

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Vayhi Part III Some Reflections Upon Concluding the Book of Genesis

### 1. Further on Joseph

Joseph had lived in Egypt since his youth, was on good terms with the king, married an Egyptian woman from a prominent family, had seen his children through the fourth generation born and raised in Egypt and in general enjoyed overwhelming success there. Despite all this, his vision was focused on the promised land. He had faith that G-d had granted it to his forefathers and their progeny and that eventually “G-d will surely take note of you and lead you out of this land to the land He promised to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob” (Gen. 50:24). (In clustering the three forefathers together in one clause he coined what became the standard expression for the patriarchs of the nation.) In accordance with his convictions, he adjured *Bene Yisrael* that “when G-d will take note of you, take my bones out from here [with you]” (v. 25). The Torah made a point of mentioning that the nation fulfilled its commitment as “Moses took Joseph’s bones with him for he had Israel take an oath” to that effect (Exod. 13:19).

Significantly, the first book of the Bible closes on that note of faith in redemption from exile. Joseph presumably had this aspiration throughout his years in Egypt, albeit in a subdued manner, since thoughts of return had not been practical or relevant during his lifetime. At seventeen years of age he had been forced to embark on what turned out to be a lifetime sojourn for him, one that G-d utilized to begin a lengthy stay for the burgeoning nucleus of the forthcoming nation. This was in accordance with G-d’s longstanding plan about which He had informed Abraham (15:13) that his descendants were to be strangers in another land and experience oppression and slavery before being liberated. Undoubtedly, a purpose of this national ordeal was to sensitize the Israelites to the suffering of fellow human beings, priming them to more fully

appreciate the laws of the Torah and make strides toward the nation G-d hoped they would become.

Joseph did not request immediate burial in Canaan as did Jacob. Such a request would have been deemed demeaning to the Egyptians given his lengthy tenure in a position of prominence and in light of the king’s invitation and warm welcome to his family. In any event, it would have been impractical; after his death the family did not have someone in high authority who could have secured permission to have accomplished it.

In his modesty Joseph did not request to be buried in the national “landmark” sepulcher of *me‘arat hamakhpela*. Surely it was not a matter of space. He realized that the period of the patriarchs had now passed and henceforth *me‘arat hamakhpela* was to become a national monument that all the tribes of Israel would “share” equally. He was buried in Shechem, in the portion of land Jacob had purchased from Hamor the father of Shechem (Josh. 24:32).

Joseph lived to one hundred and ten years of age, considered the ideal life span in ancient Egypt. He died eighty years after having been released from prison, as “Joseph was thirty years of age when he stood before Pharaoh” (Gen. 41:46). Eighty signifies full covenantal achievement. It is especially significant that the eighty year period began immediately following the thirteen-year period that was initiated with his sale, when he was seventeen (30–17=13), the only age markers the Torah furnishes for Joseph. It should be recalled that attestations of eight and thirteen or their decimal multiples, generally working in tandem, are also associated with the ages, important events or prominent literary devices employed in the narration of the lives of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, as pointed out in

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

## 2. Survey of the Book of Genesis

The conclusion of the Joseph saga brings the story of the founding family, now on the verge of becoming a nation as G-d had promised to Abraham, to an end. With it the book of Genesis closes and the book of Exodus picks up the narrative thread. In its first verses, utilizing quotes from Genesis, that book will confirm the divine intention of advancing the purpose of creation through the new nation. It then immediately turns to the phase of oppression and slavery. But a nation is being formed that will soon enter a covenant with G-d, conceived for the purpose of bringing blessing to all the land and thus representing a carrying forward of the objective of creation.

In surveying the book of Genesis we note that the most fundamental principles every person is expected to know about the world and life are presented in the first portion of the book. The one G-d created all that exists; He instilled infinite dignity in man and provided him with free will; He desires that man exercise his free will to abide by His will and He considers it man's basic responsibility to do so. The importance of human conscience is depicted, insight into the elemental workings of transgression and the principles of accountability is provided and reward and punishment are established. The potential for repentance is taught.

G-d's responses to serious cases of human failure to fulfill His will, including His punishment of Adam and Eve and of Cain, the events of the Flood and the Dispersal, are narrated. The selection of Abraham to father a nation to improve the human situation through promulgating true religious values into the world is described. From that point forward Genesis deals with Abraham and his descendants, imparting its messages and values mostly through character portrayals, actions, interactions and resulting consequences relevant to them.

The central message is that Abraham (to be followed by his descendants) is to foster blessing to his progeny and to the nations of the world through a new conception of religion. The diffusion of this idea is

vividly illustrated in the examples the Torah provides from his life. It constitutes concepts that will be further elaborated in the Torah and by the prophets that follow. Essentially, it is that man's responsibility is to conduct himself in accordance with 'הָרַךְ ה' ("the way of G-d" [Gen. 18:18-19]), that is, to perform righteousness and justice on earth, with compassion and caring (the narrative context within which G-d made His declaration of this principle). The polytheistic conceptions of religion, with their focus on magic, superstition and empty ritual, are totally negated.

The strict monotheistic dimension of the religious revolution presented in the Bible is not a major point of elaboration in the book of Genesis. It is further advanced in the book of Exodus.

Although G-d promised the patriarchs that their progeny would become His nation and inherit the promised land, the narratives of Genesis make clear that nothing is guaranteed. Threats to fulfillment of the promises abound. To overcome great trials and tribulations, the progenitors of the incipient nation must prove themselves deserving. The point is continually made that the future nation's existence is precarious, but the point is also made that G-d is responsive to those worthy of His intervention.

Throughout the book the founding family's very survival was threatened by formidable obstacles, including barren wives, famines, contention with competitors, ethical misjudgments and deceptions, strife between brothers, as well as the natural aftereffects of transgression. Amazingly, all were surmounted. This was to be a nation whose consciousness was to be imbued with the knowledge that its very existence from its foundation was not part of the natural order. Beginning with the remarkable birth of Isaac from the aged Abraham and Sarah, the nation's existence was to be contingent on internalizing G-d's commands and ultimately dependant on His providence. He recognizes merit but He is also impartial and fair to all. Human beings, absorbed in the pressures and particulars of their own situations, do not always appreciate these essential principles. In the course of time and events, with great pain and suffering, crucial lessons were learned.

In the last phase of the family maturation, the leadership visions of a youthful and tactless Joseph,

combined with his father's naiveté and insistence on publicly (and prematurely) favoring the son with the loftier potential, almost brought disaster to the enterprise. But Joseph's faithfulness to G-d's law in the face of enormous troubles and temptations merited divine intervention to bring about his redemption and salvation of the clan. Contrition on the part of the transgressors matched by extraordinary compassion from the victim – established as precedents and inspiring examples for the nation – bring about unity, success and growth at the end of the book.

The point is decisively made that men act on their own agendas but G-d governs the world. When He sees fit to do so, He transforms the obstacles men place in the way of His goals into opportunities to promote those goals.

### **3. Reversal of Primogeniture**

The status of a firstborn son was a solid fixture in most regions of the ancient Near East. It included significant privileges together with a responsibility to preserve and promote the family heritage. Torah law recognizes a firstborn's rights as concerns material inheritance (Deut. 21:15-17). But a prominent feature of the lineage of the leading personages who form the foundation of the forthcoming nation of Israel is the eclipsing of the firstborn for leadership. Remarkably, in not a single case of the offspring of the principal forebears who comprise the ancestry and leadership of Israel – the children of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and Joseph – does a firstborn son assume or become slated for the primary leadership role. It is a reflection of his revolutionary role in the transition that Abraham, born into the old order as the firstborn of the idolatrous Terah, rejects his parental religious heritage and brings about the innovation against it.

This reflects an important principle: Being a firstborn is not to be thought of as a valid determinant for leadership or ascendancy. This message is related to the principles that all men are created in the image of G-d and all possess freedom of will with great potential. When this perspective fully penetrates the consciousness of mankind, it will have provided a powerful thrust toward raising the dignity of all. Directly or indirectly, it has served in many societies to release the potential that resides in each individual and generate vast societal improvements, as well as

prompt movement toward widespread democratization.

### **4. Portrayal of Failings**

In sharp contrast to the national and religious literature of other nations of the ancient world, the Tanakh consistently describes its characters along with their character weaknesses and moral failings. This particularly includes the leading personages in Israel's history and applies even when the shortcomings had eventually been surmounted. (When the point is made, there may be some limitation in this regard.) The book of Genesis contains several prominent examples and the subsequent books of Tanakh expand on them. This approach facilitates learning valuable lessons from the events depicted in the text since one cannot easily identify, if identify at all, with an artificial depiction of human beings who are presented as perfect and infallible. These lessons help shape biblical readers in accordance with the goals G-d set for mankind; specifically, we may identify at least the following objectives of the narratives:

1. They demonstrate how careful everyone must be in deciding on a course of action, especially one that affects other people. Everyone must be wary of possible rationalizations. A particularly dangerous rationalization is that "the ends justify the means," often applied when lofty goals are being pursued.
2. They teach that G-d does not overlook moral and ethical lapses even in those who are close to Him, or rather especially in those close to Him.
3. They portray G-d's educative purpose within His retribution.
4. They highlight the enormous power and ready availability of repentance.
5. They emphasize the fact that even the greatest of people are human, so that the egregious error of ascribing divinity to them must not be contemplated.
6. Particularly for Israelites, they counteract smugness concerning the past and the origins of the nation, prompting humility and introspection.

Biblical characters are usually described through their actions and words, generally without the text providing an explicit comment on the morality and correctness of these. This reflects the subtle nuances and depth of human motivation. The texts are

sophisticated and must be read carefully – they are designed for even the most advanced of readers. It is the reader’s responsibility to be ever alert, consider the full context, exercise careful judgment, and look for the associations and allusions. One must employ conscience and common sense to draw the intended lesson. And the lesson often is complex and nuanced. In this unusual type of work, it generally is necessary

to read and reread the text to see the whole picture; as the sages advised, one should constantly look at it as something new and unfamiliar. Surely, one cannot merely emulate, unthinkingly, the action of a biblical personage. This is part of the Torah’s revolution and distinguishes it from all ancient religious literature.

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