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No 57
VAYEISHEV
20 KISLEV 5765
DEC.4.2004

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Responsible of publication Hanania Soussan

TORAH AND LOVE OF OTHERS, REPARATION OF THE EGYPTIAN EXIL

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "And Jacob dwelt [וישב] in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan" (Genesis 37:1). The Midrash explains: "Jacob expected to live a tranquil life, but he was prevented from doing so when the tragedy of Joseph's disappearance took hold of him. The promise of the world to come is therefore not enough for the righteous, as they still aspire to a tranquil life in this world!"

One must understand the sense of the expression וישב (lit. "and he sat"). Why does the Torah not use the word "live"? It is because the intention of the verse is precisely to indicate the seated position, in the same way that the yeshiva is the place where Torah is studied. Jacob our Father desired to dedicate himself to the study of Torah and the service of G-d in all tranquility, yet the grief that seized him because of Joseph prevented him from doing so.

Sometimes the study of Torah can be done quite easily, but oftentimes study demands that a person overcome quite a bit of distress. This is what our Sages have said, namely: "Torah is acquired through suffering" (Berachot 5a). The pains that one must endure for acquiring Torah by means of its study are as trying as those endured by one who acquires Torah through suffering.

In order to annul the decree of exile for the Children of Israel, our Father Jacob desired to establish a permanent place for the study of Torah in the land of Canaan. This is because Torah study has the power to annul punishment, as the Sages say, "The Torah protects and saves us" (Sotah 21a). Why then was he struck with such tremendous grief? It was because G-d wanted to make him understand that Torah study is not an easy activity, to be performed with head rested in comfort and tranquility. Rather, Torah should be studied despite the torments of exile, and even if the pain and anguish that we endure are great, this does not mean that we should neglect the study of Torah.

It seems that the expression בארץ כנען ("in the land of Canaan") – the last letter of each word together forming the word נץ ("blossom") – signifies the idea that the time of the exile approaches and, as it were, "blossoms". As it is written, "The blossoms have appeared in the land" (Song

of Songs 2:12), which Rashi explains as meaning "the days of summer are near." In the same way, concerning our verse, the idea is that the time of exile approaches. At such a moment, it is not appropriate to rest on the pillars of Torah and piety. One must overcome suffering and study Torah in order to annul the rigors of exile. In fact, instead of being prolonged for 400 years (according to the decree given to Abraham), the exile of Egypt lasted but 210 years, precisely because Jacob did not enjoy tranquility in this world. For having overcome all his suffering, he managed to reduce the exile by 190 years and to diminish the severity of the decree.

If we look at this passage a little more closely, we will see that the exile was caused by behavior that was erroneous and apparently wicked. Studying Torah together, whether we learn or teach it, engenders love and feelings of fraternity for others, and it leads to friendship between individuals.

It is written, "And he [Joseph] was a lad with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives" (Genesis 37:2). The Torah expressly witnesses to the fact that Bilhah and Zilpah were Jacob's wives proper. Yet Joseph suspected his brothers, the sons of Leah, of scorning the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, as if they ignored the aforementioned fact. Rashi explains: "Joseph was spending his time with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah because his brothers scorned them and he himself wanted to reconcile them by conciliatory actions." Given that the Torah testifies that Bilhah and Zilpah were the wives of Jacob, it goes without saying that their children were not scorned by the other brothers, and the unfounded suspicions of Joseph caused a great wrong, finally leading to the exile into Egypt.

We can now understand the end of the verse that states, "and Joseph brought the evil report of them to their father" (v.2). What type of slander did this consist of? Our Sages have said, "When Joseph saw his brothers, the sons of Leah, behaving improperly, he reported the matter to his father, telling him that they ate meat torn from a living animal, that they scorned the children of the maidservants by treating them like slaves, and that they themselves behaved immorally" (Bereshith Rabba

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84:7). To understand Joseph, we need to realize that he passed his time with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the wives of his father, meaning to say that he became friendly with them, but not with the sons of Leah. This led Joseph to suspect them of disparaging the sons of the maidservants. Such suspicions concerning the fathers of the tribes of Israel were uncalled for. How could “the tribes of G-D, a testimony for Israel” (Psalms 122:4) disparage their brothers and treat them like slaves? Joseph was punished measure for measure, as he himself was sold as a slave, and in the final analysis this is what caused the exile of our ancestors in Egypt.

When Joseph was sold as a slave, Jacob refused to accept any consolation: “But he refused to be comforted and said, ‘For I will go down to the grave mourning for my son’ ”(Genesis 37:35). Why? Our Sages tell us, “Jacob knew that if none of his sons would die during his lifetime, it would be a sign for him that he would not see hell. However now, thinking that Joseph was dead, he believed that his marital relations were lacking in perfection and that he would have to suffer the torments of hell” (Tanhuma Vayigash 9). If all of his children were alive, it was a guarantee for Jacob that he would not see hell. However if but one of them was gone, it would mean that he had lacked perfection, something that Jacob especially dreaded.

We can now better understand that which was stated above, namely that Joseph frequented the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the wives of his father, which makes us think that he didn’t love his other brothers, the sons of Leah. This is the reason why Joseph slandered them to his father. In fact this is what the righteous Joseph, who did not spend time with his older brothers, implied by his accusations. If the brothers treated the sons of the maidservants as slaves, it follows that as slaves, they only have the right to marry maidservants, and it is forbidden for them to marry women from non-slave families. This is the meaning of Joseph’s accusation of immorality, whereas imputing them with acting scornfully with the sons of the maidservants and speaking slanderously of them is similar to “eating a limb torn from a living animal.”

Joseph should have been more wary. In light of his own greatness, he had no reason to limit his fraternal relationships to the sons of the maidservants and to incite his other brothers’ mistrust of him. On the contrary, he should have conducted himself with all his brothers in the same way. For not having done so, he was punished.

The Sages warn us: “A father should not favor one son more than the others. He should not spend more time with one of them to the detriment of the others, for it was the favoritism of Jacob for Joseph that led the brothers to jealousy, and which in the end brought them all to Egypt” (Bereshith Rabba 84:8). Joseph himself, in showing a preference for the sons of the maidservants, simply imitated his father, and this caused the exile into Egypt.

Let us now return to our first concept. Joseph’s accusations caused the bitter exile, however the study of Torah in difficult conditions is a remedy that can correct the three sins that he accused them of: Eating meat torn

from a live animal, slander of others, and immorality. Let us see how this is so.

The Sages tell us, “The Torah is called Life” (Avoth d’Rabbi Nathan 34:10), and also, “The Torah is an elixir of life for the entire body” (Eruvin 54a). This is to say that a life sanctified by Torah will rectify having eaten a limb torn from a living animal, since Torah is a remedy for the body.

The Sages say further: “The Torah is a tree of life; it is a remedy against slander” (Tanhuma Metzora 2), meaning to say that it rectifies the slander of others and gossip-mongering directed against those who have been enslaved to nothing other than Torah.

Furthermore, “The Torah and Israel are connected one to the other like an engaged couple” (Sifri Beracha 4). Thus the Torah rectifies immorality, in the sense of the statement, “The Torah is figuratively represented by the righteous woman” (Yebamot 63a), meaning that it protects and saves us from all improper conduct. All this goes hand in hand with the love of others, which indicates that the Torah – which is learned and taught by one to the next – can rectify the sufferings of exile and bring the time of redemption closer.

From the story of Joseph, who was punished for having attached himself to the sons of the maidservants and not to the sons of Leah, we learn of our duty to associate with every Jew, as it is written, “All Jews are connected in friendship one to another.” Above all, one must desire the good of each (Perkei Avoth 4:15) and look to achieve unity of all, to the point of being “like a single man with a single heart” (Mechilta Yitro 19:2). Conversely, since “from that which is said we understand that which is not said” (Bamidbar Rabba 9:47), a person who associates with some to the exclusion of others expresses a lack of love by doing so, and it is forbidden not to love another Jew, as it is written, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (Leviticus 19:17). This was demonstrated by Joseph’s conduct, for which he was punished.

It is for every Jew to bind himself in friendship to all other Jews, which will save us and bring about the Final Redemption, speedily in our days. Amen.

THE PATH OF THE JUST PRIDE – PART I

Pride is a type of currency that the Supreme King has declared null and condemned in the Torah: “Beware lest you forget the L-RD your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” In fact, the man of pride forgets his Creator, as it is written: “Your cattle and sheep increase, and you increase silver and gold for yourselves ... and you may say in your heart, ‘My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!’ Then you shall remember the L-RD your G-d, that it was He Who gave you strength to make wealth.” The king himself is also warned, “so that his heart not become haughty over his brothers.” If the Torah judged it necessary to make this recommendation to the king, how much more so is it essential for ordinary people, in order that they not lord it over one another!

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

From the Maggid of Dubno

It is written, “And it came to pass that at that time Judah went down from his brothers” (Genesis 38:1). On this verse the Midrash states, “‘Judah has betrayed, and an abomination has been done in Israel’ [Malachi 2:11]. Hashem said to Judah, ‘You have renounced, you have lied, “an abomination has been done in Israel.” Judah became profaned, “for Judah has defiled the holy [nation] of the L-RD, which He loved” [ibid.]’ ”

Here is a passage that is completely incomprehensible. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman also comments on this passage, stating the following: “ ‘For I know the thoughts that I am thinking of you – the word of the L-RD; thoughts of peace and not evil, to give you a future and a hope’ [Jeremiah 29:11]. What does this consist of? The sons of Jacob were busy selling Joseph, Joseph had fallen into mourning, Reuben was in mourning, and Jacob even more so. Judah was looking for a wife, and during this time Hashem was busy creating the light of Mashiach.”

What is this all about? The trials of Jacob, in all their detail, resulted from Hashem’s intervention in history. This is what the Midrash is explaining concerning the verse that states, “And he sent him from the valley of Hebron” (Genesis 37:14). It points out that Hebron is not found in a valley, but rather on a mountain. The idea being highlighted here is that the beginning of a profound undertaking is taking place, an undertaking revealed by Hashem to the one whom He loved and who is buried in Hebron, namely our Father Abraham. As it is written, “Your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own – and they will serve them, and they will oppress them – four hundred years” (Genesis 15:13). This exile constitutes the preparation and foundation for the future blossoming of the nation: “[Days] are coming when Jacob will take root; Israel will bud and blossom” (Isaiah 27:6). Yet Jacob himself did not understand, not more than his sons did, the ultimate goal of the events in his life, and each single episode tormented him, as Scripture attests.

This is what the Sages wanted to say in affirming that “Judah went down from his brothers” (Genesis 38:1), as it is written, “For I know the thoughts that I am thinking of you – the word of the L-RD; thoughts of peace and not evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Everything that occurred, down to the minutest detail, had as its goal the assuaging of good on a global scale.

One must still ask why Hashem, if He wanted to give Judah the honor of such a wonderful gift (the sprouting of the light of Mashiach from his offspring), didn’t use a more dignified process to achieve this goal. Was it necessary to put him in such a situation that he was obliged to say, “lest we become a laughingstock” (Genesis 38:23), not to mention, “she has conceived by harlotry” (v.24)?

Let us try to clarify the meaning of G-d’s choice by a parable.

A rich man married off his son, a boy who was wise and intelligent. Now where they lived, the custom was that on the day of the wedding the Rav bestowed honor on the bridegroom by calling his father “our master”. The Rav therefore sent him

a letter that referred to him as “our illustrious master,” with praise for the bridegroom and his bride to be, all written in admiring terms. The Rav had nevertheless made the mistake of writing this beautifully poetic letter on an old piece of paper that had been erased and scratched. When the father received the letter, he immediately noticed that it was all gray and stained, which bothered him to no end. He nevertheless read the contents of the letter so as not to offend the Rav, noting that it contained as many complements as the Rav could possibly send. The contents pleased him greatly, but not the container. He thought it best not to make a story out of it, since the essentials of the message were wonderful, yet he was tempted to send something similar to the sender. When the occasion arose to send a gift to the Rav, he took the best sweets and delicacies, as well as 20 pieces of silver, and put them in an old and dirty chest with a filthy cover. He then sent it to the Rav by the intermediary of a young troublemaker. When the latter brought the package to the Rav, he was extremely upset, but took it nevertheless. He noted that while it didn’t look good on the outside, it was filled with fine and precious things. A few days later the two men met, and the Rav asked the rich man what made him send a magnificent gift encased in scrap. He therefore brought to the Rav’s attention that he only paid him back for what he had done, since he had received a precious letter written on old and ruined paper, of bad quality and rubbed out on top of it!

It is true that Hashem could have brought Joseph down to Egypt in a completely different manner. However, since the brothers hated him and wanted to bring his dreams to nothing, He permitted them to be the cause of the exile. As for the advice that Judah gave to his brothers (to sell Joseph instead of killing him), although pleasing to G-d, it had the appearance of treason, especially when Judah came to his father and presented him with a tunic stained with a young goat’s blood: “We found this. Identify, if you please: Is it your son’s tunic or not?” (Genesis 37:32). So as not to leave any room for surprise that Hashem did not find another way in which to give Judah such a precious gift, the Sages also said, “G-d told Judah, ‘You deceived your father with a young goat, Tamar will deceive you with a young goat. You told your father, “Identify, if you please” [Genesis 37:32], Tamar will tell you, “Identify, if you please” [Genesis 38:25]. I am sending you the mirror image of your actions.’ ”

Let us now return to this marvelous Midrash: “Judah went down from his brothers” (Genesis 38:1), “Judah has betrayed, and an abomination has been done in Israel” (Malachi 2:11). This means that the advice to sell Joseph certainly fit into Hashem’s plans, but in the meantime it seemed very much like treachery. This is why the verse states, “an abomination has been done in Israel” – the holy and precious act of creating the light of Mashiach would also occur in shame. This is the imagery of the Midrash: “Since Judah betrayed, consequently an abomination has been done in Israel.” This is also the sense of what follows: Judah became profaned, “for Judah has defiled the holy [nation] of the L-RD, which He loved.” That which he did was holy and precious for Hashem, yet it still remains that it happened in a very profane manner.

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM

RABBI AVRAHAM GRODZINSKI OF SLABODKA

I remember a time when I was a young man studying at the great Telz yeshiva in Lithuania. Seated next to me was a young man older than myself who was studying with great diligence.

One day he told me, "I'm going to the Kneset Israel yeshiva in Slabodka during the next school year." Since I was surprised that he could leave the Telz yeshiva, he told me, "I'm not going to the Slabodka yeshiva. I'm going to listen to the Mussar lectures of the Gaon and Tzaddik Rabbi Avraham Grodzinski." I didn't understand him at the time, and moreover I couldn't understand what he was talking about, since I was still young. A few years later, I went to study at the Hebron yeshiva and there I met Rabbi Avraham face to face. He was visiting the yeshiva and giving courses in Mussar.

His appearance at the yeshiva made a great impression on everyone. He was an exceptional man of upright posture. His face was shining and there was a warm smile on his lips. His lecture progressed slowly, with his words being uttered with logic and a melody that attracted that heart, penetrating to the depths of the soul and touching the innermost being. I then began to understand what that person had said and why he had gone to Slabodka.

Rabbi Avraham Grodzinski was born in 5642 (1882), the son of the Tzaddik Rabbi Yitzchak Grodzinski of Warsaw. Known as "Reb Yitsche," his father was a recognized figure in Warsaw. His house was open to all those in difficulty, and scores of poor people ate at his table throughout the year. His entire life was devoted to teaching Torah and doing good. He also established a yeshiva in Warsaw, which he himself directed. The Chafetz Chaim, who went to see him whenever he was in Warsaw, once said, "Reb Yitsche saved Torah study in Warsaw during that era."

Rabbi Avraham first studied at his father's yeshiva, commonly called "Rav Yitsche's yeshiva." His father devoted much time to his son Avraham, teaching him Torah and kindness.

When he grew older, Rabbi Avraham studied for some time in the yeshivot of Lomza and Radin. He then left for the famous Slabodka yeshiva, arriving there at the age of 17. He immediately drew the attention of associates by his character traits and conduct. Rabbi Nathan Tzvi Finkel, the "Alter of Slabodka," right away noticed his exceptional gifts, showing him affection and allowing him into his inner circle. Little by little he became the right hand of the Alter, repeating his Rav's Mussar courses before the yeshiva students. The Alter said of him, "Here is the result of all my work."

In 5671 (1911), Rabbi Avraham married the daughter of the yeshiva's Mashgiach, the Tzaddik Rabbi Dov Tzvi Heller, a man known for his generosity and loved by the yeshiva students. After his wedding, Rabbi Avraham continued to study at the yeshiva.

During the First World War (1914-1918), the Slabodka yeshiva was forced to relocate to Kremenshov in the Ukraine. The yeshiva students suffered from poverty during those years, as well as from all the atrocities of war, famine, misery, and persecution. Rabbi Avraham showed himself to be a man of Mussar during that time, like a devoted father to his children. He encouraged and supported whoever called upon him for help. When an epidemic broke out, a frequent occurrence during those times, he organized assistance for the sick and first aid for the injured.

Through his immense wisdom, he saved many yeshiva students from numerous hardships.

The Alter, Rabbi Nathan Tzvi Finkel, kept all this in mind, making Rabbi Avraham a yeshiva director when the yeshiva returned from its exile at the end of the war. He thus began to give Mussar courses to groups of students, and when the Alter left for the Hebron yeshiva in Eretz Israel in 5687 (1927), the spiritual direction of the Slabodka yeshiva was entrusted to him, who continued in the Torah of his Rav.

Rabbi Avraham's home was always filled with people who came to see him requesting assistance or advice. He had a father-son relationship with his yeshiva students, and perhaps even more.

During the Shiva for his wife, who passed away while still young, one yeshiva student came to him and reported that he had been freed from serving in the Lithuanian military. Rabbi Avraham got up and embraced him with all his heart, and at that point no trace of mourning could be seen in him. One night as he stayed at his summer home in Otbotok near Warsaw, he was seen immersed in great joy. When asked the reason for this, he replied that on that day the marriage of one of his yeshiva students was taking place in Slobodka, and although he was not present, he could at least (and even should) rejoice in the joy of others, be it from afar.

Rabbi Avraham worked like this until the Second World War broke out, not losing hope even when the Germans came and built the Slabodka ghetto. He was always alert and lively, and his face continued to shine even during the most somber days. His home became a gathering place for rabbis and Torah scholars who came asking him for advice, and although he suffered great physical pain during that time, he never refused to help anyone who requested it. He once asked the Gaon Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, who found refuge in his home, to give a Torah lecture to those gathered there on the subject of martyrdom. The Gaon and Tzaddik agreed to the request, speaking on the subject in terms of Halachah and also providing a profound Mussar perspective on it. This left an impression that was etched in the minds of all those present, making them tremble at the same time as giving them courage.

The last days of the Slabodka ghetto approached. On July 8, 1944, the Germans interned the last Jews of Kovno in a concentration camp outside the city. They beat Rabbi Avraham to the point that he was brought to the ghetto hospital, after which it was learned that the Germans were going to burn the hospital down along with all its sick. To the last students who devotedly came to see him, he said that he had lovingly accepted Heaven's decision, but that despite everything his heart was suffering for the image of G-d that was defiled by the wicked. On Tammuz 22, 5704 (1944), the accursed Germans set fire to the hospital. Several hundred Jews, including sick children, were burned alive. Among them was Rabbi Avraham Grodzinski, the last pillar of Torah and Mussar from the Slabodka yeshiva, who was then 63 years.

After his death, Rabbi Avraham's lectures were published in a book entitled Torah Avraham. A yeshiva bearing his name was also built in Bnei Brak. May his soul cling to the light of life.