

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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Vayechi Yaakov - Vayechi Yosef

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The title of our parasha would seem to introduce a summary of Yaakov's life, but in fact this parasha - which concludes Sefer Bereishit - closes three different circles.

All of the last few parashot (starting from Vayeshev) have followed a single continuum, dealing with the same story - that of Yosef and his brothers. The story as a whole has three principal heroes who take center stage in turns: Yaakov, the brothers (and, as we have seen in Parashat Vayeshev, Yehuda sometimes serves to represent all the brothers), and Yosef. Our parasha closes three separate circles related to these three heroes.

YAAKOV: As noted above, the parasha bears Yaakov's name: "And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years. And the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were seven years and forty and one hundred years." (47:28) This would certainly indicate that the parasha is going to contain the final and concluding moments of Yaakov's life, and indeed we find many such examples (his standing before Yosef, his blessing of his sons, the description of the mourning for him and his burial, etc.). One scene in particular is especially poignant, since it clearly represents the closing of the circle that underscored all of Yaakov's adult life.

Yosef brings his two sons to Yaakov to be blessed. Now, for some reason, the Torah points out that "the eyes of Israel were heavy with age; he could not see" (48:9-10). It seems at first that Yaakov is confused, for he switches his hands, placing his right hand (the stronger one) on the head of Ephraim, despite the fact that he is younger, and his left hand (the weaker one) on the head of Menashe - the elder. Yosef attempts to correct this mistake but from Yaakov's response it becomes clear that the switch was intentional: "I know, my son, I know. He too will be a nation and he, too, will be great, but his younger brother will be greater than him, and his descendants will become many nations." (48:17-20)

Thus the younger brother receives greater status in the blessing bestowed by Yaakov, who can no longer see owing to his old age. This image is clearly reminiscent of a scene which Yaakov himself experienced at a young age, a scene which changed the course of his entire life: his parents, too, had two sons who were due to be blessed, and he was the younger one. Despite his youth Yaakov received the blessing instead of his elder brother, just as Ephraim now received the blessing which seemed rightfully due to Menashe. Then too the Torah noted that "it came to pass when Yitzchak grew old that his eyes ceased to see." (27:1)

As a result of having stolen the blessing that was originally intended for his older brother Esav, Yaakov is forced to flee to

Charan and to remain there for twenty years, to deal with the deceitful Lavan and to marry his two daughters. (Were it not for having stolen the blessing and having to escape, Yaakov would quite possibly have married only one wife - we have hinted at this idea in the shiur on Parashat Vayishlach.) Since then, Yaakov's household has been riveted by tension between "Leah's camp" and "Rachel's camp," leading ultimately to the sale of Yosef and everything which transpired as a result.

Now, at the end of his days, Yaakov looks back on his life and hears over and over his mother's advice - to steal the blessing - which so dramatically influenced his life. It seems to me that by switching the blessing of the sons, Yaakov is showing that despite all his suffering and the difficult life he has led ("few and bad have been the years of my life") he is not sorry. He knows that he has paid a great price for having deceived his father and for having stolen the blessing from his brother, but ultimately it was something that Yaakov had to do, in light of what Rivka was told when the twin brothers fought in her womb: "There are two nations in your womb and two nations will separate from your innards, and the one nation will be mightier than the other nations, and the elder will serve the younger." Now Yaakov repeats the same action in the generation of his grandchildren. And just as Rivka heard that "two nations are in your womb... and the elder will serve the younger," so Yaakov now likewise declares, "He, too, will be a nation and he too will be great, but his younger brother will be greater than him."

The most significant event in Yaakov's life is now reflected with once again choosing to switch the elder and younger brothers.

THE BROTHERS: Our parasha re-introduces all of Yaakov's sons, together as they were before the sale of Yosef. Although this family reunion takes place in Egypt and not in Canaan, it nevertheless closes and completes the tale. At the beginning of the story Yosef is depicted as a talebearer against his brothers - he tells nasty stories about them to his father and arouses their jealousy by means of his dreams about power. The brothers, for their part, hate him and cannot speak to him peaceably - to the point where they sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. Now, with the reunion in Egypt, the circle is closed. The brothers admit to their sin and ask for Yosef's forgiveness: "And now, please forgive the sin of the servants of the God of your father... and his brothers also went and fell before him and they said, 'Behold, we are servants to you.'" They, who sold Yosef as a slave, now offer themselves as slaves to Yosef. Yosef, who had dreamed that his brothers would bow before him like the sheaves and the eleven stars in his dreams, now - at the realization of this moment (for the brothers now bow before him in full cognizance of who he is) - Yosef shows that he, too, has turned over a new leaf. He no longer sees himself as a master or a king; he is not the representative of law and order who reports the brothers' actions to the legal authorities. On the contrary: "Do not fear, for am I in place of God? You thought evil concerning me, but God turned your intention to the good, in order to bring about this day that many people could be

spared." Yosef sees himself not as a powerful judge but rather as God's representative, to serve the welfare of the brothers.

But there is even more to the closing of this circle than merely the personal conflict. The entire story of Yosef's sale is, of course, connected with the basic tension which exists in Yaakov's house concerning who will continue Avraham's family and who will be rejected. The brothers may well have feared that the precedent of the rejection of Yishmael and Esav would continue into the next generation, and it certainly appeared that Yaakov was going to choose Yosef (he had, after all, made him a special striped coat). Even if more than one brother could be chosen, the tension between Rachel and Leah is certainly perceptible among their children and it would seem reasonable that only one "branch" of the household would merit the privilege of continuing the historic covenant with God. This is the background to the sale of Yosef – the beloved Rachel's elder son - and his removal from the competition for their father's inheritance, this is also the background to Reuven's relations with his father's concubine - the wish to create irreversible facts with regard to the next inheritor. This may even be the background to Yehuda's demotion among the brothers following the sale of Yosef.

In our parasha Yaakov gathers all his sons and decisively determines the outcome of this stubborn battle between them. They may all well heave a collective sigh of relief with the knowledge that there is no chosen son and no rejected son. From now onwards all are included in the family which is destined to become a nation. This is emphasized by the Torah at the conclusion of Yaakov's blessings: "All of these, the tribes of Israel, are twelve, and this is what their father told them and he blessed them, each according to his blessing he blessed them." (49:28) Until now it was far from obvious that "all of these are the tribes of Israel," and this is one of the most important conclusions the sons hear prior to their father's death.

However, even if none of the brothers is rejected while another is chosen, three sons nevertheless receive preference over their brothers with regard to leadership of the family:

1. Yehuda - Yaakov starts to bless Reuven, the eldest, but instead disqualifies him from assuming leadership of the family and from the rights of the firstborn. The leadership moves to the next son in line, but we immediately encounter criticism aimed at Shimon and Levi, which disqualifies them as well. Yehuda is next in line, and it is he who finally receives the staff of leadership: "Yehuda, you (as opposed to those who have come before you) are praised by your brothers... your father's sons shall bow down to you... The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his feet." The blessing that Yitzchak gave to Yaakov ("You shall be a nobleman to your brothers, and your mother's sons shall bow before you" - 27:29) is reflected in Yehuda: "Your father's sons shall bow down to you." (Yaakov intentionally refrains from using Yitzchak's phrase, "your mother's sons," preferring instead "your father's sons" in order to make it clear that Rachel's sons, too, are destined to be subservient to him. The family will not be divided again into two separate camps of the two matriarchs.)

2. Dan - Following the blessing to Yehuda we read the blessings bestowed on Yissakhar and Zevulun, neither of which makes any mention of leadership, but immediately after Leah's sons the Torah moves to Dan - the eldest of the children of the maidservants, and here we read: "Dan shall judge his people, like one of the tribes of Israel." Many explanations have been offered for Yaakov's blessings to each of his sons, including the blessing to Dan, but I would suggest that this blessing should be considered keeping in mind the fact that Dan is the son of a maidservant and not part of the highest stratum of "the tribes of Israel" - the sons of Rachel and Leah. Against this backdrop Yaakov tells Dan that he will be "like one of the tribes of Israel," despite the fact that he is the son of a maidservant. Even the sons of the maidservants are not excluded from the family of Israel; moreover, Dan receives a certain leadership role concerning rule of Israel: "Dan shall judge his people." Dan's special status in this regard will be repeated later in Moshe's blessings to the tribes, where Dan receives a blessing similar to the one now bestowed on Yehuda: "Dan is a lion whelp that leaps from Bashan." (Yehuda is now blessed by Yaakov, "A lion whelp is Yehuda, from the prey of my son you have risen.") The comparison of these two tribes is highlighted in Sefer Shoftim; this subject lies outside the scope of this shiur.

3. Yosef is the third son to receive a blessing which points to superior status: "They (the blessings) shall be upon the head of Yosef and on the head of he who is a Nazir among his brothers." Yaakov refers to Yosef as a Nazir, an expression connoting a certain superiority, even though Yaakov refrains from explaining its nature. Yosef's special status finds expression even earlier, when Yaakov tells him that his two sons "shall be to me like Reuven and Shimon," in other words, Yosef's two sons inherit just as if they were Yaakov's own sons. They represent tribes of Israel equal in status to Yaakov's sons, and from this perspective Yosef receives a double-portion in comparison with all of his brothers, just as a first-born usually would.

Thus Yehuda ultimately receives the leadership of the family, while two other brothers - Yosef and Dan - also play a certain auxiliary role. In fact, each branch of the family is represented here: Yehuda represents Leah (following the rejection of Reuven, Shimon and Levi), Yosef is Rachel's elder son, and Dan is the firstborn of the children of the handmaids. A similar distribution is to be found in the encampment around the Mishkan and during the nation's travels in the desert. The four flags there are led by Reuven (the biological firstborn who in our context was rejected as leader), Yehuda (the chosen "firstborn" of Leah), Ephraim (the son of Yosef, chosen over his elder brother Menashe), and Dan (firstborn of the handmaids).

YOSEF: There is no doubt that the most significant circle to be closed in our parasha is that of Yosef. Following the death of Yaakov the Torah continues with the history of the family in Egypt, with Yosef under the spotlight. Only when he dies is the story complete and Sefer Bereishit ends.

A careful examination indicates that actually the hero of all the stories of Yaakov's family recounted since the sale of Yosef is in fact Yosef himself. Even though other people play a role in what happens, everything appears to be recounted with a focus

on Yosef and from the point of view of his experiences. This long story begins with "These are the generations of Yaakov; Yosef was seventeen years old..." (37:2) and concludes with "and Yosef died at the age of one hundred and ten years" (50:26 - end of Sefer). These two verses are formal opening and concluding formulae for biography, indicating that everything we read in between describes the life of Yosef, from the age of seventeen to his death at 110. It should be emphasized that throughout Sefer Bereishit the introduction, "These are the generations of..." precedes a focus on the CHILDREN of the person mentioned (see commentary of the Rashbam on the beginning of parashat Vayeshev). Hence, for example, after "These are the generations of Terach" we read the story of Avraham. The introduction "These are the generations of Yitzchak" precedes the story of Yitzchak's son, Yaakov: his escape to Charan, his indenture to Lavan, his meeting with Esav, his wanderings in Eretz Yisrael and the story of Dina. The next introduction, "These are the generations of Yaakov" opens the story of Yaakov's son Yosef, and the Torah goes on to describe his sale and what happens to him in Egypt.

In other words, there is another hero of Sefer Bereishit after Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and he is Yosef. Not only does the Torah focus on him, but the Shekhina wanders with him, and wherever Yosef goes we are told that God watches over him and grants him success in all his endeavors.

The focus on Yosef at the conclusion of the parasha, too, follows the death of the last patriarch, Yaakov, when the story has apparently not ended. It continues with Yosef. In this concluding passage (50:22-26), it is difficult to ignore the comparison of Yosef's life with that of Yaakov:

1. Concerning Yaakov we read, "And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years, and the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were seven years and forty and a hundred years." A numerical summation of a lifetime, as occurs also in the case of Avraham and Yitzchak, does not appear for any brother other than Yosef: "And Yosef lived a hundred and ten years... And Yosef died at the age of a hundred and ten years." (As an aside and in a different manner altogether we later read an accounting of Levi's life, in [Shemot 6:15](#).)

2. Corresponding to Yaakov's words of encouragement, "Behold, I am dying; God will be with you and will return you to the land of your forefathers" (48:21), Yosef says: "I am dying; God will surely remember you and raise you up from this land to the land which He promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov."

3. As part of the conclusion of Yaakov's life we hear him say, "I had not dreamed to see your face, and behold, God has shown me even your children" (48:11). The blessing of fruitful descendants which so gladdens the elderly grandfather repeats itself at the conclusion of Yosef's life: "And Yosef saw Ephraim's children of the third generation, and the children of Makhir the son of Menashe were also born on Yosef's knees."

4. Concerning Yaakov we read, "The physicians embalmed Yaakov" (50:1), and similarly concerning Yosef we read, "And they embalmed him and placed him in a casket in Egypt."

5. Yaakov makes Yosef and his other sons swear that they will bury him in the land of Canaan: "Do not bury me in Egypt; I will lie with my fathers, and you shall carry me from Egypt and bury me in their burial place... and he said, 'SWEAR TO ME,' AND HE SWORE TO HIM... and he commanded them and said to them, 'I am gathered to my people, bury me with my fathers, in the cave which is in the field of Efron the Chittite... which faces Mamrei in the land of Canaan'" (49:29-30). (Yosef makes mention of this again later: "My father MADE ME SWEAR, saying, 'Behold I am dying; in the grave which I prepared for myself in Eretz Canaan, there shall you bury me.'") A similar request issues from Yosef: "And Yosef MADE BNEI YISRAEL SWEAR, saying, 'the Lord shall surely remember you and you shall take up my bones from here.'"

These clear, formal parallels (all included in the concluding five verses of the Sefer) sharpen the more general comparison between Yaakov and Yosef: both are forced to leave their homes and families because of a family feud; both bring economic success to their masters (compare Lavan's words to Yaakov: "I have guessed that God has blessed me because of you" (30:27) to what we are told about Yosef: "And God blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Yosef" (39:5)); both are tricked by their masters; both marry and build their households in exile, etc.

This phenomenon highlights our question concerning Yosef's status. Chazal ([Berakhot 16b](#)) teach that "only three are called patriarchs" (i.e., only Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov). It would seem that Chazal seek to negate the idea that could logically be suggested, that Yosef himself represents a fourth forefather.

When the Torah focuses on someone as clearly as it does on Yosef, it is a sign that the Shekhina shines on him too, and accompanies him, and thus it would certainly appear possible that Yosef should be considered one of the patriarchs of the Israelite nation - if not in the genetic sense of the word then at least from a cultural-spiritual point of view.

Moreover, while Yosef is not granted prophecy as his fathers were, but he is nevertheless a "dreamer." This is not the same as prophecy per se, but Yosef nevertheless receives and understands messages about the future. In addition, his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, are part of the house of Israel just like Yaakov's sons. From this perspective Yosef assumes the status of a patriarch-of-sorts. Nonetheless, Yaakov remains the last of the patriarchs.

The Sefer concludes, as mentioned, with the story of Yosef, emphasizing his intermediate status as something in between "father" and "son," something between Yaakov and his brothers. It may be that this intermediate status is necessary in order to effect a transition from a situation of chosen sons to that of a chosen nation. Thus at this intermediate stage Yosef is chosen on a certain level in his own right, but his brothers are not rejected.

This is the last story of the family of Yaakov. In the next story, which opens Sefer Shemot, we shall hear for the first time from the king of Egypt, "Behold the NATION of the children of Israel...". From now on they are no longer a family but rather a

nation, no longer struggling over chosenness and rejection but rather striving to construct a national cultural identity.

For further study:

1. To continue the question asked at the end of the shiur, why does Yosef have an intermediate status between "father and son?" Remember – he is not the leader. What does he then represent? Perhaps the mysterious (in terms of Bereishit) word "Nazi" can help us.

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