

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

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Parshas Vayigash: Fathers & Sons Part II – Yaakov Avinu Emerges from the Window

A couple of weeks back I wrote an article that spoke about the relationship between Yaakov and Yosef and how Yosef saw his father's image in the window during a moment of crisis. I was appreciative of the amount of thoughtful feedback to the dvar Torah that I received and decided to write a follow up column of sorts.

After all of these years father and son are on the precipice of their long-awaited reunion. The Torah describes that:

וַיֵּאָסֶר יוֹסֵף מִרְכַּבְתּוֹ וַיַּעַל לִקְרַאת יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גִּשְׁנָה וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרָיו וַיִּבֶךְ עַל-צַוְאָרָיו עוֹד:

And Yosef harnessed his chariot and he went up to greet his father Yisroel in Goshen. He appeared to him and he fell on his neck and continued to cry.

If l'havdil this sentence was penned by an 8th grader writing an essay for school I would imagine a passionate English teacher taking out his or her red marker (if those even exist anymore) and taking a figurative blowtorch to this sentence. Who appeared to who?? Who fell on who's neck?? Who exactly is doing the crying?? The Torah's lack of clarity at such an emotionally charged moment is somewhat tantalizing to say the least.

The most famous position, one that seems to be supported by the desire for consistency in the pasuk, is that of Rashi and the medrash. Rashi says that the subject of the pasuk from start to finish is Yosef. It was Yosef who appeared to his father and who at this moment was crying on his father's neck while Yaakov Avinu was engaged in saying kerias shema. While it is not the topic of this Dvar Torah, be aware that there is a lengthy discussion in the acharonim about Yaakov's decision to say kerias shema specifically during this most personal of moments. (See the Maharal, Rav Soloveitchik and the Kotzker Rebbe among others).

While Rashi, as is his wont, pays no mind to any of the deeper psychological dynamics at play, Rav Hirsch fills in some of the underlying emotions. Rav Hirsch writes that:

Joseph wept, Jacob did not weep. Joseph could still weep, Jacob was finished with weeping, he had wept enough in his life..... Since he had missed Joseph,

Jacob had had a dull monotonous life and had not ceased from weeping, his whole life of feelings had been spent in grief over Joseph. In the meantime, Joseph had lived a life full of changes, had had no time to give himself up so much to the pain of separation, he was kept fully occupied with each of his different posts. Now when he fell round his father's neck again, he felt all the more what the separation had really meant to him and lived once again through the (pain of the) past 20 years.

The Ramban quotes Rashi and takes umbrage with his position. Like Rav Hirsch, the Ramban marshaled an argument from the world of psychology and emotions. Unlike Rav Hirsch this more emotionally intuitive position led the Ramban to the exact opposite conclusion - namely that it was Yaakov who cried and who is the subject of the pasuk - ויפל על צוואריו ויבך. The Ramban writes:

ודבר ידוע הוא מי דמעתו מצויה אם האב הזקן המוצא את בנו
חי לאחר היאוש והאבל או הבן הבכור המולך

It is common knowledge whose tears are ready to flow in a situation such as this. Is it the elderly father who finds his son after a period of mourning and despair or is it the younger son who has become a ruler? (Clearly it is the father who would be more inclined to cry).

What's fascinating is that both Rav Hirsch and the Ramban are driven by the same questions and the same desire to 'get to the bottom' of this emotionally charged situation. For whatever their reasons and analyses they come out at the opposite sides of the spectrum. (In my humble opinion I believe that a case can be made for both positions and both perspectives certainly resonate).

My brother Rabbi Dr. David Blass, with his typical insight, mentioned to me recently that perhaps both Yaakov and Yosef did in fact cry at this moment. One could argue that if it was either one or the other why would the Torah specify that it was either Yaakov or Yosef. Rather, both of these giants were moved to tears. Why then only use the singular - ויפל and ויבך? My brother suggested that the Torah is highlighting that the experience of each person was singular, each party felt something different than the other. As was conveyed by

both Rav Hirsch and the Ramban, the experiences of the elderly father towards the end of his life and the son at the height of his powers are completely different from each other. Writing the verbs in the singular highlights these singular experiences.

I saw a pshat recently (I believe it was in Rav Shternbuch's sefer) that indicated that the Torah's use of the singular - וירא אליו - and he appeared to him, conveys a similar message as to what my brother had said. Both men appeared to each other. Why then only specify that one person (Yosef according to Rashi) appeared to the other? Rav Shternbuch argued that the Torah is focusing on the perspective of Yosef because of his overwhelming desire to give respect to his father. As such even though technically the word should be in the plural, the Torah writes in singular to highlight the individual experience.

In thinking about this idea this past week, I was struck by a reflection born out of a lifetime of observing familial relationships. While both Yaakov and Yosef came to this meeting after 22 years infused with their own feelings of joy - along with undoubtedly a host of other feelings as well - at the very least there was an actual meeting. The union, despite the passage of time and the numerous impediments, came to pass. But in this lies an element of sadness.

For how many fathers and sons (or mothers and daughters) does the union never take place. I don't mean an actual reunion after a separation of years. What I mean is the meaningful union of emotions and nefashos in which parents and children can really 'meet' - deeply and openly. Often as life will have it, when the children are desperately seeking the closeness with a parent the parent for one reason or another cannot be present. As the child grows the parent wants more involvement with the child but by then the most important people in the child's life are no longer the parents, and the child is busy establishing his or her own identity. This is the way that the course of life proceeds often for decades. Two proverbial ships who love each other deeply but who gently pass each other in the night. How often at the center of all of that exists deep emotions and feelings, often complex feelings, that do not get expressed or shared?

What I am describing is not true about many relationships between parents and children. Besides being blessed to be close to my own parents, I have observed countless relationships that stand as a model of inspiration of what parent-child 'unions' can look like. Sadly, in many other circumstances, for one reason or another, there might never be an opportunity to solidify or repair the shared space between the child and parent. Arguably

the majority of parent-child relationships are loving and solid – or at the very least functional - but could benefit from the continued focus on deep and meaningful union. The question is are we willing to invest the necessary time, effort and emotional buy-in to allow for the deepening of these relationships? Are we collectively willing to do the necessary work on ourselves that allows us to move certain relationships forward? Undoubtedly the quick answer to these questions is yes, but do we back up that affirmative response by putting our money where our mouths are?

We have a relative who we are very close with who lives in Eretz Yisroel and whose parents still live in the States. Like all of us, these parents are not getting any younger. Our relative had an epiphany several years back that why should she wait to make more frequent visits to her parents only once they have begun to experience the inevitable health problems. She is a mother of a large family with extensive personal, professional and community obligations. She does not possess thousands of excess dollars ready at her disposal. That said the relationship was important enough that she decided to start making routine trips to the States just to be present and to help to continue to cultivate the type of chibbur nefashos that inform Yaakov and Yosef's meeting.

As previously mentioned, man is always looking backwards to parents and grandparents and then forwards to children and grandchildren. In a way a person finds themselves at the center of a multi-generational symphony filled with both harmonious and occasionally discordant notes. As filled as our lives are with a thousand other areas of richness and meaning, ultimately our final judgements of our own existence is based on whether or not we excelled in that symphony. Whether we invested in a deep union with everyone who came before and after us. It is that which Yaakov expresses in the next pasuk וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה אֱמוּנָתִי – and Yaakov said that now I am prepared to die'. Now that Yaakov experienced the union with Yosef and the reunification of his family, he felt that his life was complete. With everything that he had accomplished, both as Yaakov and as the national figure of Yisroel, these relationships stood as the centerpiece of his life work. What a profoundly beautiful model these moments provide in navigating our own lives.

Everyone should have a meaningful and peaceful Shabbos

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