

PARSHAS VAYECHI

תש"פ

Yaakov came to Egypt at the end of his life. He wants to give brochos to his sons. First he gives brochos to the sons of Yosef. They were special brochos for those who were born and grew up in Egypt—before Yaakov's family moved there. Why do they need special brochos? Because they grew up in very difficult circumstances. The gemara in Sanhedrin points out, there was a much earlier age of maturity in the times of Tanach than we have today. Menashe was only eight years old, but he was functioning as a mature adult. He was running Yosef's household.

Menashe and Ephraim both were born and grew up in the royal Egyptian palace, but there is a posuk in last week's parsha which says something very odd. It lists the children of Yosef as among those who are coming down from Canaan to Egypt—along with the rest of the family! It reveals a deep insight into how Yosef raised his two children.

He was able to make his children feel mentally as though they were growing up with Yaakov's family in Canaan. Even though their mother was Egyptian—the daughter of a priest of avodo zoro—still mentally, they felt a part of Yaakov's household. During the confrontation between Yehuda and Yosef, Menashe stamped his foot, and Yehuda remarked that it reminded him of his father's house. That means Yosef was even able to instill the same mannerisms and habits of Yaakov's family in his children! Two sons who never saw Yaakov Ovinu, never saw Canaan!

It was an incredible achievement of chinuch on Yosef's part. It is also an amazing feat on the part of Menashe and Ephraim. You are living in an environment which is completely foreign to the reality outside the house. They have no connections to friends, no social group—just Yaakov's household in distant Canaan. But from now on, all of Yosef's children will be living in the Jewish Ghetto in Goshen.

Yosef, Menashe and Ephraim weathered an unbelievable nisayon, and they received special recognition by Yaakov as a result. Menashe and Ephraim are to be considered as shevotim—on equal footing with Reuven and Shimon.

Then Yaakov addresses the other brothers. He recognizes that Shimon and Levi were born with tremendous passion and drive. Because of that passion and drive, they destroyed the city of Shechem and were responsible for the sale of Yosef. Everyone is born with different middos and dispositions. The question of life is what you do with those middos.

Yaakov curses their anger. Rashi comments that even in the midst of rebuke, he only cursed their anger—not them as people. The remedy for their extreme middos is to separate Shimon and Levi from each other.

At this point, Yaakov rebukes Shimon and Levi equally—making no distinctions. By the end of the Chumash, in Birkas Moshe, we find a very sharp contrast between Shimon and Levi. Levi is praised and praised, and Shimon is simply skipped over completely. What happened in the 233 years between the two sets of brochos?

If you look in the Rambam's description of the early history of humanity in the first perek of Hilchos Avodo Zoro, you see that when Klal Yisroel came down to Egypt, Yaakov designated Levi to be the rosh yeshiva for Klal Yisroel. This means that Levi managed to channel all his passion and his drive into learning and teaching Torah to the rest of Klal Yisroel.

Every one of us has different middos; the question is what we do

with those middos. They can be channeled in different directions—constructive or destructive. But a person has to be self-aware and think. He has to consider what his natural middos are, and plan out how he is going to use them in a constructive way. Levi accomplished this task very successfully and is elevated to extremely high levels of praise.

But Shevet Shimon is missing from Birkas Moshe. Why? He had those same middos, but lacked the strength to take those middos and use them in a constructive manner.

This is a general challenge every one of us has to confront in our lives. We are all given unique talents, abilities and opportunities. The question is what we do with those abilities. We need to understand that our lives are directed by the choices we make—about how to use our natural talents.

Rabbeinu Yonah writes that free will—bechiroh chofshis—is not a fixed, constant component of human nature. It is a mitzvah. That means we have to decide to use our free will when we make decisions. Otherwise, we decide to do things simply by responding to various internal and external pressures pushing us in various directions. Our friends tell us to do this, the media tells us to do that. Sometimes it's a good thing we are pushed to do. Often it's bad. We never take our lives in our hands unless we make a conscious effort to push aside all these pressures and decide to do what is really right. Free will means take your life in your hands and control where you go. The moment a person does that, he will truly choose life.

Chazal say a tzaddik is someone who has his heart in his hands. A rosho is in the hands of his heart. What is the essential difference? A tzaddik thinks about what's important in life and makes a conscious effort to move himself in that direction—not to be pushed and pulled by random forces like reshaim are.

There is a very deep Rambam. One of the halachos of a get is that the husband has to decide to give it out of his own free will. But there is another halacha that if a proper beis din rules that the husband is obligated according to halacha to give his wife a get, the beis din can beat the husband up until he complies. The Rambam asks: it doesn't make any sense—if we need the husband to make a free-willed decision how can we pressure him into it?

The Rambam answers that deep down within the neshomo of every Jew is the will to do the right thing. If beis din is telling him that the right thing is to divorce his wife, it means the deepest will of his neshomo is to give his wife a get. But if he refuses, it is because he has a yetzer horo which is pressuring him to withhold it. So beis din is allowed to supply counter-pressure to the yetzer horo by way of physical pain—in order to allow the true will of his neshomo to make the decision that it really wants to make.

The Rambam is telling us deep idea. A person has all sorts of pressures which cloud his judgment. But if he would stop and look at things clearly, he would naturally make the right decision that his neshomo wants.

Shimon and Levi were all fired up at the violation of their sister Dinah and they wiped out Shechem completely. They were convinced Yehuda was the melech and Yosef was a usurper. They had powerful drives and they decided Yosef has to go. It was misapplied passion. But over those 22 years while Yosef was in Egypt, Levi figured out how to channel his

drives, and by the time Klal Yisroel came down to Egypt, he was the rosh yeshiva.

A generation later, when all of Klal Yisroel felt compelled to join the national service and were so eager to be accepted by the Egyptians, Shevet Levi used this passionate drive to cling to the Torah. It was the only shevet that resisted and stayed in the beis midrash. Out of all Klal Yisroel, they never got enslaved and never sank into avodo zoro. At the time of the eigel hazohov, Levi was the only shevet who helped Moshe Rabbeinu execute those who succumbed to temptation. Shevet Levi goes on to become the ones who are completely dedicated to avodas Hashem in the Mishkon and teach Torah to Klal Yisroel.

There is a tremendous lesson we learn from the transformation of Levi. We can have all kinds of pressures and tendencies pushing us to do this or that. But when we stop and take our lives in our hands, we can accomplish tremendous things.

Levi has a counter-part in Shevet Yissochor. Yaakov describes Yissochor as a beast of burden. The posuk says Shevet Yissochor became a shevet of Torah—they served on the Sanhedrin. He didn't have the same passionate drive as Levi. It is a different capacity—one of tremendously hard work. What is he going to do with that capacity? Hashem doesn't make life easy for him. He gives Yissochor a very pleasant and fertile portion in Eretz Yisroel. He could invest his energy to work his land and be prosperous, or he can take it easy. What does Yissochor do? Rashi says instead of either of those things, he takes upon himself the burden of supplying the dayanim and poskim for Klal Yisroel.

Hashem gave Yissochor a capacity for tremendous work and a very fertile land. Now he has a choice—where does he want to invest his energy? Yissochor responded that he wanted to invest it in Torah and he became great.

These are the two shevotim of Torah who teach us what people can do with their inborn talents and drives. It teaches us that Hashem doesn't give us an easy decision to make. He gives us opportunities to channel

our talents in any way we choose. These are very different shevotim who were supported in very different ways. Levi is supported by terumoh and ma'aser—the generosity of all Klal Yisroel and Yissochor is supported by his arrangement with Zevulun.

Zevulun was given his own talents and capacities—to build an economic empire. But he used it to build up Yissochor's Torah.

Yaakov identified the talents and challenges of each shevet and then it was up to them to make the best choices with them. This is the question each of us will be asked after 120. Did we channel those talents and abilities in the ways that Hashem wanted us to? Or did we squander them on all sorts of foolishness? Did we fulfil the mitzvah of bechiroh chofshis and take our hearts in our hands? Or were we just pushed and pulled in all different directions throughout our lives—sometimes in good directions and sometimes bad—by our middos, and by our friends and our environment, and we just drifted along with the tide?

If we look at the brochos of Yaakov and compare them to the brochos of Moshe Rabbeinu we see the Torah is showing us a pattern of personal development over a very long span. It starts by Yaakov identifying the various kochos hanefesh and nisyonos of his children, and concludes with a description of how those kochos were developed and channeled centuries down the road by the entire shevet. Some did it successfully and some didn't. Yissochor and Zevulun both start off with a natural capacity to work hard and prosper or succeed in commerce. They are faced with a challenge: What are they going to do with it? 233 years later we see they succeeded in using their talents towards ruchniyus goals—each in his own unique way. Moshe says they should rejoice. Levi had passion and drive and channels it to Torah.

This is how Hashem judges us. He gives us talents and challenges, He sees how we make choices—how we take our lives in our hands and develop ourselves in the direction that He wants.