

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Vayiggash Part II

### 1. Regarding the Migration

Jacob and his entire clan with all their possessions moved to Egypt with the intention to survive the famine. Joseph had informed them that five years of famine remained. (He spoke of that detail as a fact. Since Pharaoh's dream was being fulfilled precisely in accordance with Joseph's interpretation, it was recognized as an oracle from on high and it was assumed that the rest of the dream would be fulfilled.) Joseph had stressed to his brothers that G-d's intervention in raising him to his position was to rescue them from the famine and that point was central in his invitation to his father to come with the entire family. Jacob's statement before departing, "I must go and see him before I die" (Gen. 45:28), implies that from his personal perspective he was going primarily to see Joseph, but surely not intending to settle the family for a lengthy stay. However, an extended family residing in a prosperous land, with a caring family member ensconced in a position of high authority that is expected to continue for a lengthy period of time, would generally not leave several years later. This is especially the case when entering the land at the explicit invitation of the king.

The reader is aware that G-d is moving events toward fulfillment of what He communicated to Abraham, "that your descendants will be strangers in a land not theirs – and they [the dwellers of that land] will enslave and afflict them – for 400 years" (15:13). But one wonders, did Abraham not transmit knowledge of this prophecy to Isaac, and he to Jacob? It appears that it was a private communication to Abraham responding to his desire to have insight into the process that will bring about national possession of the promised land.

In any event, dwelling in a foreign land gives rise to the danger of assimilation into the life and culture of the new land and makes the prospect of returning

home one day doubtful. Such a fear must have been weighing heavily on Jacob's mind. Indeed, after he traveled a short distance, before leaving Canaan, G-d saw fit to reassure him on his fears.

When he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to "the G-d of his father Isaac" (46:1). Deployment of that epithet may indicate that Jacob was then thinking about the command G-d gave Isaac in a situation that was analogous to the one he was presently in. During a famine, when Isaac had begun traveling to Egypt as his father did before him during a famine, while at Gerar, G-d appeared to him and instructed him: "Do not descend to Egypt...dwell in this land and I will be with you and will bless you...and I will multiply your descendants...and I will give your descendants these lands, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your descendants. Because Abraham hearkened to My voice" (26:2-5). Throughout his life, Isaac had never left the land. Should Jacob now leave the land? What would be with the Abraham-Isaac heritage and the divine commitment to establish a new nation through their progeny? Was it proper to abandon the foothold that they had achieved in the promised land? Would his descendants remain as a unit in Egypt? How would they get reestablished in Canaan?

Apparently in direct response to these fears, that night G-d granted Jacob a prophetic vision, saying, "Do not fear going down to Egypt for I will make you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt and I will bring you [your progeny] back" (46:3-4), addressing his doubts.

When we are told that Jacob offered sacrifices in Beersheba the text does not mention that he constructed an altar. Perhaps he used the altar his father had built there, which he had then made a center for promulgation of the new religious values the patriarchs taught, a matter connoted in the

statement associated with that altar, “and he called in the name of Hashem” (26:25).

In most of the narratives concerning the patriarchs the Torah does not explicitly comment on their devotion to the more visionary dimensions of their life; the focus is on the external aspects of their comportment. Accordingly, in our chapters Jacob is depicted as living in the “here and now,” as he appeared to others, dealing with human emotions and coping with the standard problems of survival. But the reader is surely expected to bring to his interpretation of the text Jacob’s consciousness of the more “spiritual” factors in life, those factors that relate to G-d’s program. The Torah’s method of narration addresses multiple levels of comprehension, including a most basic one; it often omits certain details that are left to the understanding of the perceptive reader, to focus on the “humanness” of the patriarchs.

## 2. On the Vayiggash Genealogy (Gen. 46:8-27)

The relocation to Egypt was a significant marker in Israel’s history; accordingly, it occasioned a detailed census of Jacob’s descendants at the time, a “taking stock.” The tally demonstrated that G-d’s blessing had been with the patriarch and that his children had grown into a significant clan.

The passage’s opening verse begins with the identical six-word clause that later opens the book of Exodus, וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִמָה (“And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt”). This alludes to the nucleus that shortly afterwards in that Exodus context is referred to by the king of Egypt as עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“the nation of the children of Israel”), while here the statement acknowledges their having become a formal, official entity. The closing verse of our passage states, “All the persons of Jacob’s household coming to Egypt were seventy” (46:27), a number also attested in that Exodus passage. Seventy was a distinctive number in the ancient Near East, a symbolic convention adopted by the Torah for certain purposes.\* Here, it signifies that the clan was an eminent and significant unit. This count will serve as a point of reference for future comparison.

The individuals are counted according to the matriarch they derived from and the totals of the four subgroups are given: Leah, thirty-three; Zilpah,

sixteen; Rachel, fourteen; and Bilhah, seven. The listing is restricted to Jacob and his descendants, thus his wives and daughters-in-law are not counted. Wives were subsumed into their husband’s familial entity (what the sages termed אִשְׁתּוֹ כְּגוֹפּוֹ, “his wife is like him”), since it was the husband who brought a wife into his family circle and established a new “home.” The census essentially counted homes and potential homes (אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ, “a man and his home,” as it states regarding the count in Exod. 1:1), the building blocks of the clan.\*\* Dividing the count into matriarchal subtotals appears to signal a considerable degree of tribal grouping and distinctiveness within the whole.

Although the totals of the four subgroups (thirty-three, sixteen, fourteen and seven) do add up to seventy, only thirty-two descendants of Leah are listed, constituting a grand total of sixty-nine descendants of Jacob. (Er and Onan, who are mentioned in the genealogy, cannot enter the count as they died in Canaan and our passage is explicitly defined as dealing with those who emigrated to Egypt.) Some have assumed that although the sum is not exactly seventy, since it is so close, it is justifiable to “round out.” In this manner the seventy also serves as a typological number. After all, Scripture stated that Gideon had seventy sons (Judg. 8:30), Abdon son of Hillel had seventy sons and grandsons (Judg. 12:13), and Ahab had seventy sons in Samaria (2 Kgs. 10:1); certainly some of these, if not all of them, were approximations. However, this explanation is inadequate for the problem of the subtotal of thirty-three for the thirty-two descendants of Leah.

Ibn Ezra and the Rashbam consider Jacob to be the thirty-third person in Leah’s subgroup. He is part of “Jacob and his sons,” that is, he is included under the heading stated in the opening verse that defines the paragraph’s theme as listing those who came to Egypt. Since Leah’s group was the first mentioned, he was included with it and he is part of the seventy. This is in agreement with the verse in Deuteronomy 10:22: “With seventy persons your fathers descended to Egypt.” The Rashbam supports this position with a close reading of our passage’s last two verses, as follows:

The penultimate verse gives the number of those coming to Egypt in the assemblage belonging to Jacob

who are יִצְאֵי יְרֵכּוֹ (“issued from his loins”), as sixty-six. That verse deals strictly with Jacob’s biological progeny, and thus obviously excludes him from the count. As it speaks of those coming to Egypt, it also excludes Joseph and his sons who were already in Egypt. (The phrase “issued from his loins” is not employed when referring to the count of the thirty-three or the seventy.) The final verse mentions Joseph’s two sons who were born in Egypt and concludes that the total number of members who belonged to בֵּית יַעֲקֹב (“the house of Jacob”), the “family entity” that was going to Egypt, was seventy. Jacob and Joseph and his two sons are members of the house of Jacob that was traveling to Egypt, even if the latter three were not with the “house” at that time.

Exodus 1:5 gives the number as seventy, and also mentions “issued from his loins,” thus providing a number that is technically short of seventy. Ibn Ezra explains this as a case where using a round, approximate number served the purpose and was acceptable. Understood as such, this rounding-out is not contradicted by anything in that passage.

The great medieval commentators may have resolved our passage’s inner textual consistency regarding the seventy, but for other reasons many scholars still consider the Torah’s use of that number in our Genesis 46 passage as typological. The major difficulty is that Hezron and Hamul, sons of Perez the son of Judah, are counted in this census although they could not have been born before the family moved to Egypt. The calculation is compelling, as follows:

The family’s migration to Egypt was in the second year of the famine, twenty-two years after the sale of Joseph. (He was seventeen when sold, thirty when standing in front of Pharaoh, seven years of plenty had passed and reconciliation was in the second year of famine.) Judah was with his brothers near Shechem when they sold Joseph, and he married after departing from them and relocating to a different region, where he continuously lived for many years. The story of this period of his life is introduced immediately following the account of the sale of Joseph with יְהִי בְעֵת הַהִיא (“and it was at that time” [Gen. 38:1]). Even if we assume he separated from his brothers immediately after the transgression (very likely as a result of it) and his marriage was shortly afterwards, fitting his grandchildren Hezron and Hamul into the

group that migrated to Egypt is extremely problematic.

How much time elapsed before all of the following occurred? Judah’s first son Er was born, grew up, married Tamar and died, his second son Onan came forward for *yibum* (levirate marriage) and died, his third son, the under-age Shelah grew up but Tamar was not given to him. She eventually despaired of waiting for him and through her ruse coupled with Judah and gave birth to Perez, who himself grew up and begot Hezron and Hamul. Surely it was appreciably more than twenty-two years from the time Judah left his brothers. One would think at least fifteen years more.

Because of this difficulty Ibn Ezra assumes that Judah married a number of years before the sale of Joseph. However, that contradicts the straightforward meaning of the text in a number of ways. It does not fit with “and it was at that time,” the introduction to the Judah chapter that follows the narrative of the sale of Joseph. It is most unlikely that Judah left his wife and young children in the southern district (the location of the places he lived in while away from his brothers) and joined his brothers in the Shechem area, significantly further north. Moreover, a sensitive reading of the Judah chapter indicates that it is deeply connected with the ongoing story; it provides the Judah portion of a contrast between him and Joseph and thereby comments on the aftereffects of the transgression. And how many years before the sale is it possible to suppose Judah left the family and married? It cannot have been enough for Hezron and Hamul to have been born before the migration to Egypt, for as Leah’s fourth son, Judah cannot have been more than three or four years older than Joseph who was seventeen at the time of the sale.

Thus, it is thought that Hezron and Hamul were born in Egypt and their names in the genealogical table of those migrating to Egypt are an insertion from a subsequent time. Presumably, they had assumed leadership roles in the tribe, perhaps occupying the slots in the genealogical table of Er and Onan, Judah’s sons who died childless in Canaan. Perez, after all, was born through a *yibum* relationship (as conceived in pre-Torah days and as intended by Tamar), a practice designed to provide continuity to Er and Onan, so Hezron and Hamul could be seen fitting into

this context. In the prophetic inspiration directing the writing of the Torah centuries later, the clans of the latter two were prominently established so it was deemed appropriate to include them.

A textual variation in our account may reflect this point. Hezron and Hamul are not cited in the same manner as are the other descendants mentioned in the passage. The others are straightaway named as the sons of their fathers – וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן הָיוּ...וּבְנֵי שִׁמְעוֹן – יְמוּאֵל...וּבְנֵי לֵוִי גֵרְשׁוֹן etc.) and the same goes for the grandchildren. These two, however, are introduced differently. It states, וַיְהִי וַיִּבְרְאוּ בְנֵי פֶרֶץ (“and they were”), employing a plural and a word that can be seen as pointing to the future, indicating that they were not then there but eventually were born to Perez. (Hezron is of particular importance as the Davidic line stems from him.) Accordingly, it may be that the total was not precisely, but rounded to, the typological seventy.

It should be noted that there is a high degree of dissimilarity between the various biblical listings of the names of Jacob’s grandsons and great grandsons. This is clearly seen when we compare our passage with the census in Numbers 26 and the genealogical registries in 1 Chronicles. This apparently reflects historical change and represents eventual status in the clan. For example, here, Benjamin has ten sons. In Numbers 26, he is credited with five sons and two grandsons. The two grandsons there (Ard and Naaman) carry names of sons in our passage, while some of the names missing in Numbers 26 reappear in 1 Chronicles 7 and/or 8 as son or grandson, and elsewhere in Scripture as prominent in the tribe.

The numbers seem to contain a significant degree of symbolism. The descendants of Leah (thirty-two) are exactly double the amount of her maid, Zilpah (sixteen), and those of Rachel (fourteen) are also exactly double those of her maid, Bilhah (seven). The totals of Leah and Zilpah are multiples of eight while the totals of Rachel and Bilhah are a multiple of seven or exactly seven. (The number eight represents the covenant while the number seven, prominent from pre-Torah days, represents completion and perfection associated with the “old order.”)\* This is perhaps relevant to the realm that is rabbinically defined as מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים (“the doings of the fathers are a sign for [or foreshadow events in the national lives of]

the children”). The numbers might reflect the situation that prevailed in times when the progeny of the patriarchs were settled in the land but divided into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, mostly under the leadership of Ephraim (Joseph), remained in large part attached to the “old order,” which is symbolized by the number seven, while the Southern Kingdom, under Judah, was more deeply associated with the covenant, the program that improved upon the previous, and was symbolized by the number eight.\*

### 3. The Example of Joseph and מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים

In Joseph, readers of the Bible are provided an inspiring paradigm of an individual’s personal growth and achievement of extraordinary virtue. He is an example of one’s maintaining continual consciousness of G-d’s presence under the most trying circumstances. He manifests self-discipline and fidelity to moral values in the face of great temptation, as well as courage and patience to achieve important goals. He exemplifies the renouncing of revenge and the extending of forgiveness – even when grievously wronged – as well as a deep concern for family unity and its heritage.

From the perspective of “the doings of the fathers are a sign for the children,” in which personages may represent tribes, great lessons were provided to the future nation. During the time that the nation was divided into two, the Southern Kingdom was primarily composed of Judah while the Northern Kingdom was mostly under the leadership of Joseph (specifically Ephraim). Particularly during the later years of that period, when the latter was in exile and the former was still extant (from 722 B.C.E. to 586 B.C.E.), as well as subsequently, the Joseph story provided an invaluable prompt toward a vision of and feelings for national unity. It called upon Judah not to feel condescending toward Ephraim, to recall that there was a time when Joseph, with the upper hand, had the opportunity to destroy Judah for his horrific transgressions of neglecting considerations of brotherliness but chose the path of reconciliation. Indeed, Joseph prompted Judah and the other brothers to repentance.

And it was Joseph who, struggling alone, kept the budding G-d-Israel covenant and the national heritage alive. Undoubtedly, our narrative also inspired

Ephraim with gratifying thoughts of its magnanimous past.

Later, when all were in exile under foreign rule, the Joseph saga was a reminder that even in the bleakest of times, when everything may look hopeless as it did to the slave-prisoner Joseph, one never knows what G-d may bring about. The reconciliation of the brothers described in our *parasha* has been considered a prophetic sign of the future reconciliation of the tribes of Israel.

In this vein, several comments of Rabbi S.D. Sassoon regarding our *parasha* and its *haftara* (Ezek. 37:15-28), taking the linkage between them as actual and historically valid, are relevant. The topic is a future Judah-Joseph reconciliation.

The *haftara* of *Parashat Vayiggash* from the prophecy of Ezekiel is a prophetic commentary on the *sidra*. This means to say that the prophet Ezekiel received this prophecy through thinking about and looking at the *parasha* (הַתְּבוּנָה (וְהַסְתַּכְלוּת בַּפְּרָשָׁה) and he saw the *parasha* as symbolic for details in his prophetic vision.

In the *haftara* it states, “take one stick and write upon it ‘for Judah and the children of Israel associated with him’ and take one stick and write upon it ‘for Joseph – the stick of Ephraim – and all the house of Israel associated with him’” (Ezek. 37:16). *Hashem Yitbarakh* said to the prophet: “Bring them close one to the other for you as one stick that they should be joined together in your hand” (v. 17). This action symbolizes that in the future there will be the Ingathering of the Exiles and true national unity...Joseph symbolizes the kingdom of Israel, as Ephraim is his capital, and Judah symbolizes the kingdom of Judah. This is all hinted at in the reconciliation of the brothers in the *parasha*.

It is also proper to recognize that the protection Judah provided for Benjamin corresponds to the historical linkage that existed between them, for after Israel divided into two kingdoms Benjamin remained attached to Judah.

Judah, as the continuation of Jacob (leader of the brothers who remained in Canaan and whose name in a number of prophetic references stands for Jacob) symbolizes the spirit of Judaism. Joseph symbolizes the prophet; at first he is the man of the dreams and afterwards he says to his brothers: “Do you not realize that a man such as me surely divines” (Gen. 44:15).

Jacob’s giving permission to Judah to take Benjamin to Joseph represents the authority that the Israelite nation gives to the prophet (or the spiritual leader who replaces the prophet) to redirect the nation and rule via prophecy even after the destruction of the Temple. And so in every generation, the nation of Israel gives authority to its spiritual leaders and agrees to be obedient to their directives and teaching. With Hashem’s help we should speedily merit the renewal of prophecy in Israel to strengthen and renew our service to our Creator *Yitbarakh*. (Excerpted from *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, translated from the Heb., pp. 23–24).

## Endnotes

\* See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.

\*\* Concerning female progeny, one daughter and one granddaughter of Jacob are cited and counted in the subtotals. Since there are twelve sons and fifty-three grandsons mentioned (including the two who died), one wonders, were there not more granddaughters? Perhaps, as is the case concerning Jacob’s wives and daughters-in-law, daughters and granddaughters were not counted in censuses such as ours except when they were particularly prominent, as the census focused on “homes,” and it was expected that each female would eventually be joined to a husband. Jacob’s daughter Dinah, of course, did figure in an important event in the family’s history. From biblical sources we don’t know of any particular role Serah, the daughter of Asher (the other female counted in our census), might have played, although the sages do attribute a great deal of prominence to her.

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