

Parashat Vayigash 5775, 2014:

Of Fears and Promises

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

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

Israel began the journey, taking all his possessions, and he arrived in Beersheba. He offered sacrifices to the G-d of his father Isaac. G-d spoke to Israel in a night vision, and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” “Yes,” replied [Jacob]. [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. I will go to Egypt with you, and I will also bring you back again. Joseph will place his hands on your eyes.” (*The Living Torah*, bolding my own)

I have always been intrigued by the seemingly out of place phrase, “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 Yaakov’s physical needs would be assured, even 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* (the Land of Israel) and enter *galut* (the Diaspora). At first glance, 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 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. (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:5). Therefore, why did Hashem seek 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), known to the world as “the Malbim.” He suggested that Yaakov had six different fears concerning his impending travel to Egypt. Moreover, based upon careful and exact analysis, he proposed that each of these fears was 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 into 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 upon his children’s future physical existence. His third fear, however, was spiritual in nature. 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* Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508), who suggested that Yaakov was afraid that he would be buried in Egypt and never be comforted in death by the holiness of *Eretz Yisrael*. Accordingly, Hashem consoled him by promising: "*v'anochi aalecha*" ("...and I [Hashem] will bring you up [to *Eretz Yisrael* for burial]"). For a *tzaddik* such as Yaakov, these must have been reassuring words indeed.

Yaakov's fifth fear was the fear that his children would never leave Egypt and return to *Eretz Yisrael*. He was afraid that the tri-fold promise that Avraham, Yitzhak and he had received would be left unfulfilled, and the *brit Avot* (the Covenant of the Patriarchs) would be thereby vitiated. Once again, Hashem allayed Yaakov's 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 he sensed that Yosef was, in fact, still alive. Now Yaakov was afraid that Yosef would die before he had an opportunity to see him, before he had a chance to see the fulfillment of Yosef's prophetic dreams. Mercifully, Hashem alleviated this fear by promising Yaakov, "Yosef will place his hands on your eyes." In sum, 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, chaos and uncertainty of *galut* with the clear and present knowledge that Hashem would protect both him and his family forevermore.

The majority of world Jewry lives outside the boundaries and inherent 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, coupled with an ever-diminishing birthrate, that threaten to reduce our numbers. Then, too, many of our people feel disconnected and alienated from *HaKodesh 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.

Even though we are not the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and the *Emahot* (Matriarchs), we are mystically and mysteriously protected by their *zechuyot* (merits), simply because we are their descendants. As such, 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 eclipsed by the darkness of man’s relentless inhumanity. We can be comforted in the knowledge that even in *galut*, we are not alone. Therefore, we longingly await the ultimate *geulah shlaimah* (Complete Redemption), the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah), and the time when the entire world will stand shoulder to shoulder in recognizing Hashem. May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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