

PARSHAS VAYECHI

תשפ"ב

Parshas Vayechi concludes the first historic period of Chumash. Sefer Bereishis is about individuals. Sefer Shemos, although it begins with individuals, is really about Klal Yisroel and its development as a nation. The individuals in Sefer Bereishis establish the basis for who and what we are. They were unusual people not to be confused with regular human beings.

The Ovos founded Klal Yisroel. The Ramban says, "maaseh ovos simon l'bonim" – the lives of the Ovos planted the seeds of the future of Klal Yisroel. Their experiences mapped out the basic struggles and triumphs that Klal Yisroel would encounter throughout their history. In many senses, Yaakov is the pre-eminent founder of Klal Yisroel. He is the choicest of the Ovos and the greatest of the Ovos. He combined the traits of Avrohom and Yitzchok in a perfect blend, and he directly gave rise to the 12 Shivtei Koh who comprise Klal Yisroel. He is emes – the type of emes necessary to function in this world. This is the emes of Torah.

Each of the shevotim drew from this multi-faceted human being their unique character and derech avodoh. When Yaakov gives these brochos to the shevotim he is identifying various traits which form each one's unique derech avodoh. It is interesting to compare the brochos which Yaakov Ovinu gave at the beginning of their history, and the brochos Moshe Rabbeinu gave at the end of Chumash.

When Klal Yisroel came to Egypt, Yosef realized that he needed to devise a way for Klal Yisroel to survive in a foreign, hostile environment and keep their identity intact. Yosef achieved an impossible task – he lived in Egypt for 22 years and still remained Yaakov's talmid and belonged in his household. He even raised children who never lived directly with Yaakov as though they had. He remained Yosef Hatzaddik throughout all the tests and influences, and continued Yaakov Ovinu's derech and taught his father's Torah to the next generation. So much so, that Yaakov was able to declare that Menashe and Efraim, who were born in Mitzraim, were like his own sons! They became shevotim like Reuven and Shimon!

Yosef had many sons subsequent to Yaakov coming down to Egypt. But they were raised in the sheltered environment in Goshen. Menashe and Efraim didn't have such great influences. Their mother was the daughter of Potifera Kohen Ohn – a high priest to avodo zoro! When Pharaoh elevated Yosef to royalty, he was very keen on making Yosef into an idol worshipping Egyptian – even though Yosef talked about Hashem all the time. Pharaoh gave Yosef a wife who he hoped would turn Yosef. But Yosef was apparently able to turn his wife to follow his agenda of replicating Eretz Canaan in his home and raising his children as if they were a part of Yaakov's household.

Yosef knew that what he accomplished was unique. It wouldn't work for the masses of Klal Yisroel. Pharaoh was very eager to have all of Klal Yisroel integrate into Egyptian society. Yosef came up with an excuse to keep them separate from their Egyptian hosts. He told Pharaoh that these Ivrim are simple, primitive shepherds. They won't help you develop your advanced, sophisticated Egyptian culture. Leave them alone in a ghetto and let them live the way they lived for generations.

When Bolok speaks about Klal Yisroel, he describes them as living the vision of Yaakov – living as a separate nation. Klal Yisroel's problems began in Egypt when they left the ghetto and tried to participate in this advanced, sophisticated culture.

People don't appreciate the greatness of the Torah's wisdom. They

always fall for the attraction of their foreign host culture as if it is superior to Torah. Torah is emes and that is why it survives unchanged through all cultures.

When I studied mathematics and science, I noticed that every field looks at the ideas that were developed a hundred years before them as primitive. Today, when they look at the ideas being developed when I was studying them fifty years ago, they now regard them as primitive. You can be certain that fifty years from now, they will be regarding the new ideas being developed in these fields today as primitive. The Rashba wrote that it is hard to be impressed with Aristotle, when every generation of philosophers are rendered obsolete by the next generation. Plato rejected the philosophy of the pre-Socratics and Aristotle rejected Plato. You can't really respect anything these fields come up with because you know they will eventually become obsolete.

Torah is not that way. Torah is forever, but people don't respect Torah.

What happened to the Jews in Eastern Europe when they emerged from the ghettos in the 19th century, or the Jews in Germany when they emerged from the ghetto in the 18th century? They were so impressed with high-brow German culture – their philosophy, literature, music, ethics, etc. In the year 2021, no one is paying attention to all that culture. But Torah stays relevant from generation to generation.

Klal Yisroel didn't have pride and respect for their own culture and their own Torah heritage. As a result, they lost the respect of the Egyptians and were made into their slaves.

Rashi in the beginning of this parsha explains why the parsha is stumoh and does not start on a separate line in the Sefer Torah. He first says it was because the shibbud started already by the death of Yaakov. But is that true? Didn't the shibbud only start in Parshas Shemos – after the generation of the shevotim died? Apparently Rashi is telling us there are two forms of shibbud. One is physical subjugation and slavery, the other is a more subtle, psychological sense of subjugation.

Rashi gave a second explanation as to why the parsha is stumoh. It is because Yaakov wanted to reveal the time of the geuloh to his descendants, but then it was concealed from him. Why?

The Zohar explains by telling us to look at the end of last week's parsha. It says that after Klal Yisroel settled in Goshen they started to move out of the ghetto and spread all over Egypt. Targum Yonason says they became farmers and planted orchards, vineyards and fields. They stopped being shepherds. Why? They were embarrassed to remain shepherds because the Egyptians detested shepherds. They lost pride in their heritage from the Ovos and went down in their level. As a direct consequence, even if Yaakov had revealed his secrets to them, they would not have understood. Yaakov's ruach hakodesh was removed from him and he could not reveal the geuloh. Later on, Klal Yisroel would become totally assimilated into Egyptian culture and filled all of Egypt. They stopped bris miloh and this is when the Egyptians started to turn on them.

But one shevet refused to integrate and assimilate into Egyptian society. They remained in Goshen separate from the rest of the country. When Yehudoh came, he set up the beis midrash, but the Rambam says that it was Levi who became the rosh yeshiva. Shevet Levi kept learning the Torah of the Ovos and fulfilling the mitzvos of the Ovos throughout the entire time and didn't have to worry about parnassoh. They never were put into slavery. Pharaoh promised Yosef

that the Egyptian treasury would continue to support those who lived in Goshen. They respected their own heritage.

The rest of Klal Yisroel lost respect for their own Torah and only had respect for Egyptian culture, so Yaakov Ovinu couldn't tell them about the days of Moshiach.

The rest of Klal Yisroel were enslaved because they were so eager to be accepted by the Egyptians. They agreed to do what every patriotic Egyptian was expected to do. Pharaoh took advantage of this and used it to trick them into slavery. Meanwhile, Shevet Levi sat in a beis midrash being supported by the Egyptian government.

The problem with a lot of people throughout our history is that they don't respect the chochmah of the Torah. It is permanent – it is always speaking to us in every generation – on many different levels. It is emes, and emes is never outdated.

Klal Yisroel weren't in danger of assimilating into the culture of Canaan because they were a primitive people and it didn't attract them. In Egypt, they had the most advanced society in the ancient world – and even today we cannot figure out things they understood – advanced engineering to construct the pyramids and advanced chemistry to preserve mummies for thousands of years. It is all very impressive and Klal Yisroel were entranced by it. It became the cause of their bitter enslavement for 83 years.

The same thing happened to the Jews in Germany. The Jews were so impressed and inspired by all the high-sounding notions of German poets and philosophers and thinkers. But ultimately it was this same philosophy which became the basis of Hitler's justification to try to wipe out the Jewish people. The leading ethicist in Germany was Heidegger. He became Hitler's philosopher.

When Klal Yisroel become enthralled by these cultures, they pay a heavy price. Whenever the Jews try to integrate too much, the non-Jews turn on them and hate them. When they stopped bris miloh,

immediately, the love of Jews turned into hatred. This happened in Germany and in Russia.

When I talked about this dynamic 40 years ago, I predicted that anti-semitism will become more and more mainstream in America – because Jews are trying to integrate themselves more and more into American culture and society. And if you know what's happening now, you can clearly see that this is coming to pass. We experience more and more openly anti-semitic violent incidents as the years go by. We have members in the United States Congress who have openly anti-semitic views and state them publicly with no political consequences.

This pattern started in Egypt when Klal Yisroel tried to assimilate into this advanced sophisticated culture, this triggered their severe persecution for 83 years. And at the same time there was one shevet who remained different and separate and they thrived. They wanted no part in the world around them. They were supported by the very government that was enslaving the rest of Klal Yisroel!

Maaseh ovos simon l'bonim.

Throughout our long golus, Klal Yisroel didn't learn this lesson. It happened again in Spain with the expulsion and the Inquisition. It happened in Poland in the 17th century. The top end of Jewish society in Poland was an integral part of Polish nobility. There was a famous Jew who was king of Poland for a day. And the peasant revolt led by Chmelnitsky massacred over a million Jews – some say close to two million.

It is a deep lesson for us to learn when we deal with non-Jewish culture and society – don't be impressed by it. We always pay a steep price. Only Shevet Levi, who weren't impressed, were able to go through the golus unharmed.

As you confront the world, it will be very difficult to withstand the overwhelming impact it has. But always realize that if you are with Torah, you have eternity – it is forever.