

Parashat Vayigash, 5770, 2009:

The Fear of Egypt

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *aleah hashalom* and the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel and Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal* translates *Sefer Bereishit* 46:1-4 in the following manner:

46:1 Israel began the journey, taking all his possessions, and he arrived in Beer-sheba. He offered sacrifices to the G-d of his father Isaac.

46:2 G-d spoke to Israel in a night vision, and said, 'Jacob! Jacob!' 'Yes,' replied [Jacob].

46:3 [G-d] said, 'I am the Omnipotent G-d of your father. **Do not be afraid to go to Egypt**, for it is there that I will make you into a great nation.

46:4 I will go to Egypt with you, and I will also bring you back again. Joseph will place his hands on your eyes. (Emphasis my own)

I have always been intrigued, and quite honestly a bit confused, by the seemingly out of place phrase of “Do not be afraid to go to Egypt” (“*al tira merdah mitzraimah*”). After all, Yaakov was going to be reunited with his long lost son Yosef! Moreover, his son was the viceroy of the most powerful country in the world. All of his physical needs would be assured, albeit in the midst of a terrible worldwide famine. Why, therefore, was he afraid?

Rashi (1040-1105) suggests that Yaakov’s fear stemmed from his being forced to leave *Eretz Yisrael* and go into *Galut* (the Diaspora). Initially, this is a particularly understandable fear since his father, Yitzhak, was enjoined by Hashem never to leave Israel. Yet, Yaakov had done this once before when, at Rivka’s request, he fled to *Charan*

to avoid Eisav's anger and fury. (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:10) We know that he remained steadfast in his Torah commitment since, as Rashi explains, “*garti* is the *gematria* (numerical) equivalent of *taryag* [613].” This, Rashi further suggests, teaches us that although Yaakov lived with Lavan the *rasha* (the evil one), he kept all of the mitzvot and did not learn from his evil ways. (Rashi to *Seer Bereishit* 32:5). Given all of this, why did Hashem have to assure him by stating: “Do not be afraid to go to Egypt”?

This question was asked and answered, as well, by the great Russian Torah scholar Rav Meir Lob ben Yechiel Michel Weiser (1809-1879), who is known to the world as the Malbim. He suggested that Yaakov had six different fears regarding going down to Egypt. Moreover, based upon careful and exact analysis, he proposed that each one of these fears is addressed by Hashem's comforting words to Yaakov. His first fear was that of assimilation. Yaakov was afraid that the glittering and technologically advanced culture of Egypt would capture his children's interest and they would, G-d forbid, turn away from their own heritage and values. Hashem responded to this fear by telling him: “*ki l'goi*” (“I will make you in to a ...nation.”) What kind of nation would this be? As the Malbim states: “They [Yaakov's sons] would be clearly recognizable...” and they would remain a distinctly defined entity. Yaakov's second fear was that his family would be diminished in size as a result of the trials and tribulations of *Galut*. The Malbim opined that Hashem addressed this fear when He emphasized that not only would they remain a nation, but that they would also be *gadol* (great).

Yaakov's first two fears focused on his children's future physical existence. His third fear, however, was a spiritual one. According to the Malbim, he was afraid that the *Schechinah* (the Divine Presence) would depart from both he and his children. Hashem assuaged his consternation with the famous words: “*Anochi arade imcha mitzraimah*” (“I will go down with you to Egypt”). In other words, even though Yaakov would no longer have the holiness of *Eretz Yisrael* to protect him, he would nevertheless remain *tachat kanfei haschechinah* (under Hashem's divine protection) even in *Galut Mitzraim* (the Egyptian Diaspora).

In understanding Yaakov's fourth fear, the Malbim noted the interpretation of the great Spanish *gaon* (Torah scholar) Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508), who suggested that Yaakov was afraid that he would be buried in Egypt and would never be comforted in death by the holiness of *Eretz Yisrael*. Accordingly, Hashem comforted him by promising: “*v'anochi aalecha*” (“...and I [Hashem] will bring you up [to *Eretz Yisrael* for burial]”). For a *tzaddik* (righteous person) such as Yaakov, these must have been comforting words indeed.

Yaakov's fifth fear, once again, returns to the realm of the physical. He was afraid that his children would never leave the precincts of the Egyptians. He was afraid that the tri-fold promise that Avraham, Yitzhak and he had received would be left unfulfilled. He was afraid, G-d forbid, that the *brit Avot* (the Covenant of the Patriarchs) would be vitiated. Once again, Hashem allayed his fear by promising: “*gam aloh*” (“and I will also bring up

[your children to *Eretz Yisrael* at the time of the Redemption]”).

The sixth and final fear that haunted Yaakov was a very personal one. He had lived without seeing Yosef for 22 long and bitter years. During this time, he was inconsolable since Yosef was, in fact, still alive. Thus, Yaakov was afraid that he would die before he had a chance to see Yosef, i.e. before he had a chance to see the fulfillment of Yosef’s prophetic dreams. Mercifully, Hashem alleviated this fear by promising him: “Yosef will place his hands on your eyes.” In a word, this was tantamount to Hashem promising him: “Don’t be afraid Yaakov, this too shall come to pass. You will see your beloved Yosef once again.” With this final phrase, all of Yaakov’s fears were addressed and he could go into the blackness and uncertainty of *Galut* with the clear and present knowledge that Hashem would protect both him and his family for evermore.

There are about 13 million Jews in the world today. Approximately five million live in *Eretz Yisrael*. This means that the majority of world Jewry lives in complete and total *Galut* conditions. In other words, most of us live like Yaakov’s children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren – physically outside of the boundaries and holiness of our G-d-given land. As such, we legitimately share many of Yaakov’s fears. We are afraid of the rampant effects of assimilation that affect our people wherever they may be found. We are afraid that we will become an even smaller part of the world’s population. After all, our birth rate continues to diminish. Many of our people feel disconnected and alienated from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and do not feel the *Schechinah*’s presence. We are afraid that

many of them could be lost, G-d forbid, to alien cultures and religions. In other words, like Yaakov of old, we have much of which to be afraid.

Unfortunately, we are not the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and the *Emahot* (Matriarchs). We are not even their shadows. Yet, we are mystically protected by their *zechuyot*, their “merits” simply because we are their descendants. As such, without arrogance and audacity, we can legitimately look to Hashem’s reassuring words to Yaakov as being addressed to us as well. He is with us and has always been with us, even when we have felt His presence was eclipsed by the darkness of man’s relentless inhumanity to his fellow man. We can be comforted in the knowledge that even in *Galut*, man is not alone and Hashem is omnipresent. Therefore, we longingly await the ultimate *Geulah Shlaimah* (Total Redemption), the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the Righteous Messiah), and the time when the entire world will stand shoulder to shoulder in recognizing the One and Only G-d. May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom