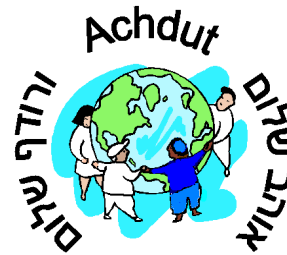


Parshat Vayechi

The Mission of Twelve Tribes

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From the time he is told that his most beloved son, Yosef, has vanished, Yaakov Avinu appears to lapse into a deep mournful depression. At almost every interval in the parshiyot following the event, Yaakov never fails to mention his "going down to the grave in mourning." This apparent pessimism influences many discussions from then until Yaakov finally meets Yosef in Egypt, foremost Yaakov's reluctance to send Binyamin down with the brothers to Egypt and Yehuda's argument as to why he should be enslaved in Binyamin's stead. Indeed, even G-d addresses this concern when he promises that "Yosef will stretch his hand over your eyes." (The Midrash understands this to mean that none of Yaakov's children will have died before him; i.e. Yosef will outlive his father.) Far more startling than all of this is Rashi's understanding of the pasuk (37:35) that Yaakov feared not just death in this world but that he would go down to Gehinom as well.

One might assume that this is perhaps no more than the grieving, albeit a little more than normal, of a distraught father. Yet, this seems to contrast too strongly with the reaction that another tzadik, Aharon, displayed when being told of the death of his two sons; he is silent, signifying total acceptance of G-d's justice. Furthermore, if this was truly the reason for his grief, it should have ended with his long awaited reunion with Yosef, yet there, even at the moment of his greatest joy, Yaakov states: "now I can die."

In order to understand Yaakov's obsession with death, it is imperative that we understand the meaning of his life. After seven years of working in Lavan's home, Yaakov feels that he is ready to start his family and in approaching Lavan about the issue, he declares "hava et ishti ... v'avo eileha - give me my wife and I will be with her." The meforshim are baffled with this tremendous contradiction in the personality of Yaakov. How does a tzadik speak like this? Rashi there explains that Yaakov was not demanding marital relations for his own pleasure; he needed to establish the twelve tribes. To this end, he asked for his wife much in the same way that one requests tefillin, a lulav or any other article used in the performance of a mitzvah. This is not to say that he viewed Rachel as a mere object for doing a mitzvah, rather he viewed relations with her as a the mitzvah of creating Am Yisrael.

Yaakov saw himself and his life as having one central goal: The creation of a nation that would continue the legacy of Avraham and Yitzchak. It is for this reason that Yaakov grieves; if one son is missing, he has failed to establish the twelve tribes. He will go down to the grave in sorrow, and his portion in the World to Come will be Gehinom since he has failed in his life's mission. This is not simple mourning; this is the grief of living a meaningless life.

Rashi explains that at the meeting of Yaakov and Yosef, where Yaakov exclaims "amuta hapa'am - now I can die," he means that now he will die only once, only in this world, he will not go down to Gehinom as well. This idea can be used in comprehending the cryptic statement of the Gemara (Ta'anit 5b) when it states "Yaakov did not die...just as his children are alive, so is he." For Yaakov, who saw himself as the vehicle through which Am Yisrael will be brought into the world, if his children live on, then so does he.

In this week's parsha, the Midrash explains that all of Yaakov's sons gathered round him in a final show of brotherhood and unity under the banner of G-d. They declared to their father "Shma Yisrael - Listen Yisrael", we all united towards one goal, you succeeded in your life mission! If but one tribe is missing, there is no Am Yisrael - but we do stand together!