

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Put on a Happy :-) Face!

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

(INTRODUCTION: I am always apprehensive about citing Biblical or Talmudic references that are critical of Biblical personalities. We must be extremely wary of viewing the Patriarchs in the same way that we look at our contemporaries. It is important to remember that Jacob was a man who wrestled with an angel. Judah and Joseph and his brothers were chosen by G-d to lead the Tribes of Israel. These people were barely mortal; the Talmud says that we would be more accurate in viewing them almost as angels. When the Torah speaks of misdeeds by these spiritual giants, it refers to conduct that might not even be recognizable to us as inappropriate. Rather, it is just that G-d holds the righteous to a higher standard. Therefore, actions that are “microscopically” incorrect are magnified in perspective. We will, G-d willing, discuss this concept in fuller detail next week.)

... The days of Jacob's life were 147 years. The time drew near for Israel to die... (Genesis, 47:27-28)

The Midrash observes that this is an unusual terminology. Whenever the Torah refers to death “drawing near,” it is a reference to the person not living as long as his father had. Apparently, the implication of *drawing near* is that death comes sooner than we might have otherwise expected. In Deuteronomy, 31:14 and 1 Kings, 2:1, we see similar phrases in reference to Moses, who died at the age of 120, seventeen years younger than his father, and King David, whose 70 years were ten years shorter than his father's.

Jacob, too, lived a shorter life than his father did. Isaac lived until the age of 180, while his son Jacob only reached 147.

Our Sages tell us that there was a reason for this 33-year deficit. In a sense, Jacob had decreed it upon himself seventeen years earlier.

Last week we read of Jacob's meeting with the Pharaoh. Ramban -- Nachmanides explains that the Pharaoh was taken aback by Jacob's appearance. While the early chapters of the Torah describe people living for several centuries, this phenomenon was no longer common at that time. The king had never seen anyone who looked so old! Jacob explained that he wasn't as old as he looked. His struggles with his brother and his uncle had taken their toll. The abduction of his daughter Dina and the disappearance of Joseph had worn him down.

Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How many years have you lived?" Jacob responded, "The days of my travels have been 130 years. They have been few and hard, not reaching to the life spans of my ancestors in their travels. (Ibid, verses 8 and 9)

Several commentaries quote the Midrash that says that Jacob was taken to task for that statement. G-d said to Jacob "I saved you from Esau and Laban! I re-united you with Dina and Joseph! And all you can say is that the years of your life have been few and hard?!"

As a result of Jacob's negative description of his life, he was punished with a shorter life. He said that he had not (yet) reached his father's age. Indeed, he never would. The conversation between Jacob and the king consists of 33 words (in the original Hebrew). As a result of that conversation, 33 years were deducted from Jacob's life. Instead of reaching his father's age of 180, Jacob only lived until 147.

There is a problem with the numbers. Let us look at the conversation again:

Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How many years have you lived?" Jacob responded, "The days of my travels have been 130 years. They have been few and hard, not reaching to the life spans of my ancestors in their travels.

The conversation begins, *Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How many years have you lived?"* Those eight words (in Hebrew) shouldn't count! If G-d wanted to punish Jacob for showing a lack of appreciation by complaining, why didn't he start counting the words from Jacob's response? Why punish him for Pharaoh's question?

I heard (or read) this answer many years ago; I don't remember the source. (If any of my readers recognize it, please let me know.)

Jacob was not only bitter in his response. It seems that his whole demeanor was one that said to the observer, "I am an old and broken man."

It wasn't just Jacob's reply that G-d was criticizing. The problem was that he carried himself in a fashion that led the Pharaoh to ask the question in the first place.

Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the "Alter ('Elder') of Slobodka" once chided a student for walking into a room with a frown on his face. "You are a thief!" he said. "Your face is a "*Reshus Harabim*" -- public property. You have no right to allow your problems to ruin someone else's day!"

There is a lady I know who just celebrated her 90th birthday. You'd never know it; I would probably guess that she is in her mid-seventies. I rarely see her without a smile.

She once confided in me about the death of her husband. He was a friendly, soft-spoken man who was honest in business and active in his synagogue and community. One day a robber came along and mugged him. He spent several weeks in the hospital. And then he died. The assailant was never found.

We spoke about the apparent unfairness in life. We spoke about the fact that the murderer got off scot-free. I told her that G-d has a very long memory; in time, the criminal will get his due.

Of course, it is easy for me to say. She's the one who lost her life's partner. She is the one who has had to grow older without her beloved husband.

Yet, she is not bitter. She prefers to focus on all the good things G-d has done for her. She speaks about her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They are her pride and joy and reason for living. "I want to be at the Bar Mitzvah," she says. "The weddings, too!" I added.

(It is important to emphasize that no one has a right to tell a person to just "grin and bear it." It is the epitome of presumptuousness and arrogance for us to curtly tell others to accept their circumstances with faith and a smile. Our job is to recognize other people's sorrows, and to help them, if we can, to bear their burdens.

Rather, the point is that this is what we should try to tell OURSELVES when challenges and adversity come our way.)

I meet Holocaust survivors who display the same attitude. While silently enduring their own private hells on a daily basis, they keep pushing forward. Rather than grappling with the unfathomable questions of "why," they focus on G-d's Providence that allowed them to survive.

Are these people bitter deep down? Is the smile a mere mask to hide their anguish? Perhaps. But a smile is contagious. If you work hard enough to convince yourself that you are happy, you will eventually find reasons to agree.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz