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What Yaacov Taught Yosef

Rabbi Dovid Miller

And Yisrael loved Yosef more than his other sons because he was a 'ben zekunim' ... Rashi points out that the phrase 'ben zekunim' is translated by Unkelos as 'bar chakin,' i.e. that Yosef was the wise son, he had a unique capacity to learn, and therefore, continues Rashi, Yaacov taught Yosef all that he learned from Shem and Ever.

This statement of Rashi is very strange. It is true that Yaakov learned in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever for fourteen years on his way to the house of Lavan, but if Yaacov had to choose a certain body of knowledge to pass on to his son Yosef—wouldn't it have made more sense to teach Yosef the Torah of Avraham and Yitzchak? Wouldn't that which Yaacov learnt when he was an "ish tam yosheiv ohalim," when he was learning with his father and his grandfather, have been a more proper heritage to pass down to his favorite son?

Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, zt"l, answered this question as follows: Certainly Yaacov taught all his sons, including Yosef that which he received from Avraham and Yitzchak, the heritage we have as Jews. However, there is a unique body of knowledge — the knowledge of Shem and Ever — that Yaacov felt he should transmit specifically to Yosef. What is the special characteristic of the knowledge of Shem and Ever? It is the key to remaining G-d fearing in an environment which is totally inhospitable to a religious lifestyle. Shem was brought up in the generation of the flood; Ever in the generation of the Tower of Babel. They had to struggle to maintain their spiritual identity in a society with totally antithetical values, and they succeeded. This is why Yaacov spent fourteen years in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever before fleeing to Charan. He knew he would need that strategic knowledge to maintain his spiritual development in the house of Lavan and in the society of Charan. He learned that special Torah, so well that after twenty years by Lavan, he was able to return to Eretz Yisrael and tell Eisav: "Im Lavan garti, v'taryag mitzvot shamarti."

Yaacov had a premonition that his wise son Yosef, who was so similar to him in so many ways (see Rashi on "toldot Yosef"—they were similar in appearance; both had brothers that hated them; both had brothers who wanted to kill them; etc.), would also need the knowledge of Shem and Ever. Yosef would also have to struggle to maintain his identity in a foreign environment similar to Shem, Ever, and Yaacov, and therefore Yaacov specifically taught these ideas to Yosef.

What was the content of Torat Shem V'Ever? We don't know, but perhaps an insight of my mechutan, Rav Chaim Brovender '65R, in an explanation of the Ramban on Chumash, would at least parallel one aspect of this very special tradition. The juxtaposition in the calendar of the parsha of V'Yeshev with Chanukah is reflected in masechet Shabbat (22a) where the drasha of the pasuk "vhabor reik, ein bo mayim" is found in the middle of the entire sugya of Chanukah.

Chazal there infer from the tautology "reik, ein bo" that the pit was empty of water, but was full of snakes and scorpions. The Ramban in his commentary on Chumash was bothered by the question as to whether the brothers were aware of this situation. If they were aware, how would casting Yosef into the pit serve as the means of "hatzalah" that Reuven intended? If they were unaware, then why would the Torah bother to give us this information? The Ramban posits that the brothers were totally unaware, because had they become aware that at any point Yosef was being miraculously saved from certain death (similar to Daniel in the lions' den), they would have immediately realized that their thesis was totally wrong. Yosef was a tzaddik in G-d's eyes. They never would have continued with the sale, the deception of Yaacov, etc. Rav Brovender pointed out that the Ramban is showing us a scenario in which obvious and open miracles are occurring literally under the feet of the brothers, and their living and acting in ignorance of the miracles brought about tragic results.

The knowledge and perspective that we are living in a world that cries out ‘al nisecha shbechol yom emanu’ and yet society ignores the implications of that reality would be a concise summary of the struggle between Judaism and Hellenism.

The miracle of the ‘pach hashemen’ as the response to the question of the braita “mai chanukah” puts in proper perspective what the war was all about: the Nes nigleh of the

pach hashemen which reflects on the reality of a world of ‘Nisecha Shbechol yom emanu,’ which is antithetical to the Hellenist philosophy.

Perhaps this is part of the tradition that served Shem and Ever so well, and was passed down from Yaacov to Yosef. It would certainly be meaningful to us in our challenge of maintaining our spiritual identity while living in western society, “im Lavan garti, v’taryag mitzvot shamarti”.

The Exception to the Rule

Rabbi Kenneth Brander

The institution of the Haftorah has been part of our tradition from the time of the Second Temple. During the second commonwealth, when the Greeks had prohibited the Jewish people from reading the Torah, Chazal chose sections of the prophetic writings which were thematically similar to the Torah portion, thus ensuring the continued study of themes found in the weekly Torah portion.

Every Haftorah is either connected to the theme of the weekly Parsha or to a special occasion on the calendar: on Rosh Chodesh, on a festival, or during a period of mourning, the overall focus of the Haftorah will shift to the specific event. For example, this year, the Haftorah of parshat vayeishev focuses on the theme of the parsha. However, when parshat vayeishev is read during Chanukah, the Haftorah focuses on that event and not on the parsha.

If one studies the blessings of the Haftorah, he or she will observe that they focus not on the themes of Shabbat or the holidays, but rather, on redemption.

Have mercy on Tziyon, for it is the source of our life; to the one who has been deeply humiliated bring salvation speedily, in our days . . .

Gladden us ... with Eliyahu the prophet ... Your anointed may he come speedily. . on his throne let no stranger sit nor let others continue to inherit his honor . . .for by Your holy name You swore . . .that his lamp would not be extinguished forever ... Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that this focus is consistent with the period in which the Haftorah was established. At that time, the Jewish people, although in their own land, were ruled by a foreign government, which promulgated decrees that prevented the Jewish people from celebrating their religion and culture. The yearning for a better time when the study of Torah, circumcision, and other religious rites would be permitted and encouraged was therefore ensconced within the blessing of the Haftorah. It is for this same reason that the

institution of the Haftorah includes a requirement that every haftorah must have words of solace or redemption. Even the Haftorah recited on the most mournful day of the year – Tisha b’Av – ends with words of redemption.

Yet there is one Haftorah in which words of redemption are not found: this week’s Haftorah of parshat vayeishev. Why is it that on the day we commemorate the destruction of the Temple we find words of comfort and on the Shabbat that we read this Torah portion we do not?

Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that Parshat Vayeishev relates a story more tragic than that of a foreign enemy burning the Temple ... it relates to us the first story of *sinat chinam*, or senseless hatred, between Jews. Unprecedented and horrible, in this week’s parsha, Jews think to kill their brother and then agree upon the more “altruistic” path of slavery. As the first verse of the Haftorah states: So said Hashem for three rebellious sins of Israel – but should I not exact retribution for the fourth – for their having sold a righteous man for silver, and a destitute one for the sake of a pair of shoes?

Rabbi Soloveitchik is reminding us that redemption is possible from destructive events, such as foreigners who have burned our temple and banished us from our land. However, redemption is not possible when one Jew turns against another. We can etch words of redemption into the Haftorah of Tisha B’av but not in the Torah portion where *sinat chinam* is discussed.

Parshat Vayeishev is our reminder that we all must celebrate the ideals of *ahavat chinam* – unconditional love. It is irrelevant if a Jew practices differently, looks different, or has a different outlook on life – redemption for us as a community will only be achieved when we realize that often our worst enemy is not from without but from within – our lack of tolerance for our fellow Jew.

Humiliating Others: Avoid at All Costs?

Rabbi Michael Taubes

The Torah relates that when Tamar, who was widowed from each of the first two sons of Yehudah, was found to be pregnant, presumably from someone to whom she was forbidden, Yehudah ruled that she should be burned. As she was taken out to be executed, Tamar displayed three items in her possession which belonged to Yehudah, and declared that the owner of these items had fathered the child she was carrying. Upon recognizing the items, Yehudah admitted that she was in fact correct (Bereishit 38:24-26). Acknowledging that Tamar did not actually identify Yehudah as the father, which would have humiliated him in public, and was prepared even to die rather than allow that fact to be discovered had Yehudah not ultimately admitted it himself, the Gemara in Bava Metzia (59a), among other places, states that it is better for one to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to shame someone in public. Rashi there (s.v. hi mutzeit) writes that this was why Tamar did not explicitly say that Yehudah had impregnated her, but rather left it to him to admit it on his own; Tosafot (s.v. dichetiv) add that Tamar remained steadfast in her refusal to embarrass Yehudah even as she was drawn ever so close to the burning fire. Both the Rif there in Bava Metzia (33a in his pagination) and the Rosh there (4:22) quote this story as reflecting the accepted halachic position; it would appear, then, that one must actually give up one's life rather than publicly humiliate another person.

The question, as raised by Tosafot in Sotah (10b, s.v. noach), is why this scenario does not then appear along with the other circumstances which require that one make the supreme sacrifice of his very life. The Gemara in Pesachim (25a-b) teaches that there are three sins which one may not violate under any conditions, even to save one's life, namely, idol worship, sexual immorality and murder. For example, as Rashi (25b there, s.v. u'shefichat and s.v. yehareg) explains, if someone tells a particular Jew to murder another Jew or else he will see to it that this particular Jew will himself be killed, this particular Jew must allow himself to be killed rather than violate the transgression of murdering the other Jew. In short, the halachah demands martyrdom rather than allowing the violation of this transgression (and the other two); the Rambam (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 5:2) and the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 157:1) rule accordingly. If, however, one must also give up one's life rather than embarrass someone else in public, why doesn't that Gemara mention this requirement together with the requirement to give up one's life rather than violate the other three transgressions of idol worship, sexual

immorality and murder?

The answer suggested by Tosafot there is that that Gemara dealt only with prohibitions which are explicitly mentioned in the text of the Torah; the prohibition against publicly humiliating somebody is not expressly formulated in the Torah (but is rather derived from the narrative in our parashah concerning Yehudah and Tamar) and was thus ignored by that Gemara. Clearly, though, the opinion of Tosafot is that one must indeed give up one's life rather than shame someone in public; it is due only to a technicality that this case is absent from the Gemara's list of situations which demand martyrdom. Rabbeinu Yonah, in his Sha'arei Teshuvah (III:139), writes as well that the halachah, as derived from the story of Tamar, is that one must indeed let himself die by hurling himself into a fiery furnace rather than publicly humiliate someone, just as one must let himself be killed rather than murder someone. While not dealing directly with the question of Tosafot (ibid.) as to why this requirement of martyrdom is left off the list in that Gemara in Pesachim (ibid.), Rabbeinu Yonah notes that shaming someone is similar to murdering him (see Bava Metzia 58b), as the blood in a person's face drains and he turns white when experiencing intense embarrassment, and the pain of shame is in some ways more bitter than death. The prohibition against humiliating someone is thus in fact a subcategory of the prohibition against murder; perhaps for that reason it is not listed independently, even though the requirement to sacrifice one's life indeed applies to it.

It would appear, however, that the Rambam disagrees with this entire notion that one must give up one's life rather than humiliate someone in public. In his Sefer HaMitzvot (Lo Ta'aseh 303), the Rambam enumerates the prohibition against embarrassing someone else, deriving it not from the story of Yehudah and Tamar, but from a pasuk later in the Torah (Vayikra 19:17) which Rashi there (s.v. velo tissa) likewise learns is a warning against shaming someone in public. (This is in contradistinction to the position of Tosafot cited above that this prohibition is not rooted in an explicit commandment in the Torah.) Similarly, in his introduction ("koteret") to Hilchot De'ot, the Rambam lists the prohibition to embarrass as the seventh of the eleven mitzvot to be discussed in that section. Later (Hilchot De'ot 6:8), he uses strong terms to describe the prohibition against humiliating others and the need to avoid violating it, identifying it as a grave sin and one for which one loses one's share in Olam HaBa, as stated in the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (3:11). Strikingly, though,

the Rambam does not say anything about giving up one's life rather than committing this transgression. As for the aforementioned statement which seems to require martyrdom in such a case based on the conduct of Tamar, the Rambam may perhaps hold like the Meiri in his Beit HaBechirah to Berachot (43b, s.v. le'olam), who implies that the statement was not meant to be taken literally (see also Beit HaBechirah to Sotah 10b, s.v. le'olam).

Alternatively, it is possible to suggest that when that Gemara in Bava Metzia (59a) speaks of casting oneself into a fiery furnace rather than humiliating someone in public, the intent is not that one is obligated to do so, but that one may do so (see Pnei Yehoshua there, s.v. beGemara, and Iyun Yaakov in Ein Yaakov there, s.v. mitato). According to Tosafot in Avodah Zarah (27b, s.v. yachol), one may indeed voluntarily sacrifice his life for the sake of fulfilling any mitzvah, even if it is not one of the three referred to above where such a sacrifice is required. In this vein, the Gemara in Shabbat (49a) tells the story of someone who was willing to risk his life in order to be able to wear tefillin, and escaped death only due to a miracle, while the Gemara in Ketubot (3b) speaks of Jewish brides who risked their lives to defy a decree that they must first sleep with a Roman official before going to their husbands. The Rambam himself, however (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 5:1,4), does not allow martyrdom other than in those situations where it is specifically mandated, as he holds that sacrificing one's life when that is not obligatory is forbidden. The Rambam therefore does not rule in accordance with the statement that one may give up his life rather than humiliate someone in public.

It must be noted that even if there is no requirement to sacrifice one's life to avoid this transgression, one who humiliates somebody else in public is certainly subject to

significant penalties. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 240) writes that while Beit Din cannot mete out the punishment of lashes for this crime because no physical action is involved, Hashem has many ways to see to it that the person gets what he deserves. The Rama (Choshen Mishpat 420:38) cites a view that although one indeed cannot be given lashes on a Torah level for this transgression, he is to be given lashes imposed by the Rabbanan (see S'ma there No. 49). The Rosh (Bava Kamma 8:15) quotes from Rav Sherira Gaon that one who embarrasses somebody verbally should be excommunicated, and the Rambam (Hilchot Chovel U'Mazik 3:5) suggests that it is up to each Beit Din in each individual situation to determine the appropriate punishment; both of these ideas are mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat ibid.).

Finally, as noted above, the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (3:11) teaches that one who humiliates another has no share in Olam HaBa despite the many other good deeds that he may have done; the Rambam in his Peirush HaMishnah to Sanhedrin (10:1) indicates that this is not so much a punishment as a fact, since a person who engages in such conduct is surely of a character that is lacking something significant and is thus not fit for Olam HaBa. Rabbeinu Yonah adds in his Sha'arei Teshuvah (III:141) that because unlike a murderer, who may eventually understand the enormity of his crime and thus regret it and do teshuvah, one who shames someone in public often fails to recognize that what he did is indeed so terrible, despite the fact that the Gemara in Bava Metzia (58b) states that the damage caused by the public humiliation of another is irreparable; he thus will not do teshuvah and his transgression will therefore never be forgiven, precluding his being granted a proper share in Olam HaBa.

Life is a Coat of Many Colors

Rabbi Zvi Shiloni

And Yaakov loved Yosef because he was his ben zekunim, and he made for him a ktonet passim”

Rashi comments on the words ben zekunim that Yaakov taught Yosef all that he had learned from Shem and Ever. On the ktonet passim Rashi comments that the striped, multicolored coat was a hint to all of the trials that Yosef was destined to endure, and in fact the word passim is an acronym for Yosef's travails - Potiphar (letter pei), Socharim (letter samech), Yishmaelim (letter yud), Midianites (letter mem).

It would be interesting to know what exactly the teachings that Yaakov transmitted to Yosef were. In addition, why did Yaakov choose to make for Yosef a striped, colored coat, and not one of a solid color?

My father שליט”א explained that Yaakov was attempting to prepare Yosef for the challenges of life. He surely told him of the struggles he had with his brother Esav, of the trials and hardships he endured in the house of his father-in-law Lavan, of the tragedies and dangers he encountered in Shechem, and the list goes on. He also must have told him that Hakadosh

Baruch Hu was always at his side, guiding him, and lifting him from all of the pitfalls of life. In the end he succeeded in building a beautiful family, and attained physical wealth as well. It was this masechet, the masechet of life that Yaakov taught Yosef. By the way, this was probably the exact same thing that Yaakov had learned from Shem and Ever when he studied in their beit medrash for 14 years before journeying out to the house of Lavan.

The coat that Yaakov made for Yosef was meant to

Is Antinomianism Really Against the Law?

Rabbi Ephraim Meth

The apparently illicit relationship between Yehuda and his daughter-in-law Tamar poses a distinct problem to the famous claim that “our patriarchs observed the Torah.”¹ A similar, though less troublesome, problem is posed by Yehuda’s marriage to “a Canaanite woman” (I Divrei ha-Yamim 2:3). Those who wrestled with this issue have adopted a variety of perspectives. R. Hirsch sees Yehuda’s actions as a “lapse,” and Ibn Ezra points out that Yehuda was censured for them. At the opposite extreme, R. Eliyahu Mizrachi tentatively suggests that Yehuda actually married Tamar (making his subsequent action fully permissible), while Maharal infers that she became his pilegsh - concubine. In a similar vein, Bereishis Rabbah tells us that Yehuda was forced to sin by “the angel of passion,” and therefore bears no responsibility for his deeds. According to this range of views, Yehuda’s actions were either non-normative or unexceptional, and have nothing to contribute to the discussion of antinomianism (going against the law).

A second school of thought relates Yehuda to the list of apparently antinomian avos; to Kayin and Hevel, who married their sisters; to Yaakov, who married a woman and her sister; to Amram, who married his aunt; perhaps to Yael, who submitted to Sisrah’s overtures²; and to Esther, who entered the king’s chambers “not in accordance with the law” (Esther 4:16). Their actions can be classified as “aveiros lishmah,” sins committed for the sake of heaven. While such actions can never be considered the norm, their precise location on the scale of “absolutely forbidden” to “desperately necessary” has engendered much controversy.

Some sources suggest that Yehuda’s actions were the norm for any analogous situation. They capitalize on the Zohar’s description of the Torah as “ittin” (Balak 202a), the Aramaic word for advice. They rely on Moshe’s caustic question, “why are you transgressing the word of Hashem, where you shall not succeed?” (Bamidbar 14:41). This implies that at times, spiritual success requires the transgression of Hashem’s will³.

symbolize exactly this same teaching. Sometimes life is bright like the clear blue sky. However, sometimes it is not. Sometimes it is grey and even black as night. Sometimes the red shades of blood threaten to harm a person. The striped, colored coat is meant to remind Yosef that life has many phases and facets, but Hashem’s protection is constantly with us.

May our Yaakov Avinu’s teaching stay with us as it did with Yosef, and may we succeed to navigate the trials of our life and overcome them, as did our brother Yosef!

While the Sabbatean movement represents the most extreme manifestation of this outlook, some of its more muted forms nonetheless survive in normative Judaism.

R. Chaim of Volozhin, however, militated valiantly against this approach⁴. He dismisses the story of Yehuda and Tamar, like most others on our earlier list, as unique to the pre-revelation period. In contrast, the post-revelation invalidity of antinomianism is illustrated by the story of Tzidkiyahu, who knew that his children would be wicked kings. When he sought, therefore, to leave the mitzvah of marriage unfulfilled, Yeshayahu condemned him: “You will die, not live!” (II Melachim 20:1). In spite of the destruction that his marriage would cause, Tzidkiyahu did not have the right to abstain from his mitzvah.

I would like to suggest a third alternative⁵. Yehuda had to choose between sinning and forfeiting his tikkunim, his share in perfecting the world, which he foresaw as resulting from his union with Tamar. Sinning itself, however, would be a gamble. Either, like Tzidkiyahu, his sin could result in a death sentence, or, like Yael, he could be lauded if his actions proved justifiable. Faced with this awesome choice, Yehuda and Yael gambled and won. Tzidkiyahu gambled and lost. Thus, antinomianism can only be permitted retroactively, and even then only sometimes.

In summary, we have five explanations of Yehuda’s actions: he sinned and was censured; he didn’t sin; he disobeyed the law, but that is permitted; disobedience to achieve tikkunim was permitted before Mattan Torah; and his antinomian choice was a gamble which he won.

¹ Yoma 28b, Bereishis Rabbah 92, Bamidbar Rabbah 14, Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim 614.

² See Nazir 23b

³ See Tzidkas ha-Tzaddik 46.

⁴ Nefesh ha-Chaim 1:21-22, Perakim 7, Ma’amarim 8.

⁵ A similar suggestion is made by the Netziv in Harchev Davar to Bamidbar 21:27.

Man's Plans, God's Plans

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin

Yosef's wrenching descent into Egyptian bondage begins innocuously as his father, Yaakov, sends him to inquire after the welfare of his brothers in Shechem: "And he (Yaakov) sent him (Yosef) from the valley of Hevron and he arrived at Shechem..."

Strangely enough, at this critical turning point, Rashi focuses on a seemingly minor, ancillary problem in the text: "Was not Hevron on a mountain?"

The answer that Rashi proposes, however, moves far beyond geography and touches upon a powerful issue, central to the story of Yosef and his brothers.

Rashi cites a Talmudic passage which explains that by referring to the "Valley of Hevron," the Torah allegorically alludes to the "deep plan" which had been revealed, decades earlier, to Yosef's great-grandfather, Avraham, who is buried in Hevron.

During the Covenant between the Pieces, God told Avraham:

"Know full well...your children will be strangers in a land not their own, where they will be enslaved and persecuted for four hundred years." (See Lech Lecha 4.)

Avraham's prophetic vision is now about to unfold, generations later. The sale of Yosef is the mechanism which will set the initial events of the prophecy in motion. The Torah, therefore, introduces the story of Yosef's sale with a reference to the "Valley of Hevron" – the deep plan rooted in Hevron.

With his short, seemingly technical observation, therefore, Rashi alerts us to a fundamental truth concerning the story that we are about to read. The tale of Yosef and his brothers overlays deeper currents. This is not only the painful, personal story of a family in crisis. Yosef's first steps towards Shechem are also the first steps in another journey, which will ultimately transform the patriarchal family into an eternal people.

We are about to experience the divinely guided transition from the patriarchal era to the national era of Jewish history.

Questions

While God's providence is forever present in our lives, rarely is his silent guidance as evident as in the story of Yosef and his brothers. As Yosef himself maintains, their personal saga serves the higher purpose of effectuating God's overall plans.

God's "behind the scenes" involvement, however, raises serious questions about the personal free will of the players in the story.

Considering that the descent of the Jewish nation into Egypt was preordained generations earlier, how much choice did Yosef and his brothers really have in the unfolding events? Were they simply acting out a predetermined script or can they be justifiably held accountable for their actions?

How does this narrative reflect upon the delicate balance between prescience (God's foreknowledge of events), free will and predestination; a balance which normally defines our lives? (See Bereishit 4, Approaches a).

Approaches

While a full discussion of these complex issues remains beyond the scope of this study, viewing the story of Yosef as a microcosm of a larger, more familiar paradigm may prove instructive.

The Jewish view of history, on a global level, mirrors the issues found in the story of Yosef and his brothers.

A: On the one hand, Jews certainly believe in a measure of preordination on a national level. A belief in such preordination is, in fact, critical to our worldview. The best known of the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith emphatically states: "I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Mashiach (Messiah), and even though he may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will come."

To believe in a Messiah is to believe in a predetermined, inevitable end point to history. Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, in fact, maintains that our introduction of the idea of Mashiach signaled a major revolution in the way man thought about his historical journey. We brought to the world the concept of a destiny-driven history. Where others saw history governed only by causality, with each era simply the product of what came before, we saw a march towards a specific destination. Where others saw civilization only propelled by the past, we claimed to be pulled, as well, by the future.

Suddenly, the world stage contained a nation which believed that there was rhyme, reason and goal to the currents of history; a nation which saw itself traveling towards a predetermined, inevitable end point: the messianic era.

On the other hand, our belief in the inevitability of the messianic era does not diminish our acceptance of the role

and responsibility that individuals and communities bear in any given generation. While our nation's destination may be clear, the parameters of the journey towards that destination are not. Within the broad brushstrokes of national preordination we each freely choose the role we will play in our people's unfolding story.

B: The rabbis, however, go even further. In order to preserve the all-important concept of free will within our national journey, they presume flexibility even concerning the preordained elements of our history.

That the Mashiach will arrive, they agree, is clear. When he will arrive, however, how he will arrive, and, most importantly, who among us or among our children will be there to greet him upon his arrival – all these variables are in our hands.

Much of our people's story remains unwritten. We are the authors of that portion of the story.

C: We can now begin to understand the interplay between free will and predestination as it unfolds in the Yosef story. For while the descent of Avraham's progeny into a foreign land was predicted by God decades before it occurred, the prophecy granted to the patriarch was general in scope. Egypt was never mentioned as the place of exile. The mode by which Avraham's descendants would be exiled was never detailed nor was the exact quality of the servitude they would experience.

Spiritual Harmony – A Return to Self

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

The opening of this week's Torah portion describes Yaakov's safe return to the Land of Israel in the aftermath of his historic confrontation with Esav. In explaining how Yaakov emerged unscathed from this perilous threat, the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 84:1) explains that, like his children in future generations, "kinuso, ve'kinus banav hitzilu mi'yad Esav." The straight forward understanding of the Midrash is that the key to success was that the family of Yaakov – including those who didn't always get along with each other – came together as a unified group when they davened to Hashem for their safety.

The Sefas Emes (Va'yeshev 5631), however, offers an alternate understanding of the Midrash and explains that it actually refers to the inner harmony that Yaakov achieved; Yaakov "returned" – va'yeshev – to his true self. After many turbulent years spent battling against the influences of Lavan,

Even the minimal details that were clearly preordained were also potentially flexible. God predicted to Avraham, for example, that the period of servitude would last for four hundred years. Our ancestors were actually slaves in Egypt, however, for only two hundred ten years. The rabbis explain the discrepancy by maintaining that the period mentioned in Avraham's prophetic vision began with the birth of Yitzchak (who was, in a sense, an exile, never fully comfortable in his own land). By beginning the count with Yitzchak's birth, God, in his mercy, diminished the pain that his people would endure.

We must accept that, one way or the other, our ancestors were destined to spend a period of time as strangers persecuted in a strange land. The story, however, did not have to play out exactly as it did. If sibling hatred and jealousy had not been the catalysts for our exile, perhaps the exile itself would have been less painful.

Far from acting out a predetermined script, Yosef and his brothers wrote their own story, of their own free will, within the context of a larger tale. The story they wrote then reverberated across the years, affecting the lives of all the generations that followed. So too, we, in each era, write our own stories, as we freely determine the roles we will play in the unfolding journey of our nation. The stories we author shape the quality of our days and affect the lives of countless generations to come.

Esav, and Shechem, Yaakov was finally able "gather together" and harmonize all of the different aspects of his personality. It was only at this point, explains the Sefas Emes, that Yaakov was able to be "nisyashev be'shorasho" and only now was he able to "return" to his essence and true self.

This understanding of the Midrash highlights the importance of spiritual harmony and, conversely, the danger of alienation. There are different forms of alienation – from the community, from a spouse, from children – but perhaps the most tragic is when a person is alienated from him or herself. Too often we allow external influences to create an artificial barrier between our actions and our essence, and instead of being true to ourselves we allow other people's values and expectations to determine the course of our lives. An essential component of Avodas Hashem – and life generally – is the ability to be "nisyashev be'shorasho," to

be genuine and to live a life of inner harmony, aware of and consistent with who we really are. Yaakov was able to achieve this harmony and was thus saved from Esav.

The Sefas Emes further develops this idea by suggesting that the words Va'yeshev and Shabbos share a common etymological link (the Hebrew letters shin and beis). The deeper point, it seems, is that Shabbos is a uniquely opportune time for achieving spiritual harmony. Shabbos is an "island in time" which allows – nay, forces – us to retreat from the helter-skelter of daily life. By removing these external distractions we have the opportunity to achieve what the Sefas Emes refers to as "bitul le'ha-shoresh," an unimpeded return to the source. Considering the potential, how unfortunate would it be if we merely observe the technical requirements of Shabbos without taking advantage of this amazing gift.

Beyond the special power of Shabbos, R. Yitzchok Hutner suggests that, understood from a proper perspective,

a Torah life can be lived in harmony all seven days of the week. Responding to a student who complained that he was living a "double life" – spiritual and professional – R. Hutner (Iggeros U-Kesavim #94) explains that the student was making a critical mistake in viewing the different aspects of his life as disconnected from each other. Rather than living an alienated, "double life," R. Hutner explains that the unity of Torah should connect all aspects of our existence into a "broad life." By properly placing Torah at the center, every aspect of our multifaceted lives – from secular to sacred – becomes harmonized and integrated into a seamless whole.

As in so many other areas of religious life, Yaakov is our role model when it comes to living with spiritual harmony. Yaakov, the personification of "Tiferes," was able to integrate all aspects of his life in a way that protected him from external threats, such as Esav, and provided inner blessing as well. May we merit to live up to this exalted standard as well.