

D'var Torah for Parshat Vayigash and Chanukah

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Happy post Chanukah! This week's portion is Vayigash, and I'd to present an idea that is connected to both Vayigash and Chanukah.

Chapter 46 verse 29 describes the emotional reunion between Joseph, who had risen from slavery to be viceroy of Egypt, and his father, Jacob, after being apart for twenty one years.

"וַיֹּאסֶר יוֹסֵף מְרֻכָּבָתוֹ וַיַּעַל לְקִרְאֵת-יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גֹּשֶׁן וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְנָאָיו וַיִּבֶךְ עַל-צַוְנָאָרָיו עוֹד."

"And Joseph harnessed his chariot, and he went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen, and he appeared to him, and he fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck for a long time."

That Joseph was the one to go to his father rather than the opposite makes sense. But when it comes to the kissing, why doesn't the Torah tell us that they kissed each other. Why does the Torah only tell us that Joseph kissed his father? Rashi answers:

אבל יעקב לא נפל על צווארי יוסף ולא נשקו, ואמרו רבותינו שהיה קורא את שמע:

"Jacob, however, neither fell on Joseph's neck nor kissed him. Our Sages said that he was reciting the Shema".

Rashi answers our question by bringing an answer from the Talmudic rabbis. They say that Jacob did not kiss Joseph because he was busy saying Shema. But that just changes the question. Why was Jacob saying Shema then? Why didn't he say Shema before he met Joseph or after? Even more puzzling is that Shema wasn't invented yet!!! The words of the Shema are found in the book of D'varim or Deuteronomy, and were said by Moses to the Jewish people right before he died. Even according to the Talmudic view that they were originally Jacob's words Moses was quoting, that opinion also maintains that Jacob first addressed them to his sons from his deathbed. So, how could he be saying them years before his death instead of kissing Joseph?

Many commentaries explain that by the term "saying Shema", the rabbis mean Jacob was concentrating on the first theme contained in the "Shema" which is the Mitzvah to love G-d. Jacob wanted to use the first minutes of his reunion with Joseph to concentrate on loving G-d. He would be feeling intense love for Joseph during the time, so it would be the best opportunity to experience gratitude to and love for G-d who made it all possible.

How does this relate to Chanukah? There is a famous question concerning Chanukah being an eight day holiday. Since there was enough oil to last one day, the miracle was only that it lasted the other seven days. If Chanukah was established to express gratitude to G-d for the miracle of the lights, it should be just a seven day holiday. There are many answers to this question. As a matter of fact, a book was written with one hundred possible solutions. One of my favorite answers is that the eighth day is to thank G-d for the so called "normal" miracle that we can make a fire. He gives us a world of uncountable wonders. New wonders are being discovered every day. On Chanukah, when we are inspired by the unusual miracle of the oil being lit far longer than usual, we pause to also be inspired by the fact that oil burns at all. That is what the extra eighth day of Chanukah is for; thanking G-d for the regular miracles that we call "nature".