

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

7 Teves, 5769 Vol. 10, No. 11

Parashas Vayigash

“PHARAOH ASKED, ‘HOW OLD ARE YOU?’ AND YAAKOV ANSWERED ‘THE YEARS ... ARE 130, FEW BUT BAD’” (BEREISHIS 47:8-9)

Why was Yaakov punished?

WHEN PHARAOH FIRST set eyes upon Yaakov, he was astonished. Yaakov seemed older than anyone Pharaoh had ever met. The Ramban (ibid.) explains that this is why Pharaoh inquired regarding Yaakov’s age. The Ramban continues to say that Yaakov responded that he was not really that old. Nevertheless, he suffered greatly during his lifetime and this caused him to look so old and worn. The Da’as Z’kaynim (ibid.), quoting a Midrash, tells us that Hashem took Yaakov to task saying “I saved you from Esav and Lavan ... and you’re complaining?” Because of Yaakov’s statement, the Da’as Z’kaynim relates, Yaakov’s life was shortened by thirty-three years – one year for each word of his interaction with Pharaoh. Why was Yaakov punished? He was asked a direct question and he answered truthfully: He had gone through a lot, suffered through great difficulties, and that is the reason that he looked old beyond his actual age. What should Yaakov have answered other than the truth?

Hashem’s criticism of Yaakov Avinu teaches us a great lesson on the proper perspective on life. Certainly, our sojourn on this earth is not an easy one, as the Mesilas Yesharim (Chap. 1) describes it, “With many types of suffering and illnesses and pains and burdens, and after all this – death.” In the big picture, our life in this world is but a brief prelude, a tiny fraction of our eternal existence, the vast majority of which will take place in the world-to-come, which will be pleasurable beyond description. This world was not intended to be a place to receive gratification, but rather to be the testing ground, the crucible in which to purify and perfect ourselves, which is sometimes accomplished through our accepting the suffering, and serving Hashem despite the challenges.

Life is not a balance sheet

However, even this world has its share of blessings and *simcha*, and we cannot allow the cloudy, rainy days to obscure the sunny days. Life is not a balance sheet in which we add up our experiences and come out with a “bottom line” in the black or in the red. We have an obligation to recognize and savor every chesed that Hashem bestows upon us, despite the many difficulties that may appear to outweigh those benefits. Hashem found fault with Yaakov’s presentation of his life. Had he merely stated the facts of his difficult experiences, there would not have been a problem. Instead, Yaakov summed up his years as, “few but bad.” Therefore Hashem took Yaakov to task for negating the many kindnesses he had received and describing his life in general as being bitter. Rough times do not nullify or erase the good times he had enjoyed.

Our tefilos and brachos should be said with feelings of joy and thankfulness

Most of us have not suffered to the degree that Yaakov Avinu did. Our troubles shrink to mere annoyances in comparison to the travails he went through with Esav, Lavan, Dinah and Yosef. We reside in one of the most tolerant host countries for living as Jews. It should be easy for us to be thankful for the *chesed* Hashem has granted us. Do we respond accordingly when asked about our welfare? Do we answer that we are blessed, *Baruch Hashem*, and appreciate His kindness? Similarly, our *tefilos* and *brachos* should be said with feelings of joy and thankfulness, praising Hashem for His bounty and asking for its continuation. If we keep the correct perspective, we can channel these emotions into greater efforts in doing *mitzvos* and studying the Torah, which in turn will merit us even more favor and love in the eyes of Hashem.