

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vayechi

Yaakov's Blessings to his Sons

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בְּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֶסְפוּ וְאֶגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים

Yaakov called his sons and said, "Assemble and I will relate to you what will happen to you in the End of Days."¹

INTRODUCTION: A WISH DENIED

Commenting on this verse, Rashi writes:²

ביקש לגלות את הקץ ונסתלקה ממנו שכינה והתחיל אומר דברים אחרים

[Yaakov] wanted to reveal the end [of the exile], however, the Divine Presence was removed from him, and [thus] he began to say other things.

The basis of Rashi's comment in the text is quite clear, for our verse describes Yaakov announcement that he will tell his sons about the End of Days, while the ensuing verses contain no such content, comprising instead his blessings to the sons. Additionally, verses 1 and 2 both begin with Yaakov assembling his sons, implying that the purpose of the assembly in verse 1 was not realized at that time, leading to him convene them again for other matters, i.e. blessings.

In a well-known passage, the Talmud in Maseches Pesachim,³ which is the source of Rashi's comment, proceeds to describe how Yaakov was afraid that the reason the Divine Presence had departed from him was due to some deficiency in one of his sons. To this, the sons replied in unison: "שמע ישראל ה' אחד – Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One", which the Gemara explains to mean "Just as Hashem is One in your heart, so, too, He is One in all of our hearts". In response to this, Yaakov exclaimed "ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד" – *Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.* Indeed, as the Gemara concludes, although this latter sentence is not written in the Torah,

1 Bereishis 49:1.

2 S.v. ve'agida.

3 56a.

4 In this context, the reference to "Israel" was to their father. Although one may not call one's parent by their first name, the name Israel, having been given to Yaakov by Hashem, had the status of a title of honor and hence it was not considered disrespectful for the brothers to refer to him by this name.

it is said in an undertone as part of our daily recitation of the Shema in recognition of having been expressed by Yaakov on this occasion.

Why does Rashi not cite the continuation of the Gemara? Because Rashi's job in his commentary is devoted purely to resolving pshat issues with the verse. Therefore, he only cites the opening section of that passage, which deals with the shift from foretelling to blessing. For the rest of the discussion, the reader can then consult the Gemara itself – where Rashi indeed has another commentary waiting for him; however, in terms of his commentary on the Torah, Rashi has cited all he needs.⁵

FROM REDEMPTION TO BLESSING

In light of the above, it is interesting to consider the blessings Yaakov proceeds to dispense, for they would appear to be a kind of “shift in topic” given Yaakov's original intention to discuss the redemption upon gathering his sons.

In truth, however, the shift is not as drastic as it seems. As the commentators explain, the blessing for each son pinpointed a unique characteristic of that particular son, which would in turn characterize the members of that tribe. This would identify the strength of that tribe that would allow it to make its unique contribution to the success and destiny of the Jewish people. In other words, in the absence of the ability to reveal the End of Days itself – whether this refers to the timing of the final redemption, or the nature of how it will come about and the era it will usher in – Yaakov turned his attention to the more practical matter of *how to bring it about*.

FOLLOWING THROUGH: THEN WHY WAS THE DIVINE PRESENCE REMOVED?

What is most fascinating to contemplate regarding this entire episode is that it is easy to review it many times, reflection on Yaakov's fears concerning the brothers and how they allayed those fears, announcing their faithfulness to Yaakov's message, without ever then proceeding to ask the question: Why, then, was the Divine Presence removed from Yaakov? If the problem with revealing the End of Days did not lay where he suspected it might, where, then, did it lay?

The answer, very simply, is it was not appropriate to reveal the date or nature of the final redemption to the Jewish people at the time when they were *embarking on their exile*. Part of the exile itself is not having a clear vision of matters pertaining to the redemption; hence, any detailed discussion of the End of Days was not appropriate at that time. Having said this, we do note that, for his part, Yaakov was hoping to reveal this to his sons. How is this to be understood?

To help explain this matter, we recall the fundamental principle concerning the lives of the Avos, namely, “*Maaseh Avos Siman le'Banim* – the deeds of the patriarchs are a sign for their descendants.” This means that every significant experience of the Jewish People has already been “pre-experienced” by the Avos. With reference to exile, too, Yaakov's had already experienced *maaseh avos* in his sojourn with Lavan, with all the difficulties that it entailed. As such, we ask, at what stage did he experience *maaseh avos* relating to redemption? The answer, according to the midrash,⁶ is that his final seventeen years, at peace, free of travail and reunited with Yosef were his redemption years. It is now easy to understand why Yaakov felt it appropriate to discuss the final redemption directly, as this was the stage he personally was experiencing.

⁵ Interestingly, the Rambam's discussion of this episode in his Mishneh Torah (Hilchos Kriyas Shema 1:4) specifically begins at the point where Rashi left off, i.e. Yaakov's fears concerning his sons' righteousness, their reassurance regarding this matter and his response of “ברוך שם”. Here, too, the reason is based on his purpose of referencing the discussion, which is to explain the background to the way we read the Shema. Accordingly, he cites only the second half of the Gemara's discussion that is relevant to this matter.

⁶ See Bereishis Rabbah 96:1.

WHEN MAASEH AVOS MET SIMAN LE'BANIM

What is fascinating about this idea is that, while generally, the “*maaseh avos*” events of the patriarchs did not overlap with the “*siman le'banim*” events of their descendants, on this one occasion, they existed simultaneously – and what’s more, as opposites! For the very years which marked redemption for Yaakov were the initial years of his children’s exile. What are we to make of this unusual situation?

To understand this “dual era,” we must realize that *maaseh avos* do not function merely as a “sign” in the *informational sense*. Rather, the personal experiences of the Avos harnessed the spiritual energy needed for their descendants’ unique history, *enabling* it to happen. The full impact of this idea as relates to our discussion is that the coincidence of Yaakov’s redemption experience with the exile experience of his children meant that *they went into exile already possessing the capacity for redemption!* In this regard, the Torah’s recording of Yaakov’s desire to reveal the End of Days to his sons in verse 1 represented the existence of the potential for redemption which was already in place at that time. In other words, while Yaakov provided the emotional and operational path toward redemption through the blessings he gave on the last day of his life, the essential capacity for redemption was something he had been providing in the seventeen years leading up to that day through his very existence and experience.

The Egyptian exile is looked upon as the root of all our exiles, and likewise, the redemption from Egypt is the root of all future redemptions. It turns out that in providing his children with the potential for redemption from Egypt, Yaakov was ultimately providing the entire Jewish people with the capacity to be redeemed from all future exiles. We look forward to that potential becoming fully actualized in our times, and to encounter ourselves the long-awaited epoch that our father Yaakov so sorely wished to reveal all those centuries ago.

חזק חזק ונתחזק