

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
Portion of Vayechi

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Vayechi

Presented by

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1. Initiative, Conforming with G'd's Will

The Torah states, **"The time approached for Israel to die, so he called his son Yosef and said to him, '...Please place your hand under my thigh...do not bury me in Egypt...'"** Before Yaakov passed away he summoned Yosef and adjured him that he would not bury his father in Egypt, but rather, he would take him to Canaan and bury him in the cave of Machpelah. When Yaakov passed away, Yosef went before Pharaoh and said, **"My father adjured me saying, 'Behold, I am about to die, in my grave that I have hewn for myself in the land of Canaan – there you will bury me.' Now I will go up if you please and bury my father, then I will return. And Pharaoh said, 'Go up and bury your father as he adjured you.'"** Rashi cites Chazal who explain, "Pharaoh had said to Yosef, 'Had you not been bound by an oath to bury your father in Canaan, I would not allow you to leave to bury him.' Pharaoh was afraid to tell Yosef to violate the oath that he had made to his father. This is because Pharaoh was concerned that Yosef would respond saying, 'Since you want me to violate the oath that I had made to my father, I will violate the oath that I made to you, that I will not reveal to anyone that I know one more language than the seventy languages that you know.'"

The Gemara in Tractate Sotah tells us that night before Yosef was released from prison in Egypt, G'd sent the archangel Gabriel to teach him seventy languages. This was necessary for Yosef to ascend to be qualified to be the Viceroy of Egypt. After Yosef was chosen by Pharaoh, the astrologers said, that in order one to ascend to such a position of power he must be versed in seventy languages. However, they believed that Yosef was not. After Pharaoh verified that Yosef was proficient in seventy languages and discovered that Yosef also knew Hebrew making him fluent in seventy-one languages. Although Pharaoh attempted to learn Hebrew (which would be the seventy-first language) he could not. Since Pharaoh did not want anyone to know that Yosef knew one more language than he did, which would compromise Pharaoh's position as the monarch, he adjured Yosef to not reveal this fact to anyone. Pharaoh understood that if would ask Yosef to violate his oath to Yaakov, contending that it is something

that is justified, Yosef would then respond, "If so then it is justified for me to violate the oath I made to you." This is the understanding of the words that Pharaoh said to Yosef, **"Go up and bury your father as he adjured you."**

Seemingly, the basis for Yaakov adjuring Yosef was based on the understanding that if he did not do so, Pharaoh would not have allowed Yosef to take his father to be buried in Canaan. It is interesting to note that when Yosef was in prison and had requested that the wine steward "remember" him and "mention" him when he would be released from prison was considered to be a lack of faith. After Yosef had interpreted the wine steward's dream when they were together in prison, he had hoped that because he had done a kindness to the wine steward, he would reciprocate and be aggregable to Yosef's request. Yosef thus asked the wine steward to remember and mention him to Pharaoh.

Chazal tell us based on a verse in Psalms, that because Yosef relied on the assistance of a heathen, he was punished by G'd to remain in prison for an additional two years for the two words that he had said to the wine steward – "remember me" and "mention me." Rabbeinu Bachya explains, that Yosef was punished because someone at his level of holiness and righteousness should have understood and appreciated that when it would be time for him to be released, G'd would release him at that moment. Taking initiative to ask the wine steward to accommodate him was thus a lack of faith. There was no need for Yosef to take any level of initiative.

Chazal tell us that Yaakov was the most special of the Patriarchs. If Yosef was punished because his initiative was considered to be a lack of faith in G'd, Yaakov being greater, why did he devise a plan to compel Pharaoh to allow Yosef to bury him in Canaan? Why did Yaakov need to adjure Yosef rather than having complete faith in G'd that ultimately he would be buried in Canaan? In addition, the Torah states that before Yaakov descended to Egypt G'd assured him saying, **"Have no fear of descending to Egypt...I shall descend with you to Egypt and I will surely bring you up..."** If Yaakov was promised by G'd Himself that he would not be buried in Egypt, but rather he

would return to Canaan, seemingly Yaakov's taking the initiative to adjure Yosef could be seen (G'd forbid) as a lack of faith. If so, why did Yaakov need to take the initiative to adjure Yosef?

Yaakov had understood the chain of events that had transpired and evolved which ultimately led to Yosef's ascent to become the Viceroy. He understood that Yosef had been in prison prior to becoming the Viceroy of Egypt. Just before Yosef was released, G'd had sent the angel Gabriel to teach him seventy languages. When Yosef was released and it became known to Pharaoh that he was proficient in seventy-one languages, he was made to take an oath that he would never reveal this fact. Although Yosef was devoutly righteous and would never violate his word, Pharaoh was still not convinced and assured that he would not reveal this fact.

Yaakov, as the ultimate spiritual person in existence understood through these events that had transpired- that just as Pharaoh compelled Yosef take an oath, it was the Will of G'd that he should also bind Yosef with an oath. Since G'd could have made Pharaoh confident in relying on Yosef's integrity, that he would not reveal the truth, he nevertheless felt insecure. He thus adjured Yosef. Yaakov understood that for the ultimate Divine Providence to be put into effect, it needed to be activated through his initiative to bring it to fruition. Yaakov thus adjured Yosef, thus compelling Pharaoh to allow him to bury his father in Canaan. It is thus not similar to the incident of Yosef regarding his request of the wine steward to "remember" and "mention" him, in which there was no basis for him to take initiative. Yosef only needed to have complete and unswerving faith.

2. Yaakov, the Counter Force of Egypt

The portion of Vayechi is considered a "sealed" portion, due to its paragraph structure. Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why is the portion of Vayechi a 'sealed' portion? It is because after Yaakov, our Patriarch passed away the eyes and hearts of the Jewish people became sealed (to holiness) due to the suffering of bondage..." If the bondage only began with the passing of the entire generation of Yosef, why were the eyes and hearts of Yaakov's family sealed from the bondage after his passing? Maharal of Prague in his work *Gevuras Hashem* explains, that as long as Yaakov our patriarch was alive, his presence was sufficient to insulate the Jewish people from the impurities of Egypt. Despite the intensity of the impurity and depravity of Egypt, Yaakov's presence created an insular environment which was the equivalent

of them not being Egypt. However, after Yaakov passed away, the impurity of Egypt began to seep into the souls of Jewish people and erode their spirituality on a subliminal level. Although they did not experience physical bondage, the assault on their spirituality was the equivalent of bondage. Ultimately, the spirituality of the Jewish people with the exception of the tribe of Levy, regressed to the point that they became pagans- no less than the Egyptians themselves. As the Midrash states regarding the destruction of the Egyptians at the time of the closing of Sea, "The angels came to G'd with a claim saying, "Why are you sparing the Jewish people and destroying the Egyptians? These are idolaters and these are idolaters." Although the seventy individuals that descended along with Yaakov to Egypt (his family) were exceptionally spiritual, their spiritual dimension was not sufficient to withstand and deflect the negative influences of being in exile without Yaakov's presence.

As long as Yaakov was alive, the Divine Presence was with him. Consequently, the spirituality of the Jewish people remained fully intact without any breach or compromise. As it states in the Midrash regarding the holy Patriarchs, "*Hein, hein HaMerkava* – they are the Chariot (receptacle for G'd)." Meaning, they are the location of G'd's Presence in this world, no less than in the Holy of Holies. Yaakov was thus able to insulate the Jewish people from the impurities of Egypt because he was the location of the Divine Presence. Yaakov's presence, even more than any of the other Patriarchs was needed to maintain the Jewish people in their exile in Egypt. He was not only, as Chazal tell us, the most special of the Patriarchs, he was the Patriarch who had a spiritual resiliency to all the impurities of exile, not to be affected to any degree.

The Torah states that before Yaakov had descended to Egypt G'd assured him saying, "**Have no fear of descending to Egypt...I shall descend with you to Egypt and I will surely bring you up...**" Seemingly, Yaakov was fearful of Egypt, whereas his family, (the tribes) were not as concerned. This is because Yaakov fully understood and appreciated the spiritual perils and lethality of being in exile. He had spent more time outside of Canaan than any of the other Patriarchs. He was thus the Patriarch that was able to contend with all of the issues of exile. Chazal tell us that Yaakov had enacted the evening service (*Arvis*) which is said during the nighttime period. The nighttime period is a time that symbolizes exile in this world as stated by the Gemara. The nighttime period connotes exile because it is a time in which one's clarity is obscured and truth is distorted. In the night, it is only possible to dispel darkness with light. Chazal tell us,

Yaakov was the Patriarch who embodied Torah, which is the equivalent of “light.” As King Solomon writes in Proverbs, *‘Neir mitzvah v’Torah ohr* (the mitzvah is the fuel and the Torah is the light/illumination).” Thus, through Yaakov’s embodiment of Torah, he was able to contend with all of the issues of exile and create an impregnable spiritual environment, despite the overwhelming impurities of that location.

The Torah tells us that before Yaakov left Canaan to go to the household of Lavan in Charan, he spent fourteen years studying Torah in the Yeshivah of Aiver in order to prepare himself for the spiritual challenges of the community of Charan. The verse states, **“...he took from the stones of the place and he arranged around his head, and he lay down in that place.”** Chazal draw from this verse that for fourteen years Yaakov did not lie down to sleep. This indicates that for the fourteen years he was in the Yeshivah of Aiver, he was totally immersed in his Torah study for what he would confront in Charan. Because he understood the gravity of the danger of spiritual impurity he had no choice but to fully immerse himself in Torah to prepare himself for the exile.

Just as Yaakov was concerned about descending to the community of Charan and its lethal spiritual ramifications, so too was he fearful of descending to Egypt with his family, because the effect of the impurity upon him and his family. This is the reason G’d needed to assure him saying, **“Have no fear of descending to Egypt... I shall descend with you to Egypt.”** By assuring Yaakov that He would descend with him to Egypt, G’d was promising him that, just as he was the location of the Divine Presence in the land of Canaan, so too would he be the location of the Divine Presence in Egypt, despite the fact that it was a location that was a bastion of spiritual impurity. Only after Yaakov was assured by G’d, regarding his family’s spiritual survival, did he descend.

Although the Jewish people had declined in their spirituality to the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity, they did not go into spiritual oblivion. This was only possible because of Yaakov’s initial presence and influence over his family. Yaakov established during the years that he lived in Egypt a spiritual infrastructure that allowed the Jewish people to spiritually survive until it was time for G’d redeemed them.

3. The Profundity of Yaakov’s Blessing to his Grandchildren

The Torah tells us that when Yosef took his sons Ephraim and Manasheh to be blessed by his father Yaakov. The Torah states, “ And Israel said to Ephraim and Manasheh, **‘May the angel who redeems me from all evil bless the lads... may they reproduce (vayidgu) abundantly within the land.’**” When Yaakov blessed his grandsons he chose the word **“vayidgu”** to imply proliferation, rather than the word **“vayirbu”** which means “to multiply/increase.” It is evident that the word **“vayidgu”**, which connotes the proliferation of fish, conveys another level of blessing.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain the significance of the word **“vayidgu”** to be, “Ephraim and Manasheh should be as prolific as fish, which procreate in an unlimited number. Secondly, they should not be susceptible to the evil eye (*ayin ha’rah*) as fish that are concealed from the human eye as a result of their being covered by the water.”

The Torah tells us that all life that existed at the time of the Great Flood came to an end. Chazal tell us that the Torah is specific in its description of the destruction of existence, to indicate that it was only the terrestrial species that perished. However, the fish in the sea were spared. There is an argument in the Gemara in Tractate Zevachim regarding the survival of the fish during the Great Flood. One opinion is that they swam to the depths of the sea where they were protected from the heat of the sulfuric waters of the Flood. Another opinion is that the fish swam to the Land of Israel, which was not inundated by the waters of the Great Flood.

After the Great Flood, G’d again blessed man and all existence as He had at the time of Creation. If in fact existence after the Flood was a continuation of the original Creation, why was it necessary for G’d to repeat the blessings of Creation? Since G’d once again did repeat the blessings that He originally bestowed upon Creation, it is an indication that after the Flood it was a new existence. However, the new existence no longer had the dimension of value of the original existence. We see that after the Flood the lifespan of man was greatly reduced. However, the fish in the sea who did not perish in the Flood were the continuation of the original Creation. Their essence and dimension of value had not been diminished. They thus continued proliferate in an unlimited manner.

The Gemara tells us that King David was one of the three most humble people who ever lived. He authored

Psalms and was the most special king that the Jewish people had. The Midrash tells us that G'd had shown Adam all the wise men and leaders of all the generations until the end of time. Adam had noticed a special soul that was among the generations and asked G'd to identify it. G'd said that the soul was only meant to live a few hours. Adam initially was destined to live 1,000 years. Upon hearing what G'd had said about the special soul, Adam said to G'd that he would give seventy years of his life so that the special soul could live. Thus, the seventy years of King David's life were the years of Adam, who was the handiwork of G'd. The years that Adam possessed had unlimited capacity because he was the handiwork of G'd. Adam initially had a level of holiness his radiance was confused by the angels with the radiance of G'd. Since King David was endowed with the special years of Adam, he too had a relative unlimited capacity and was thus able to achieve a unique dimension of spiritual accomplishment.

The blessing, which Yaakov gave his grandchildren, equating them to fish regarding their proliferation, was intended to bless them with the potential of the original Creation that no longer existed. Thus, by choosing the word "*vayidgu*" rather than "*vayirbu*", Yaakov was communicating a blessing to his grandchildren that they should be the beneficiaries of G'd's original blessing to Creation which was more special.

4. Yaakov's Opposition to be Buried in Egypt

The Torah tells us that before Yaakov passed away he made a special request of his son Yosef, the Viceroy of Egypt. The Torah states, **"The time approached for Israel to die, so he called for his son, for Yosef, and said to him - Please – if I have found favor in your eyes, please place your hand under my thigh... please do not bury me in Egypt."** Why did Yaakov not want to be buried in Egypt? Rashi cites three reasons from the Midrash why Yaakov did not want to be buried in Egypt. However, the Midrash offers another reason that is not cited by Rashi. The Midrash states, "The prophet Yechezkel identifies the Egyptian people as donkeys (*chamorim*), 'Their flesh is the flesh of donkeys (*chamorim*).' Yaakov said, 'I am compared to the sheep. As it states, **'Israel is the sheep...'** Therefore, I do not want to be the sheep that redeems the donkey.' As it states in the Torah, **'the donkey shall be redeemed by the sheep.'** Therefore, please do not bury me in Egypt." Rabbeinu Taam explains the Midrash to mean, that

Yaakov did not want to be buried in Egypt because it would save the Egyptians from the Ten Plagues. If Yaakov were to be buried in Egypt, his merit would prevent the ten plagues from coming upon Egypt in the future. Why was Yaakov concerned whether the ten plagues would come upon Egypt or not?

The Torah states at the beginning of the Portion of Beshalach, **"And it was when Pharaoh sent out the people (after the ten plagues)..."** The Midrash states, "G'd said, 'Woe that he (Pharaoh) sent the Jewish people out of Egypt only after ten plagues. Had they remained there longer, I would have brought more plagues upon Egypt.'" G'd is bemoaning the fact that He could no longer bring more plagues upon Egypt. Bais HaLevy asks, "If G'd's Mercy is upon all of His creations, why would He want the Egyptians to suffer to a greater degree with more plagues?" He explains, that the Jewish people, as a result of the bondage in Egypt became pagans. However, when they had witnessed the Hand of G'd through the plagues, which were revealed miracles, they were gradually purged from their pagan beliefs. Each plague that they had witnessed brought about another level of clarity and purging. However, since it was essential and critical that they leave Egypt at the moment that they had, there remained a trace of idolatry within them. It was due to the urgency of their departure that they were not fully purged. Bais HaLevy explains that the vulnerability to the sin of the Golden Calf was due to this trace of idolatry. Had the Jewish people been able to remain in Egypt slightly longer and be exposed to additional plagues, they would have been fully purged of the impurity of paganism.

Yaakov understood that if the ten plagues would not come upon Egypt because of being buried there, the Jewish people would not have the opportunity to extricate themselves from their idolatrous state, thus retaining the false beliefs of paganism and impurity of Egypt. They would thus not be qualified to stand at Sinai to receive the Torah. If this were to happen, the objective of Creation, which is the receiving and fulfillment of the Torah, would not occur. It was thus an imperative for him not to be buried in Egypt under any circumstance so that the Jewish people would be qualified to become G'd's Chosen.

Yaakov lived his entire life for the sake of fathering a family that would be the foundation of the Jewish people with a capacity to be taken as G'd's people. Rav Aaron Kotler z'tl explains that the reason Yaakov did not start a family until he was eighty-four years old, was because he understood that he was not yet qualified to father the tribes until he fully purged himself from all impurity and deficiency. Yaakov underwent many levels

of purging through Torah study and the difficult challenges that were presented to him. Succeeding in his qualification as the Patriarch, he chose to begin to have a family. Since this was his perspective of life and existence, he would not allow himself under any circumstance to be buried in Egypt, because it would impede and undermine the objective of existence.

5. *One's Relevance to Eternity*

The Torah tells us that before Yaakov passed away he blessed his children, in a manner that secured the potential of each of the tribes. The Torah states regarding the blessing Yaakov had given his children, **“Zevulon shall settle by seashores. He shall be at the ship’s harbor...Yissachar is a strong-boned donkey...”** Zevulon was meant to be the sea merchant who would travel and conduct trade, while Yissachar was meant to be totally dedicated to the study of Torah. It was through this blessing that Yaakov, our Patriarch, established a partnership between his sons Yissachar and Zevulon, in which Zevulon would assume all financial and material responsibility for the support of Yissachar who would be fully dedicated to the study of Torah. The Midrash tells us that the level of commitment that Zevulon had to Yissachar was to the degree that they “placed the food in the mouth of Yissachar.” Meaning, Zevulon provided in a manner that Yissachar was not distracted for even an instant to be concerned for his own material needs. Because of his degree of immersion in Torah study, which was without any distraction, Yissachar possessed a unique level of clarity and Torah knowledge.

The Gemara in Tractate Yomah tells us that if one sees one who is proficient in Torah to the degree that he is a decisor of Jewish Law, he is from the tribe of Levy or Yissachar. The Gemara asks, “If so, one could also be from the Tribe of Yehudah because he was a legislator of the law?” The Gemara answers that although Yehudah was a legislator, he did not possess the unique ability to determine the absolutely definitive Torah law. This ability was unique to Levy and Yissachar. Why was this so? It is because these two tribes were not involved in the material. Levy had no share in the Land because G’d was their portion and they were His officiants. Yissachar’s material needs were fully provided by Zevulon and thus was able to be continuously immersed in Torah.

Sforno asks, “If Yissachar was continuously immersed in Torah and achieved a unique dimension of Torah, why is Yaakov’s blessing to Zevulon mentioned before the blessing that was given to Yissachar? (One

would think that since the study of Torah is the ultimate pursuit that the blessing to Yissachar should have been mentioned first.) It is because one cannot be immersed in Torah study unless his material needs are addressed. As it states in the Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers, *‘im ein kemach, ein Torah* – if there is no flour there is no Torah.’ If one provides for his fellow’s material needs so that he should be able to engage in Torah study, as Zevulon had done for Yissachar, then the merit of that Torah study will accrue to both of them. Meaning, the one who had studied the Torah and the one who had enabled him to do so through his financial support, will both be fully accredited for the Torah that had been studied. This is the intent of the Torah establishing the obligation of tithing one’s produce to the Kohen (Priests) and the Levy. Since the Priests and Levites were the ones who were fully dedicated to the study of Torah, by providing them with their respective tithes, each Jew will have a share in the Torah that is studied by them. Similarly we find regarding the blessing that was given by Moshe to the Tribe of Levy, **‘Who are the ones who will teach and give direction to Yaakov? It is the Tribe of Levy.’** By establishing such a partnership between every Jew and the tribe that consists of Kohen and Levy, the Torah is providing each Jew with an opportunity to have a share in the world to come. As it states in the Mishna in Tractate Sanhedrin, ‘Every Jew has a share in the world to come.’”

The Gemara tells us at the end of Tractate Kesubos that if one does not engage in Torah study, he will not be resurrected at the end of time. This is because the Torah is the “dew of life (*tal chaim*).” The Gemara states, “If so then simple unlearned Jew (*aam haaretz*) will not merit a share in the world to come (to be resurrected).” The Gemara states that even the unlearned Jew who is not engaged in Torah, if he supports the study of Torah, he too will merit resurrection (share in the world to come).

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that there was a significant minority of “*aamei haaretz* – a sect of Jews who were not meticulous and sensitive to many areas of Jewish Law” who did not give the tithe to the Levy because they were not willing to part with a significant percentage of their produce. Since this tithe had not particular level of sanctity they justified withholding it. They however realized that the tithe of the Kohen could not be withheld because of its level of sanctity and liability if they should eat it. Thus, even the *aamei haaretz* had a share in the study of Torah. However, after the destruction of the Holy Temple there no longer is a context in which one has the opportunity to give tithes. (It is only the produce that is grown in the Land of Israel that must be tithed). How then is the unlearned Jew able to merit a

share in the world to come if the mechanism of tithes is no longer in place? It is only if one supports the study of Torah of others will the unlearned Jew merit a share in the world to come.

Chofetz Chaim writes that just as one needs to eat every day in order to sustain himself, identically one must sustain his spirituality. Regardless if one had eaten sufficiently on one day, he must eat again another day in order to continue to survive. The body needs continuous sustenance to continue; however, the need to sustain the physical is only as long as the person is alive and therefore it is sufficient to have sustenance that has limitation. However in order for one's soul to come to the world to come, which is eternal, it must be given eternal sustenance. The spirituality that lies within Torah gives the Jew the ability to have relevance to eternity.