

VAYIGASH (GENESIS 44:18-47:27)

Staying 'On The Wagon

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Everybody wants to see *Nachas* from his children. We want to see them happy, healthy, and successful. And, of course, we want to see them alive.

Imagine for a moment Jacob's intense grief and anguish. For twenty-two years he had been separated from his beloved son Joseph. As far as he knew, a wild animal had attacked Joseph, and all that remained of him was a torn and bloody robe. During this painful time, Jacob refused to allow himself to be consoled. He never stopped mourning for Joseph. His depression was so deep that the spirit of prophecy had left him.

Now, twenty-two years later, Joseph's eleven brothers have returned from Egypt with wonderful news. Joseph has been found; he is alive and well. And, he has made it "big!" He is second only to the King of Egypt. He is rich, famous, and powerful.

Jacob refuses to believe the story. It just can't be true. Not after all these years! Finally, however, the convincing proof presents itself:

...and he saw the "Agalos" (wagons) that Joseph had sent to transport him. Then the spirit of their father Jacob was revived." (Genesis, 44:27)

What were these wagons and how did they sway Jacob away from disbelief? When the Pharaoh heard that Jacob's brothers were visiting Egypt, he invited them to stay as his guests. He commanded that they be provided with wagons with which to transport provisions, and bring their families to Egypt.

Apparently, once Jacob saw these Egyptian wagons loaded with all the riches of Egypt, he was convinced. He now understood that Joseph truly was alive, and that he had become a "*macher*."

There's one problem with this interpretation of the text: what the verse says is "*he saw the "Agalos" (wagons) that **Joseph** had sent.*" Joseph was not the one who had sent the wagons, Pharaoh was!

Several of the commentaries are bothered by the question of why the Torah refers to the Pharaoh's wagons as Joseph's. They conclude that we have to look for a different translation of the word "*Agalos*." Although a simple reading of the verse indicates that Jacob was responding to the wagons that were sent, the Midrash provides an alternate translation. The word "*Agalos*" also means "*Calves*." (Plural of "*Eglah*" – a female calf.)

Joseph was sending a subtle message to his father. "Just in case Dad doesn't believe that it's really me, I'll give you some information that you could have only heard from me. Tell him that when I last saw him 22 years ago, we were studying the laws of 'Eglah Arufah.' "(An offering that is sometimes brought by the sages of a city. The offering is performed with a female CALF. (For details, see Deuteronomy 21:1-9, and "Clean Hands and Clear Conscience").

Therefore, the real way to read this verse is: ...and he saw the "*Agalos*" -- *calves* that Joseph had sent ... He saw from Joseph's message that he remembered studying about calves 22 years ago. It was really Joseph! He was alive and well! And therefore, continues the Torah: ... *the spirit of their father Jacob was revived*.

There is more to this revival of spirit than just knowing that Joseph was alive. Joseph could have chosen a number of convincing messages to let his father know that he was still living. The real point of his communication was to let his father know that Torah was still the priority of his life.

Jacob had dedicated his life to teaching his children about the essential values of a Torah lifestyle. Jacob was worried about more than Joseph's physical well being. He was also deathly afraid of what the decadent influences of 22 years in Egypt might have done to the virtuous young man who had left him as a 17-year-old.

Everyone wants his children to succeed, but there are many ways to define success. A German Jewish 14-year-old named Henry Kissinger wrote an article criticizing Zionists for not being sufficiently orthodox. As an adult, he became a very successful and powerful man, but in the process, he left his Jewish values by the wayside. Contrast this with Joseph Lieberman, (JOSEPH??) who almost became the second most powerful man in America, and yet remains a Sabbath observer. (See "Way to Go, Joe!")

Jacob was totally unimpressed by Joseph's wealth and his connections. His concern was, "how is my son faring spiritually?" Joseph was telling his father, "Don't worry, Dad. Not only am I thriving materially, not only do I have political clout, I also have what is much more vital. In spite of my life in the Egyptian melting pot, I still cherish that which is more important than anything else; I remain a Torah Jew!"

Have a great Shabbos.

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