



Vayechi - The Heel Lives

Dead or Alive?

This week's Parsha opens up with the posuk "Yaakov was **alive** in Egypt for 17 years..." Hebrew doesn't use the term "**lived**" as a synonym for "**resided**". What is the Torah telling us? Was Yaakov more alive in Egypt than anywhere he resided? The Midrash Rabbah says that Rav Yehuda HaNasi who compiled the Mishnah used to say "Yaakov was alive in Egypt for 17 years - Yehuda (referring to himself) was alive in Tzipori for 17 years". What was Rav Yehuda HaNasi alluding to? When the Torah describes Yaakov's passing away (49:33) it never mentions "**Misah**" - the Hebrew word for **death**. Rashi explains it is because Yaakov didn't really "**die**". This is **Rashi's own explanation** of the posuk, based on a Gemara in Taanis (5b) that simply states "**Yaakov Avinu didn't die**", Rashi used that Gemara to explain why the term "**Misah**" (death) is missing. However, in the second posuk of the Parsha it says "The days of Yisroel **Lamus**" (to **die** - derived from "**misah**") drew near"! "**Misah**" is **mentioned regarding Yisroel!** What would Rashi say to that?

What do we mean by "Not Dead"?

In the Gemara Taanis (5b) Rav Yitzchak said in the name of Rav Yochanan: "Yaakov Avinu did not die" Rav Nachman countered with the simple question: "was it for nothing that he was eulogized embalmed and buried?" Rav Yitzchak responded: "I have make a drasha – it says (Yirmiyahu,30): 'do not fear Yaakov says Hashem and do not tremble Yisroel for I will save you from far away and your children from the land of their captors' - Yaakov is being

equated to his children- just like his children are alive so also he is alive....". The question is better than the answer! The Torah is not lying! If it says it Yaakov was that's what happened! How can a Drasha overturn facts written in the Torah?

Yaakov vs Yisroel & Jewish Mazel

Yaakov has two names and those two names become our two National names. He's called Yaakov because he held onto the **heel** of Eisav and he is called Yisroel which means Victor, distinguished person, and leader. Sometimes we're called "Beis Yaakov" sometimes we're called "B'nai Yisroel". These two terms are constantly switching off, sometimes even in the same posuk! This means that they are two equally real aspects about us. There is most definitely a concept of "**Jewish Mazel**". Haman's wife Zeresh told Haman: "...if Mordecai is a descendant of the Jews you will surely fall before him..." Rashi explains that she was actually saying: "this nation (the Jews) is compared to **dust** and compared to the **stars**- when they go down they go as low as dust - when they go up - they go up to the heavens". Either we're all the way down or all the way up! During the time of Exile, as we are now, we're all the way down. By the Final Redemption, and during all the mini redemptions that happened along the way, we are on top of everyone else. These are the two poles of Jewish existence, and they are rooted in these two names of **Yaakov** and **Yisroel**. "**Yaakov**" refers to the **heel** which is the lowest part of the person and touches **dust**. The "**Yaakov mode**" is how Jewish life operates when we're down.

“Yisroel” refers to our elevated State. The word “Yisroel” (in Hebrew) could be inverted to read “Li Rosh” - I have the head - I take the lead! **There is no programming for the Jewish people to be in the ‘middle’ with all other nations**, we’re either on top of them or beneath them, it’s a “seesaw” relationship. The amazing thing is that we have a way of surviving and **thriving spiritually, academically, and culturally when we’re down!**

Torah shebichtav vs Torah Shebaal Peh

These two states of our existence in this world are parallel to the two aspects of our Torah, the written and the oral. The written law is comprised of prophecies. Prophecy is the Pinnacle of perfection that any human being could hope to attain in this world and it is the legacy of the Jewish people alone. We were in our highest State (to date) when prophets walked the Earth. They guided us and they created an energy of feeling the Divine presence amongst us. While we still had Prophets the books of the written law were expanding as all the prophecies needed for all generations were being recorded. Following the death of Ezra the Scribe (his death is mourned on the 10th of Teves) that ended. We no longer had prophets and the books of the Tanach were sealed, and not to be added to. During this period of Darkness, which lasts until today, we had a Resurgence with the miracle of Chanukah. There is no official book of Chanukah like there is a Megillah for Purim. Chanukah was after the era of the prophets, so a ‘Chanukah scroll’ couldn’t be composed. However, Chanukah gave us an infusion for the long journey ahead. Stripped of prophecy before and stripped of the Last Vestige of revealed Divine presence on Earth with the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash only 200 years later, that ‘**jug of oil**’ is still giving us the power of the oral law! Despite all we’ve gone through, tragedy after tragedy, for nearly 2,000 years the Jewish people not only survive, **they thrive! The core of our spiritual and cultural**

success is the oral law. The oral law never lost its vitality! New rulings, new laws, new insights, and new explanations! We may be stripped of the light of Prophecy, but we are navigating through the darkness exceptionally well! “He put me in **darkness** like those **dead** to the world - this is the **Babylonian Talmud**” (Sanhedrin 38).

The Mishna

The Talmud, and all that branches out from it, have a power base, the Mishnah! **The Mishnah is amazingly encoded with the entire oral law and easy to retain.** The Mishna was written after the destruction of the Temple, **in the depth of the exile. From there (!)** it is giving us the strength, fortitude, and proficiency to continue to thrive spiritually academically and culturally, despite our lowly geo-political state. It is the “battery” for our “**Yaakov mode**” when we are the most despised and downtrodden amongst the Nations and yet continue to thrive as the people of Hashem even when we are the “**heel in the dust**”.

Yisroel near death experience

Our “Yisroel mode” with prophets walking the earth, is “**near dead**”. As it says in Eicha: “...The city full of inhabitants is like a widow” Chazal explain: only like a widow, but really the husband is alive but far far away. We still have those books of prophecies, we still learn them, and we are awaiting the restoration of Prophecy and all the high levels that we once had, and more. What is fully alive and active is our “Yaakov mode”.

Understanding the Gemara in Taanis

The **written law** says that Yaakov died because his “**Yisroel side**”, parallel to the written law, has been stripped from us! But “**Yaakov**”, parallel to the oral law, still lives! **We lost Yaakov avinu from the perspective of the Chumash-** meaning to say that our higher-level that the Chumash represents was stripped

from us! However, the other level of the “heel” lives on and continues to thrive despite being in the **dust and darkness**. This is illustrated by the oral law that continuously expands in the time of Exile. That’s what Rav Yitzchak meant to say: “I use the power of the oral law- with the power of the oral law and I see the secret of the survival of the Jewish people - **the ‘heel’ aspect of “Yaakov”** that gives programming for Jewish life in the darkness and the Dust”. From the perspective of the oral law “Yaakov” never died, **the heel lives on!** The Miracle of Jewish continuity is what we mean by “**Yaakov Avinu never died**”.

Back to Rashi

Now we can understand Rashi. When the Torah writes: “Yaakov passed away” it never uses the terms ‘died’ or ‘death’. That’s where the Torah referred to him as “**Yaakov**”. Where it says “the day of Yisroel to die drew near” the name “**Yisroel**” is used. It never actually says that he died, but he is indeed **near death**. The level of “**Yisroel**” was stripped from us, and is in a **near-death state**, as we explained above.

“Living” in Egypt

With this we could understand the secret of the opening of the Parsha: “Yaakov was alive in Egypt for 17 years”. He went down to Exile with us and he infused us with life **within Exile** ensuring that the Jewish people will make it out of that Exile, and all Exiles! Those 17 years, numerical value of “**Tov**” –good – “Hashem saw the light was **good**” and then hid the that wondrous light. The power of the oral law comes from the “**hidden goodness**”. That light that shines **behind the darkness** empowers us in times of darkness. Yaakov infused us with that power during those 17 years that he shared with us in Egypt. He was “alive in Egypt” - meaning to say: he gave us the power of life during those times and that’s what ensured our survival in Exile forever after.

Yaakov Avinu & Rav Yehuda HaNasi

What Yaakov did in those 17 years in Egypt is what Rav Yehuda HaNasi did during those 17 years in Tzipori. During that time he compiled the Mishnah. He did everything necessary to ensure the Jewish survival. He gave us the Mishnah which is the inexhaustible base from which the Talmud and all other works come from. It was written within during the Exile and it gives us life during the Exile. That’s what Rav Yehuda HaNasi was alluding to: “Just like Yaakov was alive in Egypt for 17 years I was alive in Tzipori for 17 years” - doing parallel work of compiling the Mishnah and infusing the Jewish people with the power of Torah that would survive and thrive for the long and bitter Exile ahead!

Legacy of Rav Moshe Shapira ZT”L

I’m writing this on the 10th of Teves, the yahrtzeit of my Rebbe HaGaon HaRav Moshe Shapira ZT”L. In his lifetime he was a **revealed Guiding Light** that opened to us understandings of ideas that are seemingly beyond the generation. With his death on the 10th of Teves, like the death of Ezra in his time, it was the end of an era, and darkness descended to the world. We have to remember: **the heel lives on!** Whatever clarity he brought down to the world and touched “Earth”, where the “heel” is, will remain, endure and regenerate, if his talmidim who follow in his **footsteps** and “roll in the **dust of his feet**” and carry on his legacy with unmitigated effort and determination.

Good Shabbos.



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