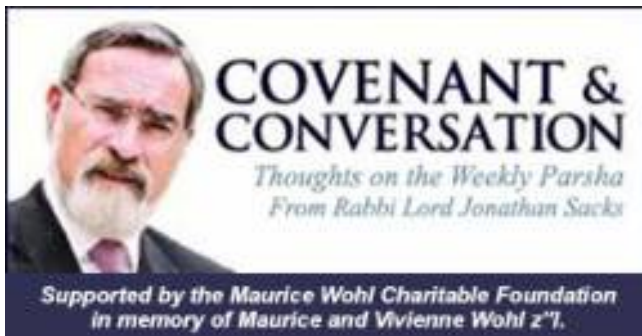


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The Unexpected Leader

I was once present when the great historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis, was asked to predict the course of events in the Middle East. He replied, “I’m a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a *retired* historian, so even my past is *passé*.” Predictions are impossible in the affairs of living, breathing human beings because we are free and there is no way of knowing in advance how an individual will react to the great challenges of their life.

If one thing has seemed clear throughout the last third of Genesis, it is that Joseph will emerge as

the archetypal leader. He is the central character of the story, and his dreams and the shifting circumstances of his fate all point in that direction. Least likely as a candidate for leadership is Judah, the man who proposed selling Joseph as a slave (Gen. 37:26-27), whom we next see separated from his brothers, living among the Canaanites, intermarried with them, losing two of his sons because of sin, and having sexual relations with a woman he takes to be a prostitute. The chapter in which this is described begins with the phrase, “At that time Judah *went down* from among his brothers” (Gen. 38:1). The commentators take this to mean moral decline.

Yet history turned out otherwise. Joseph’s descendants, the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, disappeared from the pages of history after the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE, while Judah’s descendants, starting with David, became kings. The tribe of Judah survived the Babylonian conquest, and it is Judah whose name we bear as a people. We are *Yehudim*, “Jews.” This week’s parsha of Vayigash explains why.

Already in last week’s parsha we began to see Judah’s leadership qualities. The family had reached deadlock. They desperately needed food, but they knew that the Egyptian viceroy had insisted that they bring their brother Benjamin with them, and Jacob refused to let this happen. His beloved wife Rachel’s first son (Joseph) was already lost to him, and he was not about to let the other, Benjamin, be taken on a hazardous journey. Reuben, in keeping with his unstable character, made an absurd suggestion: “Kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back safely.” (Gen. 42:37)

In the end it was Judah, with his quiet authority – “I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him” (Gen. 43:9) – who persuaded Jacob to let Benjamin go with them.

Now, as the brothers attempt to leave Egypt, and return home, the nightmare scenario has unfolded. Benjamin has been found with the viceroy’s silver cup in his possession. The official delivers his verdict. Benjamin is to be held as a slave. The other brothers can go free. At this point Judah steps forward and makes a speech that changes history. He speaks eloquently about their father’s grief at the loss of one of Rachel’s sons. If he loses the other, he will die of grief. I, says Judah, personally guaranteed his safe return. He concludes:

“Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.” (Gen. 44:33-34)

No sooner has he said these words than Joseph, overcome with emotion, reveals his identity and the whole elaborate drama reaches closure. What is happening here and how does it have a bearing on leadership?

The Sages articulated a principle: “Where penitents stand even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.” (Brachot 34b) The Talmud brings a proof-text from Isaiah: “Peace, peace, to those far and near” (Is. 57:19) placing the far (the penitent

sinner) before the near (the perfectly righteous). However, almost certainly the real source is here in the story of Joseph and Judah. Joseph is known to tradition as *ha-tzaddik*, the righteous one.¹ Judah, as we will see, is a penitent. Joseph became “second to the king.” Judah, however, became the ancestor of kings. Hence, where penitents stand even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.

Judah is the first person in the Torah to achieve perfect repentance (*teshuvah gemurah*), defined by the Sages as when you find yourself in a situation where it is likely you will be tempted to repeat an earlier sin, but you are able to resist because you are now a changed person.²

Many years before Judah was responsible for Joseph being sold as a slave:

Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. (Gen. 37:26-27)

Now, faced with the similar prospect of leaving Benjamin as a slave, he has a very different response. He says, “Let me stay as a slave and let my brother go free.” (44:33) That is perfect repentance, and it is what prompts Joseph to reveal his identity and forgive his brothers.

The Torah had already hinted at the change in Judah’s character in an earlier chapter. Having accused his daughter-in-law Tamar of becoming pregnant by a forbidden sexual relationship, he is

confronted by her with evidence that he himself is the father of the child, and his response is to immediately declare: “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38:26). This is the first time in the Torah we see a character admit that he is wrong. If Judah was the first penitent, it was Tamar – mother of Perez from whom King David was descended – who was ultimately responsible.

Perhaps Judah’s future was already implicit in his name, for though the verb *le-hodot* from which it is derived means “to thank” (Leah called her fourth son Judah saying, “This time I will thank the Lord,” Gen. 29: 35), it is also related to the verb *le-hitvadot*, which means “to admit or “to confess” – and confession is, according to the Rambam, the core of the command to repent.

Leaders make mistakes. That is an occupational hazard of the role. Managers follow the rules, but leaders find themselves in situations for which there are no rules. Do you declare a war in which people will die, or do you refrain from doing so at the risk of letting your enemy grow stronger with the result that more will die later? That was the dilemma faced by Chamberlain in 1939, and it was only some time later that it became clear that he was wrong and Churchill right.

But leaders are also human, and their mistakes often have nothing to do with leadership and everything to do with human weakness and temptation. The sexual misconduct of John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton and many other leaders has undoubtably been less than perfect. Does this affect our judgment of them as leaders or not? Judaism suggests it should. The prophet Nathan was unsparing of King David for consorting with

another man’s wife. But Judaism also takes note of what happens next.

What matters, suggests the Torah, is that you repent – you recognise and admit your wrongdoings, and you change as a result. As Rav Soloveitchik pointed out, both Saul and David, Israel’s first two kings, sinned. Both were reprimanded by a Prophet. Both said *chattati*, “I have sinned”.³ But their fates were radically different. Saul lost the throne, David did not. The reason, said the Rav, was that David confessed immediately. Saul prevaricated and made excuses before admitting his sin.⁴

The stories of Judah, and of his descendant David, tell us that what marks a leader is not necessarily perfect righteousness. It is the ability to admit mistakes, to learn from them and grow from them. The Judah we see at the beginning of the story is not the man we see at the end, just as the Moses we see at the burning bush – stammering, hesitant – is not the mighty hero we see at the end, “his sight undimmed, his natural energy unabated.” A leader is one who, though he may stumble and fall, arises more honest, humble and courageous than he was before.

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. How does Judaism’s view of a leader differ from the secular understanding of leadership in your country?
2. Do you gauge people by their mistakes or by their responses to these mistakes?
3. How can we apply these ideas about *teshuvah* to our lives today?

NOTES

1. See Tanchuma (Buber), Noach, 4, s.v. eleh, on the basis of Amos 2:6, "They sold the righteous for silver."
2. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1.
3. I Sam. 15:24 and II Sam. 12:13.
4. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen – My Beloved Knocks* (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav, 2006), 26.



Seeing a Ghost

They never saw it coming: The dramatic, unexpected end to the saga in which they were embroiled was the last thing the brothers anticipated – and that was precisely the problem. The scrutiny to which they had been subjected seemed unwarranted. Why, of all the visitors who came to Egypt to purchase food, had they been singled out? Why the interest in their family, their father, their brother Binyamin?

When they attempt to return the money that had mysteriously turned up in their bags, the brothers' misinterpretation of the events that had transpired in Egypt becomes clear: They convince themselves that everything that had happened was part of a plot to rob them of their possessions and their freedom.

When the men [realized that] they were being brought to Yosef's palace, they were terrified. They said, 'We are

being brought here because of the money that was put back in our packs the last time. We are being framed and will be convicted, our donkeys will be confiscated, and we might be taken as slaves.' (Bereishit 43:18)

Had they thought things through more calmly and rationally, they might have asked themselves why the second-most powerful man in Egypt would need some paltry excuse to seize their meager possessions; moreover, the Egyptian ruler's *modus operandi* – placing his own money in their bags – seems strange and counter-intuitive: Had the Egyptian wanted to keep their donkeys, he could have left all of the brothers in prison, rather than freeing them after three days, and their donkeys and very lives would have been his.

Apparently, the human mind has a powerful capacity to rationalize, justify and fabricate alternative explanations to the obvious when the simple truth is too difficult to face. In flagrant disregard for Occam's Razor¹, the brothers built intricate and improbable hypotheses to explain their predicament. Had they been able or willing to open their eyes, they would have saved themselves so much confusion, fear and angst. Their adversary was not a stranger; they had known him their entire lives, but were unable or unwilling to recognize him. The obvious solution eluded them, because in their minds it was impossible in so many ways. This person could not possibly be Yosef: Yosef was a dreamer, with no grasp of reality. Yosef was probably not even alive: As a slave, Yosef must have annoyed his master to the point that he did what the brothers themselves could not. On the other hand, who

other than Yosef would have cared about their youngest brother and their father? Who else had any reason to throw them in prison? Who else cared enough to carry on this protracted game of wits, to maintain contact only to continue to threaten and abuse them?

The brothers never dreamed that they would bow to Yosef; ironically, when they finally did bow before him, the brothers were unaware that Yosef’s dreams had come to fruition: They did not know that it was Yosef to whom they bowed. They bowed to the man who controlled all the food in Egypt; in a very real sense, they had not bowed to Yosef, but to a strange Egyptian potentate. They never dreamed that this was their own brother.

The Midrash offers a more detailed account of the moments in which Yosef finally revealed himself to his brothers: At first, Yosef told them that their “missing” brother, the brother they had claimed was dead, was in fact very much alive. The brothers were stunned, incredulous. Yosef then assured them that this long-lost brother was in the palace; in fact, “he told them, ‘I will call him and he will appear before your eyes.’ He called out, ‘Yosef son of Yaakov, come to me! Yosef son of Yaakov, show yourself!’ The brothers scanned every corner of the room, searching for Yosef, until Yosef finally declared, ‘I am Yosef’ – and the brothers (almost) died. (Bereishit Rabbah 93:9)

Even when they are told that Yosef is in the room, they look everywhere – except at the man who stands before them.

Sometimes, jealousy and hatred can be so strong that we underestimate the person who is the object of our hatred. By belittling their worth, we justify our own bad behavior. Because the brothers hated Yosef, they could not see the truth – even as it stared directly at them. When they were finally forced to recognize Yosef, they were dumbfounded, shocked almost to death. As if struck by lightning or confronted by a ghost, that moment of enlightenment forced them to recognize their many crimes.

They had hated their brother for no reason. Yosef had not been suffering from delusions of grandeur; he was, and always had been, capable of greatness. They suspected him of vanity and a false sense of superiority, but it was they who suffered from myopathy: They could not, or would not, see what was, and always had been, right in front of them. In the end, they had bowed to him, just as he had dreamed they would. They relied on him for sustenance, as his dream foretold. They understood, too, that if revenge was on his mind, he was certainly in a position to do anything he wished to them, and not merely take their few donkeys.

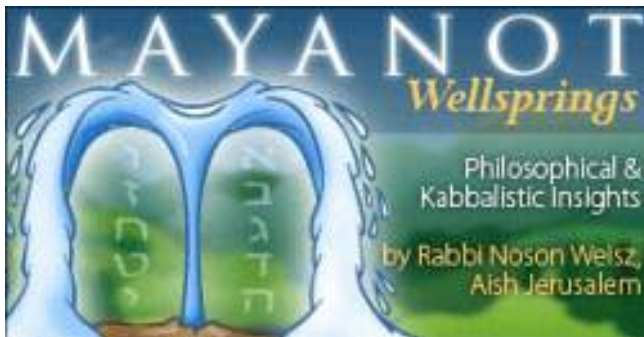
In one dazzling moment, the brothers’ world was turned upside down. They were not victims, as they had imagined, of this man’s abuse; they themselves were the abusers. They might tell their story, and perhaps even garner sympathy from anyone and everyone else – but there was one person in the world who was not fooled. They might have taken comfort in self-pity and self-righteousness had they been standing before any other accuser, but the man who stood before them was Yosef, the one person who knew their darkest

secret, the person who had been their victim, the brother they had put out of their minds for so many years. Yehudah's impassioned speech, so full of righteous indignation, suddenly seemed hollow, even laughable. Now, they were forced to remember: They had another brother, he was in the room, staring right at them, and he was everything they had tried to deny: Yosef was a visionary, a man of unparalleled talents and strengths, a man of the highest moral caliber. He had risen far above them in every way, but he was willing to go even further, to do the unimaginable: Yosef was willing to forgive them.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2015/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayigash.html>

1. Occam's (or Ockham's) Razor states that among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected. In other words, the most straightforward explanation is usually correct.



Bracing For Exile

So Israel set out with all that he had and he came to Beersheba where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God spoke to Israel in night visions and He said, "Jacob, Jacob ... I am the God of your father.

Have no fear of descending to Egypt, for I shall establish you as a great nation there. I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall also bring you up..." So Jacob arose from Beersheba. The sons of Israel transported Jacob their father... (Genesis 46:1-5)

In this short passage Jacob is referred to by name no less than seven times -- four times he is called Jacob, three times Israel. What is this bewildering switch of identities all about? Who is this man, Jacob or Israel?

Why is he offering sacrifices to the God of Isaac? Why not simply to God, or at least to the God of his forefathers, since God is also known as the God of Abraham.

Moreover these sacrifices are unlike any that have been previously mentioned in the Torah. So far it has only referred to *olah* -- sacrifices that are burnt on the altar in their entirety. But here, the Hebrew word used for sacrifice is *zevachim* -- a divided sacrifice (also called *shlomim*). The fat is burned on the altar, but the meat is divided between the officiating priest and the owner, who are both commanded to eat their share. What is the significance of the association of this particular sacrifice with Jacob?

Finally, why does God appear to Jacob in night visions?

A SINGLE THEME

All these difficulties are pondered by the commentators, and their approach to the solution centers around a single theme. In their view, this entire passage describes the spiritual preparation

of the Jewish people for the trials they will have to confront during the Egyptian exile.

Nachmanides explains:

Jacob arrived at the meeting as Israel, a name that signifies his ascendancy over all other creatures in the universe whatever the source of their power, be it human or Divine, as stated in Genesis 32:29. But God told him that he was now going into exile and this name was no longer appropriate. For the foreseeable future he will be Jacob, not Israel, as he will live under the domination of a foreign power, Egypt.

Nevertheless, he was also told that he need not fear -- God loves him, as the doubling of his name "Jacob, Jacob" indicates (see Rashi 46:2), and the *Shechina*, God's Divine Presence, will go down with him to Egypt and stay with him there till the redemption.

Jacob's sacrifices on this occasion established a connection with God that is described in the following passage of Talmud:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai [the author of the "Zohar"] taught: "Come and see how beloved is Israel to the Holy One, the Source of all blessing. Wherever Israel went into exile, the *Shechina* went along into exile. They went to exile to Egypt, the *Shechina* went with them as it is written, *Did I not appear to your ancestor's family when they were in Egypt [enslaved] to the house of Pharaoh* (Samuel 1:2-27. They went to Babylon in exile and the *Shechina* went with them, as it is

written, *because of you I was sent to Babylon* (Isaiah 43:14). And when they will eventually be redeemed, the *Shechina* will be redeemed along with them, as it is written, *Then the Lord your God will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you* (Deut. 30:3). The verb used in the verse is not *veheshiv*, the proper grammatical way to express bringing back someone else in Hebrew, but *veshov* which expresses the idea of returning oneself; to teach you that God Himself returns along with Israel from its exiles. (Talmud, Megilah, 29a)

Only after he had attained the assurance of being accompanied into exile by the *Shechina* from God, was Jacob willing to go down to Egypt to see his lost son Joseph and enter the Egyptian exile. Without this guarantee, despite the hunger prevailing in Canaan, and despite the presence of his beloved son Joseph in Egypt for whom he had pined for 22 long years, he would never have gone down to Egypt willingly. God would have had to drag him down to Egypt in chains.

THE SHECHINA

But what is the significance of this promise? What is the difference if God Himself goes with Jacob into his exile in the form of the *Shechina*, or if he merely controls what happens to the Jewish people from a distance? What is more, how is it possible to conceive of God going into exile at all?

The first step in our search for understanding is to attempt to understand what is meant by "the

Shechina." Isn't God by any other name just God? Why in fact does God go by such a bewildering number of names?

The holy name *Shechina* is universally employed in Jewish tradition to describe the Divine Presence that rests on the Temple. (See Nachmanides' introduction to Exodus.) It is a feminine name in Hebrew, a language which, like French for example, assigns masculine or feminine gender to all nouns.

What does masculine and feminine mean in relation to God? Obviously, it refers to a concept rather than to sexual orientation.

"Masculine" stands for the source, or provider of some emanation or force, whereas "feminine" represents the receiver, or destination of the force or emanation that is being provided. These ideas are derived from procreation, the main function of sex differentiation among humans. In the conception of children, the role of the male is to offer or provide seed, while the role of the female is to receive this seed and develop it into a child.

In the tenets of Judaism, God is not a philosophical construct. We can know nothing about God Himself through the exercise of our own mental faculties. How could we? He is infinite and we are finite. At most we can deduce that there must be a creator, otherwise we have no explanation for how the world began.

But this deduction hardly tells us anything about the nature of such a creator, or of His plan or purpose in creating the universe. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, this limitation in the ability of humans to reach out to Him was God's

primary purpose in giving us the Torah. Having designed us, God knew very well that we humans were unable to discover how to relate to Him on our own, and as He desired a relationship with us, He gave us the Torah and told us about Himself.

Indeed, God told us a lot about Himself. He told us His names and described his character traits and policies to us in the Torah in great detail, so that we could relate to Him.

But it is one thing to possess the vocabulary with which to describe the infinite, and it is something else entirely to be able to have a real relationship with a Being Who is infinite.

To offer tangible animal sacrifices to an abstract concept in your head is the height of absurdity. This is precisely why we cannot have a Temple at the present time. If we had a Temple, we would have to offer sacrifices in it by the dictates of Jewish law and this we cannot do. For although we know all the names of God written in the Torah, conceptual awareness of God's names is hardly the equivalent of a real relationship with Him.

Inasmuch as people at our present spiritual level can only be aware of God on the level of faith, but cannot detect Him as a palpable Presence that is part of our physical world, we cannot maintain any physical bond with Him at all. We are unable to relate to God through physical acts such as the offering of sacrifices.

MEETING GOD

The Divine presence that makes it possible to establish and maintain such a palpable face to face relationship with God is known as the

Shechina. The word derives from the Hebrew word *shachen*, meaning "neighbor." It is through the Divine revelation provided by the *Shechina* that God becomes our neighbor. In fact, the different names of God each represent different levels of revelation.

We can understand this idea of the *Shechina* conceptually with the aid of two metaphors.

First metaphor:

Suppose you have a meeting with President Clinton. Such a meeting takes place in the Oval Office and has a preset duration and a fixed agenda. Thus you only have a limited time at your disposal to be with the president and you only have permission to discuss the topic on the agenda. When you walk out of such a meeting, you will not know anything about the president's hobbies or interests, you will know nothing about how he feels about his wife or his mother or any other part of his personal life. Nevertheless, you have clearly had a meeting with the president in person. It was not someone else you were conversing with.

In the same way, God in His infinite goodness provided an opportunity for us to relate to Him in a way that we are capable. Thus He established a venue (the Temple) and set up a schedule and agenda for meetings. The amount of revelation of the Divine Presence that is displayed at such meetings is tailor designed to suit our spiritual capacity stretched to its maximum. It is with God Himself that we are meeting. But the meetings take place on a spiritual level that is suitable to our spiritual capacities, not His. The *Shechina* and the Temple go hand in hand.

As an encounter with God also involves the ability to relate to the infinite intellectually, we require the aid of a second metaphor:

Suppose Albert Einstein wanted to explain his theory of relativity to a very bright liberal arts student with absolutely no background in physics or mathematics. He would have to translate the ideas, which, in his mind are in the form of mathematical equations and physical formulae, and express them in vocabulary and concepts that are comprehensible to someone whose background is purely in liberal arts. If he were especially adept at teaching, he would succeed in conveying some idea of the theory of relativity to his audience. The picture of relativity that could be conveyed in such a fashion would be true, and would really express the theory of relativity, not some other concept, but it would obviously fall far short of what Einstein himself understood.

In the same way God invented a language and vocabulary in which He could explain Himself to us in ways that we could really comprehend. The mental picture we have of God is a true picture, even if it necessarily falls short of how God understands Himself. This mental picture of God is also implicit in the idea of the *Shechina*.

As it is only through the application of these two metaphors that we can comprehend the Divine Presence known as the *Shechina*. This Divine Presence is obviously not the full equivalent of God Himself. To emphasize the fact that this is a Presence that God assumes, so that He can become our neighbor in some sense and share a common reality with us finite creatures, it is expressed in the feminine. This Presence --

although it is the Presence of God Himself -- is deemed to emanate from a Higher Source, with which we finite creatures cannot be neighbors.

JACOB'S PROBLEM

Armed with this information, we can attack the crux of Jacob's problem in approaching the idea of exile.

If God inhabits a neighborhood, it must be transformed by the fact of His residence. As God's Presence is palpable, the entire neighborhood inevitably becomes suffused with holiness. People become spiritually aware, a Divine serenity descends on the area, the entire physical world becomes elevated. Prophecy is a common phenomenon.

All these phenomena are antithetical to exile. In exile, the dominant culture pervades the atmosphere of the neighborhood by definition. The very meaning of exile is that the tone of life is set by the host nation rather than by the Jewish people.

Jacob was afraid of exile. Even if God would watch over the Jewish people from afar, their inner spiritual survival would be put to serious risk. Moving out of God's neighborhood means the loss of emotional contact with God. But spiritual survival requires the maintenance of precisely such contact. In order to survive exile, the Jewish people must be given some way to maintain their relationship with God. The *Shechina* must accompany them into exile.

THE DIVIDED SACRIFICE

If we look around the world and examine the lives of all humans that are striving to reach holiness, we find that they all have something in common, no matter what religion or philosophy they formally espouse. People who strive for holiness inevitably adopt very ascetic lifestyles. They take on vows of poverty and chastity, they fast and meditate, they live apart from other human beings in separate enclaves. They seem to sense that contact with God mandates that the physical world be entirely consumed on the altar of self-sacrifice. They instinctively feel that they should become *olah* sacrifices.

Indeed, Isaac is called an *olah temimah*, a sacrifice entirely pure of blemish. (Genesis raba 64:3) Jacob pleaded with God to make himself accessible without the need for such heroic measures. He wanted to offer a *shlomim*, a divided sacrifice. He wanted to be able to cling to God and to holiness through the food he found on his own table.

If he and the Jewish people were to have any chance of surviving the 210-year sojourn in Egypt spiritually, they must have the ability to remain God's neighbors immersed in the atmosphere of a foreign culture. They must have the ability to retain their vibrant emotional attachment to God through the mundane activities of their everyday lives.

In exile, God's Presence cannot pervade the neighborhood. At best, it could remain detectable only in the privacy of the Jewish home.

Nachmonides quotes the opinion of the Talmud (Zevachim, 116a) that until Jacob, all the

sacrifices mentioned in the Torah were *olah* sacrifices. Jacob was the first to offer the *shlomim* sacrifice. He requested that the God of his father Isaac -- who was the very personification of the *olah* sacrifice -- agree to be his neighbor even through the divided sacrifice.

DARKNESS OF EXILE

God appeared to Jacob in a night vision. This is because exile is represented by darkness. In exile, it is never evident that we Jews actually live in God's neighborhood. Any vision we have of God in exile is by definition a night vision. The world outside is spiritually dark for us. Ostensibly the Jewish people appear to have been banished from the warm protection offered by God's Presence. We are oppressed, persecuted and often slaughtered. God seems to have abandoned us.

But God promised Jacob that the *Shechina* would accompany us into exile. The night vision of the *Shechina* has kept us spiritually alive through the travails of the last two thousand years. Somehow, we have never felt abandoned to a degree that could extinguish the warmth of the inner flame of the Presence of the *Shechina* within us.

NAMES OF JACOB

Jacob has two names because he relates to the *Shechina* in two different ways. When the *Shechina* moves into his neighborhood in the open and proudly proclaims God's neighborly feelings, Jacob is known as Israel. When the neighborly relationship is concealed and restricted to night visions he is called Jacob.

The world was created in seven days -- the seventh day, the Shabbat, representing the

creation of the world's ultimate destination. According to Jewish tradition, it will stand for six thousand years in the form with which we are familiar, and for another thousand when it will resemble Shabbat.

In mystical thought the seven days and seven thousands parallel the lower seven *sefirot* -- the Divine manifestations of God in the world. Of these, the first three refer to the inner character traits of Divinity, while the last four represent the methods of interaction between Divinity and the outside world.

On the spiritual level of the inner *sefirot*, Jacob is always Israel. It is only towards the outside that he appears as Jacob. Of the seven times he is mentioned in this passage, there are four Jacobs and three Israels.



Short and Sharp Rebuke

And Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" And the brothers could not respond to him, for they shrank from him in shame. (Gen. 45:3)

After a sharp confrontation with Yehudah, who pleads with him to have mercy on his aged father, Yosef can no longer maintain his masquerade. He bursts into tears and reveals his identity to his brothers. "I am Yosef," he cries out. "Is my father still alive?" And the brothers "shrink from him in shame."

The Midrash comments (*Bereishis Rabbah* 93:10), "Woe is to us on the day of judgment. Woe is to us on the day of rebuke ... If the brothers could not endure Yosef's rebuke [without shrinking away in shame], each individual will certainly not endure it when the Holy One, Blessed is He, rebukes him for what he has done."

What connection is the Midrash making? How does Yosef's rebuke to his brothers foreshadow the rebuke each of us will face on the final day of reckoning?

Let us consider for a moment. What exactly were Yosef's words of rebuke? "I am Yosef." Why are these words considered rebuke?

For 22 years, the brothers lived under the impression that they had acted justly by selling their brother into slavery. They saw their broken-hearted, inconsolable father, but they still thought they were right. They saw that the *Shechinah* had consequently departed from their home, and still, they were convinced that they had done the right thing.

They suffered through a famine. They went down to Egypt to buy food and found themselves caught in a web of intrigue. They were accused of being spies. Some of them were taken hostage. They were endangered. And now they were falsely

accused of robbing the viceroy's cup. They must have wondered why they were being subjected to such trials and tribulations, but they didn't have any answers.

And then Yosef declares, "I am Yosef." And everything is crystal clear! Like a flash of lightning, those words illuminate the landscape of their lives for the previous twenty-two years. Suddenly, they understand everything. All the mysteries are dispelled, and they understand that they have been living a lie for all these years. There could be no stronger rebuke, and they shrink back in shame.

Each of us goes through life distracted by this, distracted by that, puzzled by this, puzzled by that, confused, deluded, and in the process, we wander off in wrong directions and make mistakes. We lose sight of our priorities and pursue the wrong goals. But when the final day of reckoning arrives, all Hashem will say is, "I am Hashem!"

Like a flash of lightning, these three short words will illuminate our lives for us. Suddenly, we will understand everything that has happened to us, and we identify all our mistakes with perfect clarity. And it will be terribly painful. Those three words are all it will take. "I am Hashem!" When we hear those words, woe is to us of the day of judgment, woe is to us on the day of rebuke.

CONCLUSIVE PROOF

And [Yaakov] saw the wagons Yosef had sent to transport him, and the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived. (Gen. 45:27)

Before Yaakov would allow himself to accept the news that his long-lost son Yosef had been found alive and that he was now the viceroy of Egypt, he wanted to see some solid proof. Perhaps the whole thing was some kind of cruel hoax.

Yosef could easily have sent along all sorts of signs that he was genuine and not an impostor. He could have described his room or any other intimate details that would not be known to a stranger. But he did something altogether different. According to the Midrash, the "wagons Yosef had sent to transport Yaakov to Egypt" were really a hint at the *sugya*, Talmudic topic, they had discussed in private on the last day they had seen each other - the topic of *eglah arufah*, the decapitated calf. (The Hebrew word for wagon is *agalah*, which is reminiscent of the word *eglah*.) This sign convinced Yaakov that this was not a hoax and revived his spirits.

But why indeed was this such a conclusive proof? Just as an impostor might have somehow learned other intimate details about Yosef, why couldn't he have discovered this information as well?

During the time of the Vilna Gaon, a very strange incident took place in his city. A young couple had gotten married, and shortly afterward, the husband vanished without a trace. The poor wife was left an *agunah*, a living widow unable to remarry because her husband might still be alive.

Thirty years passed, and then, one fine day, a man appeared on her doorstep and declared, "My dear wife, I'm back!" Then he told her a long story about what had kept him from returning for so many years.

The woman looked at the man and did not recognize him as her husband. But then again, she couldn't be sure that he wasn't. Thirty years wreak changes on a person. They also fade the memory, especially in those times when there were no photographs. The man was about the same build and coloring as her husband. His features were not really dissimilar. His face was weathered by time and the elements, and it was difficult to imagine what he might have looked like thirty years earlier. It was not impossible that this was her husband. And yet, he did not seem familiar.

She expressed her reservations to the man, and he was very understanding.

"Test me," he said. "Ask me any question about our life together. See if I know the answers."

So she asked him questions, and he had all the answers. He knew all about their families, their wedding day, their home, including some intimate details that only the two of them could have known.

Still, she remained suspicious, and she decided to seek the advice of the *beis din*, the Jewish court. The judges of the *beis din* interrogated the man extensively, but they could not catch him in a mistake. He was very convincing. And yet, his wife was not convinced, which was certainly cause for suspicion. What should they do? They sought the counsel of the Vilna Gaon.

"Take the man to the *shul*," said the Gaon. "Ask him to point out his *makom kavua*, the place where he normally sat."

They took him to the *shul* and asked him to point to his seat. The man hemmed and hawed, but he

could not do it. Then he broke down and admitted that he had learned all his information from the husband whom he had befriended many years earlier.

The Vilna Gaon had put his finger on the flaw in this man's diabolical plan. Assuming that the man was an impostor seeking to move in with another man's wife, he was obviously far from a righteous person. Such a person would seek out all sorts of important details to "prove" his identity, but it would not occur to him to find out about the husband's seat in *shul* or any of the other holy matters in Jewish life.

Similarly, Yaakov knew that if the man who claimed to be Yosef was an impostor he might have extracted all sorts of intimate and obscure information from the real Yosef. But he also knew that it would never occur to an impostor to ask which Talmudic topic he and Yaakov were discussing when they last saw each other. When Yosef was able to refer to the topic of *eglah arufah*, Yaakov was convinced that he had found his long-lost son.

Serious Jews identify themselves by the holy aspects of their lives. The important information is not the make and color of their cars, not the size of their houses, not the last time they went fishing or played baseball. It is the mitzvot they have performed, the *chessed*, kindness, they have done, the place where they sit in *shul*, the last topic they discussed.

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