

Illuminating Man's Inner World THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

Parshas VaYeshev - The Face in the Window

It is a moment that is filled with deep emotional resonance and speaks to the most significant of bonds between fathers and sons. Yosef Hatzaddik returns to the near empty house of Potifar, לעשות מלאכתו - to do his work. This somewhat ambiguous phraseology is understood by some of the Amoraim to connote that Yosef had nefarious thoughts in mind and sought to engage in an inappropriate relationship with the wife of Potifar (Sotah 36b). At some point, Yosef, despite the consequences and great personal sacrifice that would in fact be brought to bear, escaped from the grasp of אשת פוטיפר. Chazal as quoted by Rashi said that the critical moment that allowed for Yosef's decisiveness was שַׁנְרָאִית לוֹ דְּמַת דִּיקוֹנוֹ שֶׁל אָבִיו - the image of his father appeared to him.

If all that we had at our disposal was the Rashi in front of us, I believe that the sensitive reader would still be moved by the concept of 'seeing' the likeness of one's father at the most critical moments of one's life. It is an imagery that carries with it enormous emotional and psychological heft. With that said the medrash and the gemarah from which Rashi draws adds in one word that in my estimation even further deepens what I can only imagine Yosef had experienced. That word is בחלון - in the window. Namely that Yosef saw the image of his father at that moment hovering in the window.

What is it about the face of his father specifically in the window that captures my imagination? I can only say what comes up for me and I do so without in any way proscribing these same sentiments to Yosef Hatzaddik. Seeing Yaakov's face in the חלון feels like Yosef looking back. It feels wistful and retrospective. It is Yosef remembering where he came from and what his roots were. It is a reflection on the values from home and upbringing. It is a memory of Yaakov and before him Yitzchak and Avraham on who's collective ideals Yosef was weaned. It is a moment of looking back, clarifying from where he came and realizing with great certainty that any relationship with אשת פוטיפר served as a complete violation of the values upon which he was

raised. To me that is the face of Yaakov in the window.

The first time I encountered this addition of the medrash was when I first read Rav Soloveitchik's Ish Halakha written in 1944 three years after his father's passing. The inscription of the book simply stated, 'at that moment the image of his father came to him and appeared before him in the window'. To me this was the Rav writing his first sefer and reflecting on his relationship with his father and on his own place in the lineage of the exalted Soloveitchik family. The window is retrospective.

A colleague whose insight I respect saw the imagery of the window in a way that was almost the diametrical opposite from my own perspective. He believed that the image of the window is that of looking into the future. The צוהר - window in Noah's teiva was a sign of hope that the mabul would in fact come to an end. The mother of Sisera peered out of the window in anticipation of her son's return. The necessity of windows in a shul are in part to connect the shul to Yerushalayim and to the גאולה. Perhaps seeing Yaakov specifically in the חלון is a reminder to Yosef to clearly contemplate the future. What would his role be in the שְׁבִטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל if he allowed himself to compromise his values with the wife of Potifar? Where would he stand vis-à-vis his father and brothers when ultimately down the road the familial reunion came to pass? This forward-looking image of what Yosef 'saw' at that moment suggested by my colleague is in fact expressed in the above mentioned gemarah in Sotah.

באותה שעה באתה דיוקנו של אביו ונראתה לו בחלון אמר לו יוסף עתידין אחיך שיכתבו על אבני אפוד ואתה ביניהם רצונך שימחה שמך מביניהם ותקרא רועה זונות

What Yaakov somehow communicated to Yosef was the question as to what Yosef wanted his future to look like. Do you want your name removed from the Choshen? Do you want to be known as a friend to women of ill repute? Yaakov's appearance in the חלון, according to

this approach represents contemplation of the future and the resolute behavior that that contemplation breeds as opposed to signifying reminiscences of the past. (As a side note I was curious why one person's mind goes to the wistful and retrospective place while another person's thoughts steer them towards something more forward thinking)

Which perspective about the significance of the window is correct? Perhaps both and perhaps neither. Perhaps this is just my mind bringing a certain deeply poetic meaning to something that is far simpler. Maybe Yaakov's face was actually seen in the window, but the window per se doesn't have some extraordinary meaning. Sometimes a window is in fact just a window. Maybe that's why Rashi in Chumash does not quote the line verbatim and doesn't mention the window. Obviously, these are questions that have no answers.

With that said, these two approaches to the nature of the window makes one think about different dimensions of experiencing time. Is there a value of reflecting on the past and thinking about the future? Of course. Ideas such as regret, understanding from where one has come (a טפה סרוחה), intense cheshbon hanefesh and the like all occupy an important place in the corpus of Jewish learning and in man's consciousness. A person who can figuratively see their parents and grandparents in the window and who can understand their roots and the significance of their mesorah lives a qualitatively different religious existence.

The reverse of that is also true. Chazal champions a person who is רואה את הנולד (has foresight), who understands where the body's ultimate end lies, and who is מצפה לישועה (awaits the days of Redemption). Thoughtful man does not live for this moment alone but is constantly weighing the effects of his behavior and decisions on the future of his life and the lives of his descendants. In a way we are always looking both backwards and forwards through our own personal windows and portals.

At the same time, ultimately man is charged with living fully in the present moment. It is clear in the writings of the Rambam and others that an overemphasis on regret for past misdeeds can be crippling. We all know people who are so busy speaking about 'the way that things used to be' that they are at constant odds with

the current realities of their lives. There are people who, to their detriment, are always peering backwards through the window to a different earlier time and who either can't or won't let the past rest peacefully. The effect is almost always a lack of genuine simcha and contentment.

Similarly, while we value being forward thinking and both reflective and responsible about the future, that also comes with its own dangers. Different levels of anxiety, obsessive thinking, the need to control, stinginess, being overly cautious and risk adverse and other behaviors and mindsets are all outgrowths of a person who lives too much in the future. The person who is continuously peering through the window of tomorrow finds themselves disadvantaged in being able to live simply and joyously in the present moment.

As usual, the Torah, Chazal and the Rishonim say it best. Rashi on the pasuk תמים תהיה אם ה' אלוֹקֶיךָ (Devarim 18:13) says that:

תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך. התהלך עמו בתמימות, ותצפה לו, ולא תחקר אחר הַעֲתִידוֹת, אֶלֶּא כֹּל מֵה שְׁיָבֵא עֲלֶיךָ קִבֵּל בְּתַמִּימוֹת וְאֵד תִּהְיֶה עִמּוֹ וְלִחְלֻקּוֹ:

Walk with G-d simply and trust him. Don't obsess over the future. Rather everything that happens to you accept it with faith and simplicity and through this you will be with Him.

Man, perhaps like Yosef Hatzadik, looks both backwards and forwards in receiving inspiration, and in shaping our values, identities, and future courses of action. At the same time, we seek the peacefulness of spirit to allow us to live simply and faithfully with HKB'H within the figurative four walls of our own בית.

Have a restful and meaningful Shabbos and a Chag Sameach.

I welcome any feedback to this Dvar Torah or any other thoughts that you might have. I can be contacted at blass@yu.edu.