

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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**The Twilight Years**  
**By Rav Ezra Bick**

Last week, I pointed out that there is an exact point in parashat Vayigash where Yaakov is finally transformed, almost "reborn," as it were. That point is found at the end of verse 45,27 – *Vatechi ruach Yaakov Avihem* – the spirit of Yaakov their father was revived. This is clearly and dramatically indicated not merely by the plain meaning of the verse, but by the startling juxtaposition of the names of the chief actor in this verse with the following one:

... the spirit of **Yaakov** their father was revived.

**Yisrael** said: It is much; my son Yosef is alive – I shall go and see him before I die.

The significance of the sudden change in Yaakov's name is irresistible, and nearly all commentators who remarked on it interpret it to mean that Yaakov's personality was transformed, with the name Yaakov referring to a lower, diminished level, and the name Yisrael signifying the higher, inspired manifestation of Yaakov, nor merely the individual with his personal problems, but the **av**, the protagonist of Jewish history, the divinely inspired manifestation of Jewish destiny itself.

In light of this, it is noteworthy that the Torah does not continue to refer to Yaakov as Yisrael, and in fact there is a rather sudden reversion to the name Yaakov. This is found in the very next verses.

**Yisrael** travelled with all that was his, and he came to Beer Sheva, and he sacrificed sacrifices to the father of his father Yitzchak.

And God said to **Yisrael** in a vision of night, and He said: **Yaakov Yaakov**, and he said: I am here.

He said: Do not fear to descend to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there....

And **Yaakov** rose from Beer Sheva, and the children of Yisrael bore **Yaakov** their father and their infants and wives on the wagons which Par'o had sent to bear him. (46,1-5)

**Yisrael** begins the journey and reaches Beer Sheva; from there **Yaakov** continues the rest of the way to Egypt. What has taken place in Beer Sheva? God appears to **Yisrael**, and speaks to him, calling him **Yaakov**. It seems almost as though God has taken Yaakov down a peg, changing his name back to the old one, the one he bore the entire time that Yosef had been missing. What is taking place here?

The Ramban (v.2) explains that God calls Yaakov by the name Yaakov to tell him that this descent to Egypt is the beginning of the exile. The name Yisrael means "for you have struggled with God and man and **have prevailed**," and in Egypt he will "be in the house of bondage until God will raise him, for now the exile begins for him." The obvious problem with this explanation is that the slavery does not begin immediately, but

the Ramban has, I think, warded off this critique by stating that the "exile begins **for him**." For Yaakov, or rather for Yisrael, to have to go to Egypt after settling in Eretz Yisrael, and after having built his house there ("*vayeishev Yaakov b'erez megurei aviv*") is exile, in a sense that it is not for his children (who, as the Ramban points out, are called "*bnei yisrael*" in the very same verse where Yaakov is called Yaakov).

The Netziv has a similar interpretation. He disagrees with the Ramban concerning the appropriateness of the name Yisrael in exile – on the contrary, the Netziv argues that this name is especially relevant to exile, as there will be need there to struggle with God and man in order to survive. He ascribes the name change more to the personal life of Yaakov, arguing that the name Yisrael refers to miraculous supernatural existence, whereas the name Yaakov refers to existing within the natural order. God is telling Yaakov that the descent to Egypt involves being subject to the natural order, and hence, he reverts to being Yaakov.

I think that the *psbat* of the name change is along the lines of the Netziv, but I would like to suggest that it should be understood in relation to the inner spirit of Yaakov, along the lines we described last week. The difference between Yaakov and Yisrael that was exemplified when he responded to Yehuda's demand that he send Binyamin to Egypt with the brothers was that Yisrael took responsibility and initiative. Before that scene in Miketz, Yaakov was passive, not in command of his destiny. Yehuda succeeded in rousing Yaakov from his lethargy, and that was immediately indicated by the use, albeit only for a short time, of the name Yisrael. The emphasis is, I suggest, on the meaning of Yisrael as "you have struggled with God and man," and less on the "prevailed;" or, if you will, "prevailed" (*vatucha*) should be understood more as "you have succeeded to struggle" rather than "you have overcome." (After all, Yaakov did not overcome the man with whom he wrestled, but only managed to keep wrestling all night).

The news of Yosef restores Yaakov's spirit and he rises to the status of Yisrael, one who will contend with his destiny, with man and with God. He sets out for Egypt thinking that there is indeed a need to contend with what is waiting for him there, and he is planning to assume once again the leadership of the emerging *am yisrael*. The fact that Egypt is exile does not imply that there is no need for struggle and leadership. But God informs him that that is not what will be. The experience of Egypt is indeed one of passivity, of suffering, and not one of reaction. This is not true only of the period of servitude, but becomes true immediately when they arrive. The house of Yaakov is a ward of the state, provided for by Yosef from the king's stores, totally dependent on royal favor, and hence it is not a total surprise that eventually they fall into servitude.

Do not fear to descend to Egypt, for I shall make you there a great nation.

I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will surely raise you, **and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes.**

The last phrase is very unclear (see Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and others), but it surely indicates the dependence of Yaakov on Yosef. I think it means that Yaakov, the father and leader, will be a dependent of Yosef, which guarantees security, but also implies a forfeiture of independence, initiative, and the proud autonomy of struggle associated with the name of Yisrael.

This is indicated by the striking difference in Yaakov's journey to Beer Sheva and the continuation from there to Egypt. Originally "**Yisrael** travelled to Beer Sheva." After God's appearance, **Yaakov** is carried by his children, together with the children and women, in a cart (verse 5). Suddenly, he appears to us as an old and infirm invalid. What is more, the verse emphasizes that the wagon was sent by Par'o to carry Yaakov. Yaakov is not travelling to Egypt, he is being carried there, and is already being carried, being born, by Par'o's command. For the rest of the parasha, Yaakov is passive, moved around by others. If when receiving the news of Yosef, the Torah says that his "spirit was revived;" when Yaakov finally meets Yosef, he exclaims,

Now I can die, after I have seen your face, that you are yet alive (46,30)

The most extreme example of Yaakov's acceptance of his passive role is in his meeting with Par'o. Remember, the patriarchs had met kings before, including Avraham's encounter with Par'o. They had met them as equals, and had "struggled with men," exchanging gifts (Malkitzedek), and signing treaties (Avimelech). Yaakov's meeting with Par'o is very different.

Yosef **brought** Yaakov his father and presented him before Par'o, and Yaakov blessed Par'o

Par'o said to Yaakov: How many are the days of your life?

Yaakov said to Par'o: The days of the dwelling of my life are a hundred and thirty years. The days of my life were few and bad, and they did not equal the days of the lives of my fathers in their dwelling.

Yaakov blessed Par'o and he departed from before Par'o. (47,7-10)

First of all, Yaakov is brought by Yosef to Par'o. Secondly, the conversation is clearly that of a dependent with his lord, including the patronizing interest shown by Par'o in Yaakov. And finally, Yaakov's answer. I do not think that Yaakov is depressed here. Rather the answer demonstrates that Par'o was not politely asking his age, but rather had been struck by how old Yaakov appeared to be. Yaakov's answer, as the Netziv makes clear, is an attempt to explain to Par'o that he in fact is not as old as he appears to be, but that he had suffered in his life which had given him the appearance of an extremely aged man.

How did Yaakov know that his life would be shorter than that of his fathers? After all, he still can live many years. I think Yaakov's answer indicates that he did not expect to live much longer, or, more accurately, that the vital part of his life is already over. This I think is the meaning of the curious phrase "the days of the life of my fathers in their dwelling." It means not the total number of years, but the number of years of active vital living, what we might call, the years of his career. (see Netziv for a somewhat different explanation). While the exact years of

Yaakov's life are not spelled out in the Torah, we know that he arrived in Eretz Yisrael shortly after the birth of Yosef, who was thirty when he became viceroy of Egypt. Hence, Yaakov's total career in Eretz Yisrael was only about thirty-nine years (of which twenty-two were spent after Yosef disappeared). Yaakov is convinced that his "career" is over, which is why he has become Yaakov again even though he has the spirit to be Yisrael.

In fact, it is not only Yaakov who "retires" from his leadership role in parashat Vayigash. One of the important themes of the previous two parshiot was the coming of Yehuda into leadership – his developing the necessary leadership qualities and his subsequent assumption of the leadership role. Yet, immediately after his success in the opening scene of the parasha, whereby he brings Yosef to acknowledge his true character and relationship (parallel to what he has accomplished in the previous parasha in regard to Yaakov), he disappears as a leader. Whereas when the brothers return for the final confrontation with Par'o, they are described as "Yehuda and his brothers" (44,14) – what could be a clearer indication of his leadership! – when they leave Yosef to go get their father, they are merely described as "*bnei Yisrael* (45,21)." The parasha continues to refer to the brothers as a nameless group. Although Yehuda is sent by his father ahead of the others to learn the route, (46,28), he does not actually lead them to the land of Goshen. Yehuda's leadership will not actually have any role before the Jews arrive in Eretz Yisrael some two hundred and fifty years later.

The actual leader of the family in Egypt is Yosef, who provides them with safety and food. But it is a mistake to view Yosef as the leader of the house of Yaakov. Yosef does not act as the head of the house of Yaakov, but as an Egyptian. He is able to take care of his brothers precisely because he is not one of them, nor their leader, but because he is viceroy of Egypt. He is their **protector**, not their leader. This is clearly indicated by the juxtaposition of the description of Yosef's role in providing for his family

Yosef nourished his father and his brothers and all of his father's house with bread according to their dependents (47,12)

with the long and detailed account of how Yosef nourished the entire Egyptian population (47,13-26). The family is actually leaderless, for they are dependents on the house of Par'o and on his viceroy, who happens to be their brother. This is only one step above slavery. The point is not the oppression, but the passivity. Events will affect them, but they have no opportunity to affect events. Their fate is not in their hands and they make no attempt to change that.

Like his fathers before him, Yaakov's career as an *av*, as one who is building *am yisrael*, ends many years before he dies. Avraham's career effectively ended when he arranged for Yitzchak's marriage, some thirty-five years before he dies. The Torah tells us nothing of those years, other than that he had other children. Yitzchak's career effectively ended when he arranged for Yaakov's marriage and sent him to Aram. According to the account advanced by Rashi at the end of Toledot, that was seventy-seven years before he dies. In fact, the Torah gives the impression that Yitzchak dies shortly after Yaakov returned to Eretz Yisrael, years before the Yosef narratives, although he actually only died ten years before Yaakov went to Egypt. Yaakov's career ends when he sees the

reunion of his family; in other words when he guarantees the existence of "the house of Yaakov," which begins to be called in the parasha by the title "*bnei Yisrael*."

Does that mean that the period of "nation-building" is over, since the fathers have finished their job? Not at all. The crucial aspect of the creation of *Am Yisrael* will take place in Egypt and in the exodus – but that is not a process under the control of a father, a leader, or of the Jews themselves. On the contrary, the crucial experience which forms the Jewish people is **helplessness**, subjugation, and the redemption as well will be one where they are passive and are saved by the mighty hand and the outstretched arm of God. Parashat Vayigash sets the stage by "retiring" Yaakov (as well as Yehuda) and placing the house of Yaakov in the position they will suffer for the next several hundred years – dependency and passivity, subject to forces beyond their control, ultimately to the force of the revealed arm of God. Hence the final verse of the parasha – "Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt in the land of Goshen and they settled in it, and they grew and multiplied very much." For the first time, we meet an entity called Yisrael (which is clearly not Yaakov in this verse). Historically, we have passed from individual history to national history, to that of the group.

There is still a delayed role for Yaakov to play, seventeen years after he descends to Egypt, and that is the giving of the blessings. These are not about the sojourn in Egypt and do not effect it; they are about the distant future. But it is Yaakov's final role as an *av*, as the greatest of the *avot*, and not surprisingly, he will be consistently called Yisrael in parashat Vayechi.

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