

PARSHAS VAYECHI

תשפ"ה

This parsha is the end of Sefer Bereishis. It is a sefer about great individual human beings who were the foundation of Klal Yisroel – the Ovos – and about people who were the foundation of the world – Odom and Noach. Sefer Bereishis gives us deep insights into humanity and human nature and what produced Klal Yisroel. Sefer Shemos is the story of Klal Yisroel. We read about incidents involving individuals, but the story is about the development of Klal Yisroel.

The last few parshiyos of Sefer Bereishis – Vayeishev, Miketz, Vayigash, and Vayechi – is the story about Yosef and his brothers. They were great individuals who were the foundations of Klal Yisroel – the 12 Shivtei Koh. People don't appreciate who these people were. Klal Yisroel rests on the greatness of their personalities – even till today and till the end of time. But they sold Yosef into slavery! How could they do that? And then we see Yosef prolonging the suffering of his own beloved father by not telling him he was still alive! True, while Yosef was a slave, or imprisoned in Potifar's dungeon, he may not have been able to send any messages to Canaan. But for nine years, he was the effective ruler of the entire Egyptian empire, with all its resources at his disposal! Why couldn't he send a message then? The meforshim wonder why Yosef didn't do this simple thing.

In addition, Yosef plays this terrifying game with his brothers – imprisoning Shimon, returning their money, planting the silver goblet, threatening to keep Binyomin as a slave, until finally Yosef reveals himself and the whole charade is over. And then Yaakov and the entire family come down to settle in Egypt.

At the end of Parshas Vayechi, we read about a very interesting interaction between Yosef and his brothers. Yaakov Ovinu dies and the brothers feel very vulnerable. They believe that Yosef is just waiting for their father to die before he exacts revenge for all the evil they did to him, and they make up a fake message that they claim Yaakov told them to deliver to Yosef after he dies. It is obviously fake because Yaakov would never suspect that Yosef would harbor any resentment. Yosef breaks down in tears when he sees how frightened they are of him, thinking he is lacking yiras shomayim and is capable of doing them any harm. He reassures them by telling them how he sees the whole series of events as orchestrated directly by Hashem. Yosef accepts fully that this was the will of Hashem and he has no problem supporting them and being their patron. Twenty-two years ago, Yosef had these dreams of becoming their leader, and he felt obligated to convey these dreams to his brothers because he thought they were prophetic messages from Hashem that needed to be revealed.

Yosef saw two things happening simultaneously. When Yosef is being brought down to Egypt as a slave, the pesukim inform us that the Arabs taking Yosef were carrying sweet-smelling spices instead of the usual foul-smelling petroleum products. Why does the Torah bother telling us this seemingly insignificant detail? Chazal explain that Hashem provided a small measure of comfort and didn't want Yosef to suffer. But this is strange – Yosef is being sold off by his own family as a slave! How could this tiny physical comfort be of any significance to him in these horrible circumstances? Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that this was Hashem's subtle way of telling Yosef that he hasn't been abandoned. Hashem is still there with him and is supervising every small little detail that is happening.

Yosef knew the nevuah will only come true on condition that he is worthy. He may have been worried that he is now being sold into slavery because he failed and his nevuah is lost. So Hashem routinely

sends Yosef reminders that even in his low situation, he is being given special talents and success, and this is preparation for the nevuos to come true eventually.

Yosef sees Hashem's special hashgocho in everything that happens in his life. He doesn't know how all this is going to lead anywhere, but Yosef knows Hashem is leading him. He is constantly announcing to all his Egyptian masters that Hashem is guiding his success. He doesn't care that his Egyptian masters have contempt for Ivrim like him to the point where they cannot bear to eat with him.

He slipped once, at the end of Parshas Vayeishev. Yosef did a normal, conventional hishtadlus which for regular people under regular circumstances would be totally legitimate. But Yosef knows that Hashem is running his life in a very unusual, non-conventional way. He knows it has nothing to do with him. So he should have left it all in Hashem's hands and not ask the Sar HaMashkim for any special favor. He needs to spend another two years in jail.

He finally comes out of jail and comes before Pharaoh. They know Ivrim are detested. And even in front of Pharaoh, who you would think he would want to impress, Yosef is not ashamed to admit openly that he has no power to interpret dreams and it all comes from Hashem.

So why is he playing these frightening games with his brothers? He told his brothers that Hashem is planning everything anyway – so why is he doing all this to them?

The Beis HaLevi explains why Yosef went through this entire charade to get Binyomin and threaten to keep him as a slave. Last week in Parshas Vayigash, the posuk says the brothers were flabbergasted when Yosef revealed himself and said: "אני יוסף, העוד אבי חי" And the midrash says that this inability to respond to Yosef's statement is just a sample of our inability to respond when we come in judgment before Hashem and He reviews our actions. What is the connection? The Beis HaLevi explains that the brothers thought they were acting 100% לשם שמים. They thought Yosef was usurping the malchus of Yehudoh with these dreams of domination, and deserved death. They even went so far as bringing Hashem Himself into the beis din to condemn Yosef. But the posuk testifies that the brothers were acting out of jealousy!

Human beings are capable of operating on two different levels. We consciously think we are doing one thing, but deep down inside, there is another motivation. The Torah reveals what was deep down in the bottom of their hearts. But they managed to convince themselves that they were really acting לשם שמים. Yosef's goal was to peel back this external rationalization and expose to the brothers that for the past 22 years, they were living a lie. He says to them "אני יוסף" – this is understandable. But then he asks: "העוד אבי חי" Why is Yosef asking this? He and the brothers have been talking about Yaakov's pain at being separated from Binyomin the entire time! Of course he is still alive!

So the Beis HaLevi explains that Yosef got Yehudoh to commit himself to protect Binyomin no matter what – he even put his olom haboh on the line. Why? To assure Yaakov that Binyomin will be brought back safely. To prevent Yaakov from the pain and anguish of losing another son of Rochel, Yehudoh pleads with Yosef to let Binyomin go because Yehudoh put so much at stake in order to spare Yaakov this pain. So Yosef responds: You say you care about your father Yaakov? You know that Yaakov can't bear to lose another son? Where was all this care and concern for your poor father Yaakov when you decided to sell me into

slavery? You didn't care about Yaakov's pain when it came to me, Yosef. So why do you care all of the sudden when it comes to Binyomin? The truth is that when you sold me, it wasn't לשם שמים – you only cared about yourself and your feelings of jealousy of me. Yosef was able to reveal to the brothers that for 22 years, they were fooling themselves. Had they really cared about Yaakov, they wouldn't have been able to sell Yosef. So they came up with a theory that Yosef deserved to die in order to somehow justify to themselves that it was necessary.

The midrash is telling us that when we come to stand before Hashem in judgment, there is a din and a cheshbon. We will be confronted with our spiritual failings, and we will try to get around them by making all kinds of justifications and rationalizations of how hard the circumstances were and how we were too weak to overcome them. Or, really it wasn't an aveiroh, it was really done לשם שמים and we only had good intentions, etc. So we try to avoid the din by justifying everything we did. But then there is the cheshbon. Hashem will show us that all the excuses are really false. Because at other times in our lives, those same circumstances didn't stop us from doing the things that we really wanted to do! When it came to something we really cared about, we always found the strength to overcome every obstacle.

Yosef HaTzaddik saw everything that happened and knew that this was Hashem's will. So he accepts it and doesn't try to interfere with Hashem's plans. But Yosef is confronted with another reality: the Shevotim – the ones who will be founding Klal Yisroel – are living a life of sheker. They have to be confronted with the reality they are hiding from in order to correct it. Yosef had to drag out the entire episode in order to allow this confrontation. And when that happened, they had no answer.

In every aspect of our lives, we have to confront the emes. It is very tempting to escape from reality and live in an illusion of sheker. It is very easy to do so. People summon up incredible genius in order to justify what they want to do. There is a story about Rav Chaim who is sitting on the beis din for a din Torah in Brisk together with Rav Simcha Zelig and another dayan. One of the people involved in the din Torah was a complete am ho'oretz who could only read the tefillos of the Siddur and nothing else. But when it came to making an argument to win his case, he concocted a sevara that was so ingenuous that it can be found in the Shach on Choshen Mishpot. Rav Simcha Zelig praised him – he came up with the sevara of the Shach! What a genius! Imagine if he were to learn Torah with this incredible mind! Rav Chaim said it is not impressive. When it comes to your own personal business, everyone can push themselves to achieve the genius of the Shach. The greatness of the Shach was that he pushed his brain to the limit to understand the Torah – he made the understanding of Torah his own personal business!

Our biggest nisoyon is being honest with ourselves and putting aside the temptation to rationalize. Yosef realized that the greatest contribution to Klal Yisroel he could make was to get the Shevotim to confront the truth and stop living a lie. It is very hard to do. Different bochorim come to yeshiva for different reasons. On one level, they are certainly coming to learn. But there are often other motivations that are pushing people under the surface, and this will lead you to make the wrong decisions. You need to be honest with yourself in order to live honestly with the reality in front of you.

In the beginning, with this desire to tell the dreams of domination to his brothers, one could assume Yosef has an oversized ego. But Yosef is a tzaddik. He understood Hashem is sending him a prophetic message and he is living under Hashem's guidance every step of the way. When we find ourselves living under a certain set of circumstances at a particular point in time, we have to ask ourselves why Hashem has put us here. What is it that Hashem wants me to accomplish in this current situation? What opportunities has Hashem given me and how

can I maximize them? For some reason or another, the Hashgocho has brought you to spend a year in Eretz Yisroel, learning in this particular yeshiva. There are opportunities here that you won't get anywhere else. Why did Hashem put you here? Are you taking advantage of what has been made available to you? Yosef looked at his life and saw that he was successful in everything he did. He became the ruler of Egypt! Did he take credit for any of it? Did he think that it was because of his great genius or charismatic personality? No – it was all from Hashem from beginning to end.

People have a very difficult time putting their ego aside and putting Hashem's agenda at the center. I often speak to wealthy individuals. I see that they struggle to accept the belief that they shouldn't take any credit for their success and they should let Hashem's agenda be paramount in deciding what to do with their enormous wealth. They find it hard to swallow their ego and declare it all comes from Hashem – and He deserves to get back a good chunk of it. Yosef was looking at the world without the filter of his own ego. He was simply a part of Hashem's grand plan, and he just has to make sure he doesn't do a bit too much hishtadlus to get in the way.

Yosef tells his brothers directly that this whole situation we are in is only because Hashem wanted it from the beginning. From the moment Yosef was sold, Hashem was sending him messages that He is right there with him, guiding his every step. When Yosef slipped and did too much hishtadlus, he paid for it by delaying his freedom. Yosef doesn't rise to greatness automatically. He had to earn it and become worthy by overcoming all those nisyonos of ego and temptation, until finally Hashem decided he deserves his freedom.

The story of Yosef is not just about Yosef as an individual – it is the way each of us has to look at our lives and notice the unique circumstances we are put in. What are the talents and abilities we are given that are unique to us, and how we can maximize the opportunities that come our way? Hashem's agenda has to be at the center. Not our egos and our achievements. It is all a gift from Hashem and He is owed something in return. The biggest nisoyon we have is to resist the temptation to make excuses and be honest with ourselves.

The Mesilas Yeshorim says that unless you are making a constant cheshbon about the decisions you make, you will fall off a cliff and destroy yourself. People have a hard time understanding what he means. It is a very simple idea. Zehirus means avoiding the temptation to live your life on automatic – following your own desires and covering it up by rationalizing and rationalizing. It is about never letting yourself realize that you are going off track. Zehirus means being honest about what is really motivating you and making honest decisions in your day-to-day life to keep you on track of sincere avodas Hashem. This is hard work.

Yosef knew he was a pawn in Hashem's plan. Had he failed, all his dreams would have come to nothing. I often describe the alternative scenario of Yosef's life had he succumbed to the temptation of Potifar's wife. Even being in jail was a nisoyon. If he would have been too preoccupied in his own situation and misery, he wouldn't have taken notice of the two servants of Pharaoh who looked particularly distressed. Yosef could have easily dismissed it – why should he care about the mood of these two complete strangers? But had he done that, he would have blown his whole future as the ruler of Egypt. Yosef realized he was in a position of running the jail and his nisoyon was to see this as an opportunity Hashem was giving him specifically to do something positive. So Yosef took this on as a personal responsibility to take an active interest in the lives of people under his care, and this is what led to his salvation. This is Yosef HaTzaddik – he sees which opportunities Hashem is giving him at a given moment, and he puts his own ego aside and puts Hashem's agenda at the center of all his decisions.