**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Vayechi – Vol. 12, Issue 12**

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**ואני בבאי מפדן מתה עלי רחל בארץ כנען בדרך בעוד כברת ארץ**

**לבא אפרתה ואקברה שם בדרך אפרת הוא בית לחם (48:7)**

When Yaakov realized that the time of his death was near, he became concerned that he would be buried in Egypt and not in his family's burial plot in Me'aras HaMachpeilah in Chevron. He called in his son Yosef, who wielded power in Egypt, and asked him to ensure that he would be buried with his forefathers in the land of Israel, a request to which Yosef agreed. Yaakov then continued and told Yosef that when he was returning to Eretz Yisroel, Rochel died on the road, so he buried her there in Beis Lechem.

Rashi explains that after asking Yosef to exert himself to arrange for his burial in Me’aras HaMachpeilah, Yaakov felt the need to justify why he did not do the same for Yosef’s mother Rochel. Therefore, Yaakov informed Yosef that Hashem told him to bury Rochel by the side of the road where she died so that she could help her descendants by weeping and praying for them when they passed by her burial place on their way to exile, as the verse says, “A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping; Rochel weeps for her children,” to which Hashem replies, “There is reward for your act … and your children will return to their border” (Yirmiyahu 31:14-16). For this reason, we refer to Rochel as “Mama Rochel,” our mother to whom we cry out in exile, who in turn beseeches Hashem on our behalf, and whose petitions are accepted as Hashem promises her that her children will ultimately return home.

In his autobiography, Rav Yisroel Meir Lau, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel and a well-connected political figure, records the following fascinating story regarding the unique status of Kever Rochel (Rochel’s Tomb), an unparalleled place of prayer to which countless Jews have travelled throughout the generations to pour out their aching hearts. Rav Lau writes that when the Israeli government was negotiating with the Palestinians following the Oslo accords, the question of the status of the city of Beis Lechem came up. Although Beis Lechem is a Palestinian city, Kever Rochel is also located there, and the Israeli negotiators insisted that Kever Rochel must remain under Jewish control.

However, to reach Kever Rochel from Yerushalayim, one must traverse a short road from Gilo, the closest Jerusalem neighborhood. The Palestinians insisted that this road be under their authority, such that Kever Rochel itself would be under Israeli auspices, but the road to reach it would be controlled by the Palestinians. Yitzchok Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, agreed to this arrangement. When word of this compromise got out, people were gravely concerned that with the Palestinians controlling the access road, it would no longer be safe to visit Kever Rochel.

Rav Lau intervened, meeting with Rabin and telling him that he must renegotiate and insist that the access road remain under Israel control to ensure safe passage for Jews traveling to Kever Rochel. Rabin, who was not observant, could not comprehend why the Chief Rabbi was making such an issue about Rochel’s burial site. Rav Lau explained, “Rochel is our Mama, and a person never abandons his mother!” Rabin was impressed and moved by Rav Lau’s poignant declaration, and shortly thereafter he announced that he had changed his position on the issue and would demand that Israel retain control over the road to Kever Rochel, access which we continue to enjoy today, all because of Rav Lau’s impassioned words about the unique power of Mama Rochel.

**וגם אתה ידעת את אשר עשה לי יואב בן צרויה אשר עשה לשני שרי צבאות ישראל לאבנר בן נר ולעמשא בן יתר ויהרגם ... ועשית כחכמתך ולא תורד שיבתו בשלם שאל (מלכים א' 2:5-6 – הפטרה)**

The Haftorah for Parshas Vayechi contains Dovid’s final instructions to his son Shlomo just before his death. After beginning by emphasizing Shlomo’s spiritual responsibilities, it is surprising to see that much of what Dovid discussed on his deathbed was a list of enemies against whom he wanted Shlomo to take revenge. Typically, at the end of people’s lives, they put their priorities in order and realize what is truly important in this world, and they work to make peace with and forgive anybody who may have harmed them in any way. Why then do we see Dovid, who throughout his life was always so humble and forgiving toward Shaul, Avshalom, and his other enemies, apparently carrying grudges until his final breath?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that in order to properly understand Dovid’s final instructions, we must first appreciate what revenge is all about. On the one hand, the Torah (Vayikra 19:18) explicitly forbids us to take revenge, but on the other hand, we refer to Hashem (Tehillim 94:1) as ק-ל נקמות ד' – the G-d of vengeance. Is revenge a positive Divine attribute that we should strive to emulate, or is it a lowly and forbidden trait that we should seek to uproot?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that there are two reasons why a person might seek revenge, one of which is commendable and one of which is problematic. If a person wishes to punish his enemy out of personal feelings of anger and retaliation, this is the type of revenge that the Torah prohibits. At the same time, the world needs justice, and there are some wrongs that are so egregious that they must be avenged, and there are some people who are so inherently evil that they must be punished to prevent other people from following in their footsteps. This latter type of revenge is productive and is the form of revenge that Hashem exacts, and doing so increases כבוד שמים (the honor of Heaven) in the world, because when sinners are punished, it is a demonstration of the concept of reward and punishment, which is one of the 13 fundamental principles of faith.

With this introduction, we now understand that the very same Dovid who twice refrained from killing Shaul when he had the opportunity to do so, and who was exceedingly humble toward his various enemies, now told Shlomo to pursue justice solely לשם שמים (for the sake of Heaven). Since Dovid would no longer be alive to see his instructions carried out, it is clear that they were not coming from a desire to witness and celebrate the downfall of his enemies, but purely for the sake of meting out appropriate justice.

Along these lines, the Chofetz Chaim was once told that a certain man was bitten by a rabid dog and died a painful death. Instead of expressing sympathy, the Chofetz Chaim’s reaction was, “I’ve been waiting for 30 years to see what punishment he was going to get. There was once a widow who was renting a house from him, and one winter, she did not have enough money to pay the rent, so he evicted her and her children out into the middle of the freezing winter. I knew then that a terrible punishment would befall him, and now I finally see what form it took.”

The Malbim suggests that in telling Shlomo to hold Yoav accountable for his actions, Dovid conveyed this concept that punishment must be carried out not for personal considerations of revenge, but solely to show Hashem’s system of justice in action, in one short word: וגם (and also), which introduced the topic by indicating that what Dovid told Shlomo about punishing Yoav was somehow related to what he told him just before this about the importance of keeping the mitzvos. What is the connection between them? Dovid was expressing that although Yoav must be killed, וגם – it also needs to be done like all other mitzvos, purely לשם שמים, to fulfill the mitzvah of punishing evildoers, and not because of any personal vendetta.

However, according to the Medrash’s elucidation of Dovid’s instructions, the entire question of why he was being so vengeful at the end of his life is moot. The Medrash explains that Dovid’s motivation in giving Shlomo these directives was not revenge, but kindness, as he was worried that because Yoav had done such terrible sins, if he died a natural death and did not receive atonement for them in this world, he would have to be punished even more harshly in the World to Come.

Although it may seem far-fetched to transform Dovid’s theme of justice and revenge into a message of love and compassion, the Be’er Moshe points out an anomaly in the structure of his speech which supports this interpretation. Dovid began by telling Shlomo to punish Yoav, then spoke about rewarding Barzilai’s children for an act of chesed (kindness) that he did for Dovid, and he ended by conveying that Shimi ben Geira must also be punished.

Why did Dovid separate the two individuals who were to be punished with those who should be rewarded? The Be’er Moshe explains that Dovid intentionally inserted the topic of doing kindness with Barzilai’s children in the middle to teach us that his speech was not two statements of revenge and one directive of chesed, but rather three consecutive commands of chesed. The Mishbetzos Zahav adds that this understanding is alluded to by the fact that the discussion of Barzilai and his children begins (2:7) ולבני ברזילי with a connecting ו, because it is a continuation of the theme of kindness that preceded it.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. Rashi writes (47:29) that in requesting Yosef to place his hand under his thigh, Yaakov was requesting him to take an oath not to bury him in Egypt. The Ramban (26:5) writes that the Avos only observed the mitzvos when they were in Eretz Yisroel, and therefore Yaakov was permitted to marry two sisters when he was outside of Israel. What was the purpose of Yosef swearing not to bury his father in Egypt, as he took the oath outside of Eretz Yisroel and according to the Ramban it wasn’t binding? (Midbar K’deimos Ma’areches Yud 55, Shu”t Avnei Nezer Yoreh Deah 2:306)
2. Yaakov promised Yosef an extra part of the land of Israel in addition to his regular inheritance (48:22). After he saw the jealousy which was caused by his earlier preferential treatment of Yosef and its catastrophic effects, why would Yaakov continue to favor him in this manner? (Daas Z’keinim, Ayeles HaShachar)
3. What is the connection between Parshas Vayechi and the (upcoming) Presidential inauguration?

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) The **Chida** explains that the opinion of the Ramban only applied to the Avos when they were outside of the land of Israel but planning to return there. As this was the case with Yaakov during his time with Lavan, he did not observe the prohibition against marrying two sisters. However, if the Avos found themselves outside of Eretz Yisroel with no plans to return, they did not permanently abandon their adherence to the mitzvos. Since this was the case with Yosef, Yaakov knew that he would keep his oath. Alternatively, the **Avnei Nezer** suggests that a person is inherently required to honor a promise that he makes to another person independent of religious obligations, and Yaakov therefore knew that Yosef would keep his word.

2) The **Daas Z’keinim** answers that the brothers became jealous of the extra gifts and attention received by Yosef when he was still a commoner, as they maintained that they were older and greater than him and he was unworthy of his status. At this point, he was now the viceroy of Egypt and they understood that royalty is deserving of greater honor, so they wouldn’t be jealous of any extra gifts that Yaakov promised him. Additionally, they saw that his dreams had been fulfilled and they were dependent upon him for sustenance, which also made them willing to accept that he deserved preferential treatment. Alternatively, **Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman** suggests that because the gift that Yaakov was now promising Yosef wouldn’t be applicable until after he died, there was no room for concern.

3) Although today many Presidents choose a Biblical verse on which to take the oath of office, George Washington had no such precedent. The Bible that he used for the first inauguration was randomly and hastily opened to Bereishis 49:13, the blessing that Yaakov gave to Zevulun.

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