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Hindsight

By Rabbi Joshua (retroactively known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In this week's parsha we are told of Yaakov's death. Rashi writes that even though the general practice is that, at the end of a weekly parsha, there is, in the Torah scroll, either a gap of nine letter spaces before the next parsha starts, or empty space at the end of the last line, the two parshas of Vayigash and Vayechi, run into each other, with only one space between them. Rashi, based on the midrash, explains that this was done to indicate that since Yaakov passed away, the eyes and hearts of Yisroel were closed because of the suffering of the enslavement that the Egyptians began to impose upon them. In our message last year, we showed that Yaakov, sensing the waning of his influence as he was about to die, did what he could to unite the brothers and enable them to withstand the impending suffering. In this way, he assured that his spirit and influence would remain with them, and, in this sense, the rabbis say that Yaakov is still alive. However, the fact remains, that according to the rabbis, there was something missing from the nation when Yaakov died, because of which they began to suffer from the enslavement that was beginning. What exactly was missing? Although a number of suggestions come to mind, I will present only one of them.

Our parsha begins with the verse, " And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years ; and the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were one hundred and forty seven years." (Bereishis 47 : 28). Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, in his commentary to this verse, writes that although Yaakov had suffered greatly throughout his life, especially during the years that he had been separated from his son Yosef, when he did not experience prophecy, the last seventeen years of his life defined his entire lifetime. After being reunited with Yosef, he was again visited by the holy spirit, a stage in the various levels of prophecy as delineated by the Rambam in his Guide to the Perplexed, and he experienced true life. Those seventeen years of being together with his family and close to God made his entire lifetime, in his eyes, a good experience. He saw his life in retrospect as leading up to those seventeen years, and realized that the entire experience was all good. I believe it can be demonstrated that Yaakov's ability to reinterpret his painful experiences and see them in a positive light is one of the things that his descendants lost, for a time, after he died, and caused them to feel the suffering of the enslavement that was beginning.

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov died, his sons, fearing that Yosef harbored ill feelings against them for their treatment of him, moved to bring about reconciliation. Yosef responded, "Fear not, for am I instead of God? Although you intended my harm, God intended it for good, in order to accomplish... that a vast people be kept alive" (Bereishis 50 : 19-20). In fact, Yosef had already told his brothers once before, at the time that he revealed his true identity to them, that what they had done turned out for the good. One may actually ask how the fact that God used the actions of the brothers in a positive way mitigates the nature of what they themselves did. Would a court of law accept such an argument? The Sefas Emes explains that when one repents out of love, his past misdeeds become converted to good deeds, and, so, because the brothers repented out of love, their actions were,

retrospectively, viewed as being good. Note, however, that Yosef added one comment to his brothers in his remarks after his father's death that he did not make while he was alive. He told them, "you intended my harm." My teacher, Rabbi Aharon Soloveichik, has said that this was the worst possible thing that Yosef could have told them. They came to him begging for forgiveness, and he told them that their intentions had been bad. Had he truly viewed the matter in retrospect and accepted their repentance with love, he would not have said this. In fact, Rabbeinu Bachya, in his commentary to these verses, writes that we never find that Yosef truly forgave his brothers, and, because of this, the Jewish people suffered in their exiles. The ability to view matters in retrospect that Yosef exhibited in full during Yaakov's life, was, thus, found lacking, to a degree, after Yaakov's death, and this brought about future suffering for the nation.

The rabbis, as we mentioned, say that after Yaakov died the eyes and hearts of Yisroel were closed from the suffering of the enslavement. They did not say that Yisroel suffered from the enslavement itself, because that did not begin, according to the midrash, until the death of Levi, the last of Yaakov's sons to pass away. It was apparently the very anticipation of the coming enslavement that caused the people to suffer. While Yaakov was alive, the nation had the ability to view past unpleasant events in retrospect and reinterpret them for the good, through Yaakov's example of the reinterpretation of reality in a positive light. Once he died, that ability was lacking, and, moreover, they began to view the present in a bad light, in anticipation of their coming hardships. Despite Yaakov's efforts to prepare his children for the events that would transpire in Egypt, they lost, for a time his ability to psychologically transform unpleasant experiences, and in this sense their eyes were closed from suffering.

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