

PARSHAS VAYECHI

תשע"ט

At the beginning of Parshas Vayeishev, Chazal tell us that Yaakov thought he could live out the rest of his days in tranquility. Hashem responded that tranquility is for olom haboh. In this world, there are only nisyonos.

After the Akeidah, Hashem told Avrohom that he achieved his final level, and he will remain on this level till the end of his life. Here too, after he is reunited with Yosef, Yaakov has passed his final test and will now enjoy tranquility till the end of his life.

Yaakov's life was full of difficult nisyonos. Fleeing for his life from his brother, living with Lovon, confronting Eisov, the ordeal in Shechem and Dinoh, and finally, the disappearance of Yosef. He survived it all and emerged victorious. When leaving Yitzchok Ovinu he was impoverished by Elifaz and his only piece of property was his staff. He came back to Eretz Canaan with great wealth. But Hashem wanted Yaakov to realize that all his hishtadlus was really a sham. Yaakov may have tried to figure out a way to fool Lovon to earn his own flock from the white sheep, but Hashem tells him that really it was all maaseh nissim.

When he returns from his encounter with Eisov, he is complete and whole—he didn't lose anything.

In this week's parsha, Yaakov blesses his children and inserts a realization he has: that despite all his efforts at hishtadlus, it was really an angel which Hashem sent to guard him and save him from evil.

The Midrash says that the geuloh comes through an angel, but parnossoh comes from Hashem Himself. Yaakov acknowledged that his survival came from a guardian angel, but his parnossoh came directly from Hashem. The Midrash says every stage of the redemption from Egypt was brought about by open nissim, but the final grand miracle is how Hashem manages to sustain each and every creature.

The reason Yaakov was successful and prosperous was because of his middas ho'emes—not because of his efforts and planning.

At the end of the parsha, after the shevotim come back from burying their father in Eretz Canaan, they notice that Yosef's demeanor towards them changed. They suspected that Yosef was waiting for their father's death to exact revenge upon them. They plead to him to have mercy.

But Yosef explains to them that they have it all wrong. This was all Hashem's doing. Hashem wanted Klal Yisroel to come to Egypt through making Yosef the ruler of Egypt. Hashem has infinite ways of manipulating people with their free will to arrange the outcome He desires. Hashem calibrated all the various factors and variables to conspire seamlessly to bring about the desired result. He used my middah of loyalty to Yaakov and your jealousy against me to make sure I got sold to a caravan that was headed for Egypt. It would have happened no matter what they did. Hashem was just using them as tools to achieve His ends.

Throughout his time in Egypt, whether as a servant, prisoner or ruler, Yosef represented Hashem in everything he did. So the question now is, why did Yosef torment his brothers and treat them so harshly? Was he being vengeful? No. The Bais haLevi explains the Midrash to say that Yosef did everything with a plan to help the brother's do teshuvoh.

When the shevotim sold Yosef, they excused their behavior to themselves by claiming they were acting "leshem shomayim". It is ironic that much of the corrupt and cruel behavior perpetrated against

other people is done by people who believe they are acting leshem shomayim. The Midrash says that Penina, the co-wife of Chana, who teased her and tormented her about her barrenness only did so in order to spur Chana to daven harder for children. The Kotzker commented that the only way a normal person can be capable of acting so cruelly, is because they think they are acting leshem shomayim. Hashem punished Penina very severely—with each child born to Chana, a child of Penina died.

The way to tell the difference between those who are genuinely acting leshem shomayim and those who are using it for cover, is by looking at their middos—how they go about executing their harsh actions?

So what was Yosef trying to accomplish?

In order to convince Yaakov to let the brothers bring Binyomin with them back to Egypt, Yehudah had to provide a personal guarantee to Yaakov. He put his olom hazeh and olom haboh on the line to assure Yaakov that Binyomin would return unharmed. When Yosef threatened to keep Binyomin back as a slave, Yehudah pleaded for mercy on behalf of their poor father who would suffer so much. Why is Yehudah coming forward to make all these arguments? Because he put both his worlds on the line for Binyomin.

Yosef respond: "I am Yosef; is my father still alive?"

What kind of question is this? They have been discussing Yaakov the entire time and what suffering he will experience if Binyomin isn't returned!

The Midrash says that with these words, Yosef rendered his brothers completely defenseless—just as Hashem will eventually render each and every one of us defenseless on the Day of Judgment. What does this all mean?

The Bais haLevi explains that Yosef was trying to catch Yehudah in a contradiction to make him realize that he had been living a lie for the past 22 years. You couldn't have been acting leshem shomayim. You are lying to yourself when you now say that you are so concerned about your poor father's suffering. If you were so concerned, you wouldn't have sold his favorite son into slavery and made him suffer for 22 years! The truth is you didn't care about Yaakov then and you don't care about him now. You cared about yourself and your jealousy then and you care about your personal stake in bringing back Binyomin now. It is all about self-interest.

Yosef showed them the brutal truth of their self-deception and they couldn't say anything in response. They were devastated by the revelation of those words: "I am Yosef; is my father still alive?" Remember what you did to me 22 years ago and Yaakov is still alive, so why are you so worried about him now?

People don't do aveiros outright. They make all kinds of excuses and rationalizations to make themselves look righteous—it's really a mitzvah! But in the final analysis, it is an aveiroh and the excuses are all flimsy and fake.

Once they realized that they were living a lie, Yosef's job was done. He wasn't going to torment them a minute longer. He would hold no grudge against them after Yaakov died. If he hadn't orchestrated the entire charade, they wouldn't have done proper and sincere teshuvoh to rid themselves of the stain of their aveiroh. He acted completely leshem shomayim and he tells his brothers he has nothing personal

against them. We are all tools carrying out Hashem's masterplan. I had dreams of nevuah and you thought they were delusions of grandeur. You treated me as a usurper, but I was simply following my destiny. Yosef views the world in a very different way.

The brothers were jealous of Yosef. Hashem picked the purest and least corruptible brother as the one to undergo all those nisyonos and emerge totally committed to Hashem. He had Shem Shomayim constantly on his lips. It had nothing to do with his own ego and his own accomplishments. Hashem had to select the one whom He felt had the capacity to survive the temptations and contamination of Egypt and raise a family of people who were still connected to their father's household.

Who did Hashem select? Yosef. Why was he chosen? Out of all his talents, the one which stood out was the ben zekunim: Onkelos translates this as the talmid muvhak of Yaakov. The one who learned the most Torah and gained the most chochmas haTorah. Learning and understanding

Torah lishmoh has the capacity to change a human being and make the perfect human being. It doesn't happen automatically—a person has to want the Torah to change him and transform him.

So 22 years later, when Yosef wanted to prove to Yaakov that he is really the same Yosef Hatzaddik, and not the cruel, sadistic despot ruling Egypt, he does this by sending agolos. He shows Yaakov, I am still learning the Torah you taught me in the same way. That Torah produced me and preserved me till today. It is because I wanted it to change me and purify my motives.

The parsha of Yosef and his nisyonos teaches us about accepting that everything comes from Hashem. It is a big avodah to engage in all your hishtadlus and still recognize that it all comes from Hashem and not take any of the credit. It is very difficult to see all your decisions and accomplishments as mere tools in Hashem's hands to achieve His ends. The way to gain and maintain that perspective is through serious, high level limud haTorah.