family's honor, was pure and holy.

During 40 years of traveling in the desert, the image of the city of Shechem waved over the camp of Shimon to remind that tribe's members never to lose their *Mesirut Nefesh* / the willingness to give their lives for holy causes. At the same time, they also needed to remember that there are limitations on, and a time and place for, *Mesirut Nefesh*. That was Yaakov's message to Shimon (and Levi). (*He'arat Ha'derech* p.157-158)

– *Continued from front page* –

R' Chaim ben Attar z"l (1696-1743; Morocco, Italy and *Eretz Yisrael*) notes that people--even Torah scholars--generally lose some of their sharpness as they approach their day of death. Thus, Yaakov was able to sense now that his end was nearing. Says the *Tolna Rebbe*: When Rabbi Yochanan connects the verse, “The time approached for Yisrael (*i.e.*, Yaakov) to die,” with “*Va'yeishev Yisrael*,” he is explaining why Yaakov's end approached at a much younger age than that of his father, Yitzchak, or his grandfather, Avraham--who lived 180 and 175 years, respectively. As he had upon settling in *Eretz Yisrael* at the beginning of *Parashat Va'yeishev*, Yaakov thought when he settled in Egypt that he had completed his spiritual growth and he was permitted to relax. In so thinking, Rabbi Yochanan is teaching us, Yaakov erred. Indeed, by believing that he had finished growing, Yaakov hastened his own death--a painful outcome. (Thus, the questions with which we began are answered.)

Another “*Va'yeishev* cited by Rabbi Yochanan: We read (*Melachim I* 5:5), “*Va'yeishev*” / Yehuda and Yisrael dwelt in security, each man under his grapevine and under his fig tree, from Dan to Be'er Sheva, all the days of [King] Shlomo.” But, we read later (*Melachim I* 11:14), “*Hashem* then stirred up an antagonist against Shlomo--Haddad the Edomite . . .” Then, regarding the time of *Mashiach*, we read (*Michah* 4:4), “They will sit, each man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none will make them afraid.” In the era of *Mashiach*, such relaxation will be appropriate, explains the *Tolna Rebbe*. However, when the Jewish People mistakenly thought that they had completed their spiritual growth during Shlomo's reign, *Hashem* had to remind them, in a painful way, that it was not so. As long as we are alive and in this world, our spiritual work is never done.

The *Tolna Rebbe* adds: It is fitting that Rabbi Yochanan, of all the Sages, teaches us this lesson. The *Gemara* (*Bava Metzia* 84a) relates that when Rabbi Yochanan's student and study partner, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (“Reish Lakish”), passed away, Rabbi Yochanan was despondent. Seeing this, Rabbi Yochanan's colleagues assigned the sage Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat to study with him. However, this arrangement only upset Rabbi Yochanan more. He said, “Reish Lakish would challenge every thing I said from 24 different sources, while Rabbi Elazar cites support for everything I say from 24 different sources.” The *Tolna Rebbe* explains: Rabbi Yochanan did not feel that he was growing from learning with a study partner who agreed with everything he said. Without a study partner who challenged him and forced him to think harder, Rabbi Yochanan saw no point in living. Indeed, he soon passed away.

The *Tolna Rebbe* concludes: May it be *Hashem's* will that we merit to continue growing all of our lives, with no interruptions. [Note: This does not mean that vacations or breaks for relaxation are improper--if they are in the service of further growth. Rather, Rabbi Yochanan is teaching that a person should never think that his spiritual growth is complete and he has no more work to do.] (*Heimah Yenachamuni* p.167)