PARSHAS VAYIGASH

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May Shmuel’s soul soar even higher in Heaven in the merits of the Torah and Ma’asim Tovim performed by his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

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PARSHAS VAYIGASH

A crowd formed around Lazer as he bet another huge amount of money at the Roulette table. He was on a winning streak. It seemed as though nothing could stop him. After every successful toss, cheers could be heard coming from the throngs of people.

Lazer felt like he was sitting on top of the world. He was so proud of himself as he impressed all of the onlookers. Lazer enjoyed all of the attention and his chest puffed up with arrogance.

The strait faces of the casino managers confirmed their apprehensiveness. Some of them gathered around to make sure that Lazer was not cheating in any way.

Lazer just ignored them. As if protected by an invisible shield, Lazer kept on playing. This time he would make it big. Thoughts of early retirement were already filling his mind.

When the energy in the room reached its peak, Lazer placed his bet and put all of his money down on 36 red. The ball went around and around. Everybody held their breath. Security guards darted glances at each other.

Suddenly, the admirers let out an awful sigh. Lazer’s jaw was gaping. He couldn’t believe it. After flying high for so long, he swiftly crashed and lost everything. Lazer was dejected. The crowd dissipated. Lazer was left all alone. Only his thoughts remained with him.

Lazer reflected back to the time that he had spent in yeshiva. He could still hear his Rebbe’s voice teaching about the prohibition against gambling. More than that, he could still hear his Rebbe explaining that life is like a wheel of fortune. Once a person is at the top, he should not become haughty because the wheel might just start to turn downwards. However, if a person hit rock bottom, he should not despair because there is only one direction to go from there, and that is, up.

This is precisely the message that we find with respect to the wagons that Yosef sent to carry Ya’akov to Egypt. When Ya’akov’s sons told him that Yosef was still alive, and that he is a ruler over the land of Egypt, he could not believe them (Gn. 45:26).

Only after Ya’akov’s sons related the words that Yosef had spoken to them, and only after Ya’akov saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him, did Ya’akov belive them. Only then was Ya’akov’s spirit revived (Gn. 45:27).

What were the words that Yosef told his brothers to relate to Ya’akov? What was so special about Yosef’s wagons? Pharaoh also sent wagons (Gn. 46:5), but only the sight of Yosef’s wagons revived Ya’akov’s spirit, not Pharaoh’s.

The Shem Mishmuel (Rabbi Shmuel ben Avraham Bornstien, Sochotchover Rebbe, 1856-1920) shares a teaching with us which will serve as a tremendous source of encouragement for all Jews in any situation we find ourselves in.

He says that the Hebrew word for “wagon” is “agalah,” which is spelled ayin, gimmel, lamed, hey. The reason why a wagon is called an “agalah is because of its wheels which are round. The Hebrew word for “round” is “igul,” which is spelled ayin, yud, gimmel, vov, lamed.

Since the words “agalah” and “igul” share a common root (ayin, gimmel, lamed), a wagon is called an “agalah” on account of its “igul” (round) wheels.

Now, the wheels of a wagon go round and round. This teaches us an important lesson. Life is like a wheel. When a person reaches the height of success at the top of the wheel of life, it is likely that he will begin to descend. Therefore, he should never allow himself to become arrogant because he might just start to take a nose dive.

However, if a person finds himself at the lowest rung of society, at the bottom of the wheel, he will probably begin his ascent, for such is the nature of a wheel. Therefore, he should never despair because success is right around the corner. When you hit rock bottom, there is only one place to go, and that is, up.

Hashem set this “wheel of life” into motion in order to help us steer away from arrogance and in order to help us stay away from giving up hope.

This is what was special about Yosef’s “agalos” (wagons). They carried a secret message to Ya’akov about the wheel of life. Yosef knew that Ya’akov would be worried about moving to Egypt. Yosef’s message to Ya’akov was not to be frightened about this descent, geographically and spiritually, to Egypt, because this going down will lead to rising back up again even better than before. Eventually, the Jews would become a nation, receive the Torah, and enter into the Promised Land.

Yosef also knew that Ya’akov would be worried about Yosef’s spiritual welfare. Ya’akov would be wondering if Yosef became arrogant due to his position and all the power that it wielded. The wheels of Yosef’s wagons also addressed this concern.

Yosef conveyed to Ya’akov that although he ruled the mightiest empire of the time, he never let it go to his head because he always remembered that life is like a wheel. Every single day that Yosef served as viceroy, he thought to himself that this might be his last day in office. Yosef remembered that he had done time in prison. Yosef realized that nothing in life is guaranteed. Just as quickly as he ascended to greatness, he could fall right back down to the dungeon, or worse. Therefore, Yosef remained humble.

These were the words that Yosef told his brothers to relate to Ya’akov. Yosef instructed his brothers to explain the meaning behind his “agalos” and their wheels. They represented the wheel of life.

When Ya’akov saw the wagons, and heard the explanation behind them, his spirit was revived because his deepest concerns had been addressed. Ya’akov was comforted.

The Toldos Ya’akov Yosef (parshas Devarim) adds that when a person is as the height of his success, he can remain there, without having to follow the wheel on its way down. The condition necessary for him to remain at the top is to cultivate the quality of humility (Dt. 28:13).

Moreover, if a person has already fallen to the lowest rung of the social ladder, he will begin to ascend with the wheel of life but only on one condition. That is, he trusts only in Hashem. However, if he trusts in his own methods and connections, he will remain at the bottom (Psa. 13:2-3).

The mechanics behind this will be understood based on the answer to the following question. How do we determine where a person is? The Ba’al Shem Tov (cited in the Toldos, parshas Chayei Sarah) says that a person is not where his body is, but where his thoughts are. This is because the primary component of a person is his soul. The soul contains the power of thought. Therefore, when a person thinks about something, that is where his soul is. If his soul is there, then that is where he is, because the main aspect of man is his soul.

Therefore, even if a person finds himself at the height of success, if he thinks thoughts of humility, he can remain at the top. If he says to himself that according to the letter of the law, he deserves to be on the lowest rung of society, but it was only Hashem’s kindness that gifted him with his wealth, then his thoughts are on the lowest ebb of the wheel. Once his thoughts are at the bottom, then it is considered as if he really is at the bottom. For such a person, the wheel of life should start to go upward, bringing him success. Should you argue, “He is already successful!” Then the answer is, let him remain successful, and let his success increase (Shvilei Pinchas).

Actually, this message that Yosef sent to Ya’akov was taught to him by Ya’akov. Let us analyze Ya’akov’s history. Growing up in Yitzchak’s home, Ya’akov was on top of the world. He purchased the birthright from Eisav and received Yitzchak’s blessings.

Then, Eisav wanted to murder Ya’akov. Ya’akov fled for his life. Eisav sent his son Elifaz to chase after Ya’akov and murder him. After overtaking Ya’akov, Elifaz could not bring himself to harm Ya’akov because he had grown up on the knees of Yitzchak, whose righteousness rubbed of on him. Elifaz was in a pickle. He could not return to Eisav because when the latter finds out that the deed was not done, he’ll kill Elifaz. There was no point in lying to Eisav because he could see right through a trickster.

Seeing how torn Elifaz was, Ya’akov suggested that Elifaz take away all of his money. That will satisfy the death warrant because of a Talmudic teaching (Nedarim, chap. 9, “Rebbi Eliezer”, pg. 64b) which states that a poor person is likened to a dead man. Elifaz will be able to look Eisav in the eye and say with confidence, “Yes, I “killed” Ya’akov.” This is precisely what Elifaz did (Rashi, Gn. 29:11, citing the Sefer Hayashar).

From there, Ya’akov ran away to the academy of Shem and Ever. When he walked through the doors of the yeshiva, Ya’akov looked pathetic. He was disheveled and unkempt. He looked so downhearted. He also did not have a penny to his name. How will he be able to afford the tuition?

Shem and Ever accepted him into the yeshiva anyway. Ya’akov had a pretty good reputation. They gave him a scholarship. They asked Ya’akov why he looked so dejected. Ya’akov told them the whole story of how he had been on top of the world and now he sank to the bottom. At that point, Shem and Ever taught Ya’akov one of the most crucial lessons that he would ever learn. They explained that life is like a wheel. There are ups and there are downs. When you are up, never feel arrogant because things could start getting worse. Similarly, when you are down, never lose hope in Hashem because you will climb back up the ladder of success.

Ya’akov absorbed this lesson. When Ya’akov went to Lavan’s home, he began to feel sorry for himself again. Ya’akov began comparing himself with Eliezer, the servant of Avraham. When Eliezer came to this very place to bring Rivka to be Yitzchak’s bride, he had ten camels. Ya’akov, on the other hand, didn’t even have two nickels to rub together. Then, Ya’akov remembered the teaching he received in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever. Ya’akov stopped himself. Ya’akov said to himself, “What, am I going to lose hope in my Creator? No way!” (Bereishis Rabba, 68:2). Eventually, Ya’akov became extremely wealthy (Gn. 30:43). In spite of his wealth, Ya’akov remained humble. He felt small by all the kindness that Hashem bestowed upon him (Gn. 32:11). Therefore, he remained wealthy until the day he died.

When Yosef was born, Ya’akov taught him everything that he learned in the academy of Shem and Ever (Bereishis rabba, 84:8, Rebbi Nechemia; Gn. 37:3), including this teaching (Shvilei Pinchas).

Therefore, years later, when Ya’akov saw Yosef’s wagons, and heard the explanation that came along with them, he was revived because he understood that Yosef remembered his Torah learning and applied those teachings to his daily life.

One acid test to determine whether or not we have cultivated this lesson is with respect to the mitzvah of tzedakka (charity). If a wealthy person, at the top of financial success, thinks that his money is his because he earned it, and giving to the poor is painful because he must part with his hard-earned money, then he is filled with arrogance. Such a person will likely fall into poverty. If not himself, then his child or grandchild will be poor (Shabbos, chap. 23, “Shoel”, pg. 151b; Shvilei Pinchas).

However, if he understands that he does not deserve such wealth, but God simply made a deposit with him, allowing him to take what he needs for himself, but that he must allocate the rest to the poor, then, he remains humble. He recognizes that the surplus of money is not his own, but that it belongs to the poor. He is merely God’s banker. Such a person can maintain his wealthy status because in his mind he deserves to be poor. If that’s what he thinks, then he is where his thoughts are, at the bottom. The wheel of life will turn upwards for him. But he is already wealthy? OK, let him stay wealthy, and become even wealthier.

In conclusion, the Talmud (Ta’anis, chap. 4, “B’shlosha Perakim”, pg. 31a, Rebbi Elazar) says that in the future, in Gan Eden (paradise), God will have all the righteous sit in a circle. God will sit (so to speak) in the center of that circle. All the righteous will point to Hashem and say, “Behold, this is our God, we hoped to Him that He would save us, this is Hashem to Who we hoped, let us exult and be glad in his salvation” (Isa. 25:9).

According to this passage, a Mishnah will be clarified. The Mishna (Ta’anis, chap. 4, “B’shlosha Perakim”, pg. 26b) says that there were never happier days for the Jewish people like “Tu B’Av” (the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month, Av). Everybody grapples with the nature of the joy of Tu B’Av. What was it? Purim seems to be a much happier day.

The Apter Rebbe (Ohev Yisrael) suggests a novel approach to this Mishnah. He says that the word “Tu” means “fifteen (because it is spelled, tes, vov. A tes is numerically 9, and a vov is numerically 6. The sum total is 15). However, the word “B’Av” does not only mean the Hebrew month called Av. The word “B’Av” can also serve as an acronym which stands for “aleph beis.” Together “Tu B’Av” means the fifteenth letter of the aleph beis, which is the letter samech. The shape of a letter samech is a circle.

On a deeper level, the Mishnah is saying that the happiest Jewish day is “Tu B’Av”, meaning, the day in which we sit around God forming a circle like the shape of the fifteenth letter of the aleph beis, which is a samech.

What is so special about that day? To understand this, we must first learn another Talmudic passage.

Although the famous “Ashrei” prayer is composed according to the acrostic of the aleph beis, there is no sentence that begins with the letter nun. This is because the letter nun represents the “nefilah” (falling) of the Jewish people (Amo. 5:2). However, King David supported that nefilah in the next verse which says, Somech Hashem L’chal Hanoflim” (Hashem supports all the fallen ones; Psa. 145:14; Berachos, chap. 1, “M’eimasai”, pg. 4b, Rebbi Yochanan, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak).

Based on this Gemarah, the Bnei Yissaschar (Kislev – Teves, 4:2) says that the letter nun represents nefilah (falling) in exile, whereas the letter samech represents the semichah (support) of redemption. When the Jews fall in exile, God performs a “nes” (miracle) to rescue them. The reason why the Hebrew word for miracle is “nes” is because it is spelled with two letters, a nun and a samech. This means that although they have nun’ed (fallen), nevertheless, Hashem is somech (support), or shall I say samech them.

The reason why the Jews fall to begin with is because they behave like the letter nun. The shape of a letter nun is half a circle. They only see half of the picture. They only see their success. They attribute their accomplishments to themselves and fail to see the bigger picture, the full circle, that it is Hashem Who provides. They don’t see that at any moment the circle of life can turn against them, sending them plummeting to the bottom (Shvilei Pinchas).

The way to fix this situation is to behave more like the letter samech and see that whole circle. Attribute success to Hashem and never become arrogant because at any moment things might begin to turn downward. When a person does this teshuvah, moving away from nunness toward samechness, Hashem will perform a nes and rescue him (Shvilei Pinchas).

This is the great joy that will be experienced on the day that the righteous will sit around God in a circle like a round samech. They will see the whole picture. They will never lose hope in God, knowing that He can and will lift them up. They will never become arrogant because they realize their own vulnerability. They realize that everything is from Hashem. There can be no greater joy than the knowledge that Hashem loves us deeply and will always be there to take care of us and protect us (Shvilei Pinchas).

Perhaps we could implement a practice or two which will help further concretize this lesson within us. First of all, when we say the “Ashrei” prayer, let us concentrate on the verse, “Somech Hashem L’chol Hanoflim” (God supports all the fallen), and remember its message that life is like a samech, not a nun. As we say this verse, let us pray inside that God perform a nes to somech us from our nefilos (falling downs).

Secondly, once a day, give a little tzedakka and say, “I am not giving away my hard earned money, rather, I am merely God’s banker, and I am simply giving the poor what is rightfully theirs.”

So, may we all be blessed with an awareness of the circle of life, concentrating on our vulnerability and never come to arrogance. May we never lose hope, but constantly yearn for a better tomorrow, in order that Hashem provide a nes for us, and support us from the low places that we have fallen to, sending us Eliyahu Hanavi on an agalah, who will tell us that the time has come to sit around Hashem in a circle and celebrate the joy of knowing that He is taking care of us completely.

Good Shabbos, Warmest wishes, Aba Wagensberg