

THE PATRIARCH'S FINAL DAYS

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "The days approached for Israel to die" (Bereshith 47:29). The Rishonim and Acharonim have asked how Jacob knew that he was about to die. The Ramban explains this verse in the following way: "When the days approached for Israel to die, which was during the last year of his life, he summoned his son Joseph. The purport of this is that he felt exhaustion and undue weakness in himself, though he was not sick. Rather, he knew that he would not live much longer, and therefore he called his son Joseph. Now after Joseph returned to Egypt, [Jacob] became ill, whereupon Joseph was informed, and he came before him with his two sons so that he would bless them. In a similar sense is the verse, 'Now the days of David drew near, that he should die' [I Kings 2:1], and there it says: 'I am going the way of all the earth' [v.2]."

He was therefore aware of his condition, as Rabbeinu Bechaye writes. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider the view of the Ohr HaChaim, who offers an entirely different explanation: "Jacob felt certain things that are perceived before death. In fact our Sages have said that we lose our tzelem Elokim [Divine image] 30 days before death (Zohar I:217b). The story of Shimon bar Yochai, who saw that the face of Rabbi Itzchak no longer reflected the tzelem Elokim, is also told there. In general, this knowledge is not accessible to man, only to the tzaddikim who sense and perceive all things spiritual."

The Ohr HaChaim raises a difficulty in regards to the words of this verse: "The days approached." Is "approached" the correct term to use when speaking about days? He responds by saying, "We must understand this in light of the Arizal's concept, developed in his book Kehilat Yaakov." That is, souls are divided into several sparks that are distributed among different reincarnations. The number of sparks corresponds to the number of days in a person's life. For days in which he fulfills mitzvot, his spark corresponding to that day is rectified. Alternatively, the days in which a person does not fulfill mitzvot, his spark corresponding to that day remains defective. The Ohr HaChaim concludes by saying, "This passage will enlighten an intelligent man in his understanding of the texts."

Before the Celestial Court Each Night

Let us explain these words. Nighttime is when people go to sleep and rest from the work of the day. Nevertheless, only the body sleeps. The soul, which is a Divine spark, does not rest. It goes to give an accounting for all its deeds of that day. In fact in the morning we recite: "I give thanks to You, living and eternal King, that You have restored my soul to me," for in the morning, Hashem in His great compassion returns our soul to us. When it is before the Celestial Court, the deeds which a person did during that day are examined. If he is worthy – if he has put an effort into learning Torah, fulfilling mitzvot, and performing good deeds – then fortunate is he and fortunate is his lot, meaning that the spark corresponding to that day will ascend towards its source in Heaven. On the other hand, if he did not act as such, a day will be missing from his soul. Thus upon returning to this world, his soul will be unable to rectify what it could have rectified on that day, which will be lost. Hence our Sages instituted that if we have not completed our Torah learning for a given day, we should make an effort to complete it before going to bed, for on the following day we will have another session to complete.

Such was the level of our forefathers, who filled their days and took advantage of each of them by using their potential to the fullest. Hence in their regard, it is said that baim bayamim (literally, "they came with days"). They took full advantage of each and every day, as well as the spark belonging to it. They were all filled and rectified, according to their objective and their hidden meaning.

A Tanna once said: "Do not say, 'When I have free time, I will study,' for perhaps you will never have free time" (Pirkei Avoth 2:4). In fact if we intend to serve our Creator "when we have time," we are liable to lose that opportunity and never study, for that day will be lost and the following day will be dedicated to another mission. The spark of that day will be extinguished, giving way to the following day's spark, new and specific to that day.

Eternal Life in an Instant

We can therefore understand what our Sages affirmed in several places throughout the Talmud, as well as in the midrashim: "Where



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penitents stand, even perfect tzaddikim cannot stand.” This is also mentioned in the Gemara: “One can acquire eternal life in an instant” (Avodah Zarah 10b). In fact a person who does teshuvah can instantly “recapture” all the days that he missed. In one fell swoop, he can rectify all the sparks of days gone by, a concept that does not even exist for complete tzaddikim. The latter, who save little by little in order to earn much, rectify sparks and elevate them day after day, hour after hour.

In reflecting upon this further, we realize that this is precisely why the first generations lived much longer lives. Concerning this subject, the Ohr HaChaim wrote: “To the complaint of men, ‘What has G-d done to us?’ What a great change has occurred in our generations and the preceding ones! Adam lived 930 years, and his children and grandchildren lived 800 and 700 years. Yet in our days, we live a maximum of 100 years. The answer jumps out at us.” In the past, they were capable of rectifying and filling their days by achieving the potential contained in each of them. They were therefore given long lives. Yet because of the great decline of the generations, the wellsprings of strength have been exhausted. If we were to live such long lives, we would transform this advantage into a loss, for we would damage the days instead of improving them. G-d therefore reduced the length of our lives so we could fulfill the task that we have been given and rectify our days.

He himself explained this concept with a parable: “It is like a king who distributes beautiful stones to craftsmen so they can work them into jewels with which to make beautiful objects, such as royal treasures. The king announces that anyone who devotes himself to this task with zeal and effort, as he has decreed, will be rewarded with these beautiful stones as ornaments. He therefore gives each craftsman a large number of stones: To one he gives 300,000, to another he gives 350,000, and so on. He then sets an allotted time for each task, one day for each stone, and announces that they will be retrieved at a set date. Once that time elapsed, the king summoned all his craftsmen, and they gathered before him with the stones entrusted to them. However they had not worked or adorned these stones. On the contrary, they had become tarnished and deteriorated while in their possession, meaning that they were now ruined! The king became furious with all these craftsmen, and he replaced them with their own children. He showed them the punishment that their fathers had received, and warned them not to do the same. He then continued to reign, all while diminishing the workload of these craftsmen. For their own good, he gave them no more than 30,000 to 40,000 stones each, hoping that they would pay attention to their task, which was now considerably lighter. The same applies to Hashem, the King of Israel: He distributes these stones to us – namely souls, known as “precious stones” – and we have been given the tools of Torah and mitzvot. By explaining and fulfilling them as we should, by persistently doing good and distancing ourselves from evil (Zohar I:82), we will confer tremendous value upon our soul, which will shine with the light of the Torah and enable us to prepare a throne for it. This corresponds to the precious objects mentioned in the parable, and it too will acquire a royal crown. Hashem thus began by entrusting

a heavy task to the first generations by granting them lofty souls comprised of many parts. Each of them corresponded to a day of their life. For example, He gave Adam more than 300,000 parts [which actually corresponds to the number of days that he lived (930 years)], and more or less for all those who lived during the first generations. Yet when they began to grow corrupt, Hashem became angry with them and replaced them with Noah and his sons. From then on, He diminished the heavy load that He gave to them. In this way, their end would be closer and they would tremble at the thought of that moment. In seeing that people were not worthy enough, He further reduced the length of their lives. Thus because of our sins, today we live about 70 years, which is around 25,000 days. Nevertheless, many of our fellow Jews do not correctly understand the simple task that is incumbent upon us.”

At the end of this exposition, he writes: “The meaning of the verse, ‘The days approached for Israel to die’ now becomes clear to us. The sparks of his soul, which ascended each day, were approaching the Throne of Glory, as the verse states: ‘You send forth Your breath,’ this denoting the concept of death. Jacob sensed that the time for perfection had come, and he summoned his son Joseph.”

In fact, each day a certain spark from Jacob’s soul ascended to Heaven and was rectified there. It remained hidden beneath the Celestial Throne, where the likeness of Jacob is found. Hence at the end of his days, he experienced fatigue. He felt that his strength was leaving him, and that the sparks of his soul had achieved their mission and role on earth.

This is a profound lesson that must infuse us at the deepest of levels: Each day given to us by the Creator is a particular gift to us all. Each day is a precious stone, a true marvel. Now the year is made up of 365 days, meaning 365 dazzling and magnificent precious stones that we are obligated to cut, polish, clean, and make shine. Nevertheless, instead of doing this, we often take these precious stones, these diamonds, and use them for our own needs. We tarnish them by following our own useless pursuits, through slander, gossip, and all kinds of transgressions. It’s horrible what we do to them, for we are destroying a precious stone each day!

How can anyone not be afraid of this? Suppose that we see someone near a river, and in his hand he is carrying a bag filled with diamonds. If we catch him throwing a diamond into the river each day, we will consider him to be insane. Anyone with just a little compassion will go up to him and reprimand him, for he clearly doesn’t realize the great value of these diamonds. Nevertheless, we ourselves are standing here each day and throwing away the most precious gift that the Creator has given us – life itself (“In His goodness He renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation”). We are discarding it in a disgraceful manner, wasting it and tarnishing it. How is this possible? How can we do something like this?

A Good Sign

It is written, “Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years” (Bereshith 47:28).

The Holy One, blessed be He, had compassion on him and gave him 17 years of good old age.

For this reason it is said, “Whoever has a good year near his old age, it is a good sign for him. Whoever has a bad year near his old age, it is a bad sign for him.” Jacob lived 17 good years before his death, and the Holy One, blessed be He, considered it as if his entire life was good.

– Seder Eliyahu Rabba

The Blessing of the Tzaddik

It is written, “It came to pass after these things that someone told Joseph...” (Bereshith 48:1).

Who told him? Some say that it was Manasseh, while others say that it was Ephraim, who studied Torah with him.

Another explanation: Some say that it was Asnat, and that she said to him, “This is what I heard, that whoever receives a blessing from a tzaddik, it is as if he had received it from G-d. Therefore take your sons so that Jacob may bless them.” – Midrash Hagadol

Removing Some of His Illness

It is written, “Someone told Joseph, ‘Behold, your father is ill’” (Bereshith 48:1).

The term henay (“behold”) has a numerical value of 60. This hints to the fact that the mitzvah of visiting the sick consists of going to see a sick person with whom we have much in common, which will remove 1/60th of his illness. Here the Sages and commentators explain that Joseph had much in common with Jacob – so much so, in fact, that he removed 1/60th of his illness just by visiting him. Hence it was precisely Joseph who had to be informed of his father’s illness, for he had much in common with him and could remove 1/60th of his illness by visiting him.

The Prayer of the Tzaddik

It is written, “I have given you Shechem... which I took from the hand of the Emorite with my sword and with my bow” (Bereshith 48:22).

Did he actually take it with his own sword and bow?

Rather, this tells us that “my sword” refers to prayer, and “my bow” refers to supplication. – Mechilta

Another explanation: After Shimon and Levi killed the residents of Shechem, all the inhabitants of the surrounding region assembled to kill them. Jacob came and drew his sword and bow, along with all the tribal fathers. Naphtali placed Judah upon his shoulders, and they killed all their enemies. Afterwards Jacob asked his sons, “Who had a greater impact during this battle: Me or you?” They replied, “Father, you are old. What could you have done?”

He said to them, “Now I will show you who is stronger!”

Jacob led them to a gate and locked it. Everyone tried to push it open, but they were unable to. All of them immediately recognized that it was Jacob (by means of his prayers and supplications) who had won this battle for them, as it is written: “with my sword and with my bow.” – Midrash

Another explanation: Did Jacob possess a sword? It was Esav who possessed a sword, as it is written: “By your sword shall you live” (Bereshith 27:40)!

As for Jacob, it is written: “Jacob was a wholesome man, abiding in tents” (Bereshith 25:27).

When Esav realized that he was unsuccessful, he went to see his mother

Rebecca and said to her: “Take my sword, which I am leaving with you as collateral. When Jacob’s children sin, I will come to retrieve it, and I will kill them.”

What did the prophet Eliyahu do? He took this sword and brought to Jacob, telling him: “Take the sword of Esav!” – Midrash

In the Light of the Parsha

Why Man Comes into this World

In the Midrash our Sages say that when the righteous Joseph was about to leave this world, he summoned his sons and said to them: “I am leaving this world, and I am dividing all my money among you.” At that point, he took out seven selayim from his pocket and distributed them to his sons. In order to understand this, let us first examine what the Ramban says on Bereshith 47:14.

“Joseph gathered up all the money. Scripture relates this and goes on to complete the subject in this entire section in order to make known Joseph’s great wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, being a faithful man insofar as he brought all money into Pharaoh’s house and did not accumulate for himself treasures of money and secret hiding places for wealth in the land of Egypt, nor did he send it to the land of Canaan. Instead, he gave all money to the king who trusted him, and he purchased the land for him and even the bodies of the Egyptians. In doing so, he found grace even in the eyes of the people, for it is G-d Who causes those who fear Him to prosper.”

This is surprising: Why did Joseph take none of this wealth for himself or his children? Furthermore, why did he only bequeath seven selayim to his sons?

The Sages have taught, “At a time of a man’s passing from this world, neither silver nor gold nor precious stones nor pearls accompany him, but only Torah [learning] and good deeds, as it is stated: ‘When you walk, it shall guide you; when you lie down, it shall watch over you; and when you awake, it shall speak for you’ [Mishlei 6:22]. When you walk, it shall guide you – in this world. When you lie down, it shall watch over you – in the grave. And when you awake, it shall speak for you – in the World to Come” (Pirkei Avoth 6:9).

Joseph knew that man does not come into this world in order to enrich himself, but to study Torah and fulfill mitzvot. When he leaves this world, he takes with him none of the wealth that he worked for during his entire life. On the verse, “Nor does he [man] have power over the day of death” (Kohelet 8:8), our Sages have taught: “A man cannot say to the Angel of Death, ‘Wait for me until I make up my accounts, and then I will come’” (Kohelet Rabba 8:11).

This is why Joseph did not think it was good to amass any of this wealth, but instead he transferred it all to Pharaoh, to the royal treasury. Why? Because he wanted to demonstrate to his sons this great principle, namely that we must not work for the sake of money, but rather for mitzvot and good deeds, which we do bring with us into the World to Come. He wanted to infuse his children with the fundamental principle that neither silver, gold, nor precious stones accompany man when he dies, but only his Torah learning and good deeds.

We can now understand why Joseph bequeathed such a small amount of money to his sons. The seven selayim that he left them correspond to the seventy years of man’s life, and he chose selayim in order to hint that man’s fate is to be buried beneath a sela (stone), and that he takes with him nothing other than mitzvot and good deeds, which this stone cannot stop, as it is said regarding words of Torah: “Like a hammer that shatters stone” (Jeremiah 23:29). Even if we possess all the silver and gold in the world, they cannot pass beyond the “stone” that signifies death. Once we are dead, money returns to whom it rightfully belongs.

In a course given by the mashgiach Rabbi Dov Yaffe Shlita in the Kol Yaakov yeshiva in Jerusalem, he discussed the fact that a person must reflect upon and ask for mercy in his prayers for the entire Jewish people. As we read in the book Eved HaMelech, “We must pray from the depths of our heart for every Jew, asking for all Jews to be constantly deserving of the best, be it in the spiritual or material realms, through either regular prayers or personal prayers. The Sages have instituted the reading on Shabbat of Yekum Purkan [“May Deliverance Arise”] by praying for every Jew.”

What follows is a summary of his marvelous discourse: Noah was worthy of being rescued from the flood, and from him a new line of humanity was established. Although Noah was found worthy of this, and although he is described as a “righteous and perfect man” (Bereshith 6:9), he is reprimanded for having failed to implore G-d to have mercy on his generation. Hence the flood is described as “the waters of Noah.” In Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, the Sages teach that when Noah emerged from the Ark and saw the entire world destroyed, he wept and said: “Sovereign of the universe! You are called the Merciful One. Why did You not show mercy to Your creation?” Hashem replied, “Fool! It’s now that you weep? When I told you, ‘I will bring a flood upon the world, and you will be saved,’ you did not think of the world. You built an ark and were saved.” Rabbi Yehoshua asked Rabbi Elazar, “Rabbi, why did Noah not implore G-d to have mercy on his generation?” He replied, “He didn’t believe that even he would be rescued, and he thought: ‘I need to ask for mercy on myself!’ Yet at the same time, he should have asked for mercy on his generation, even if he didn’t believe that he possessed any special merit, for the Holy One, blessed be He, loves to hear good things being said of His children. From whom do we learn this? From Gideon the son of Joash, who possessed no special merit, neither him nor his generation, for he spoke favorably of them. He was told, ‘Go with this strength of yours and save Israel’ [Judges 6:14]. What strength did he possess? It was the good that he spoke of the Children of Israel, for it gave him great strength to save them.”

“One day, said the mashgiach Rabbi Dov Yaffe Shlita, “after I spoke about this subject, an outstanding avrech came to me and said, ‘Although prayer is written in the plural, I never thought of this, for I always thought of myself.’”

Praying for Those Who Stray

During his course, the mashgiach recounted the following story:

“An avrech confided in me that his son was weak in the performance of mitzvot. His wife thought that, despite their prayers and supplication, nothing seemed to change him. The man told her that without their prayers to the Sovereign of the universe, it was possible that their son would have abandoned everything.

“I asked him, ‘Do you also pray for other youngsters who are in a similar situation?’ When he told me that he did not, I said to him: ‘A person who has not experienced this trial and does not understand just how painful it is to have a son who does not act properly, he finds it difficult to pray for this when he should. Yet you know what it feels like, and you must pray for others from the bottom of your heart. If you only pray for your son, it’s possible that you will be reprimanded for not having prayed for others. Hence during the prayer for the sick,

we say “among the sick of Israel,” for in this way our prayer has a greater chance of being answered.’”

The Tears of a Mother

Oftentimes, educators are stunned to see how a certain student can develop a desire and yearning to study the holy Torah, seemingly without any particular reason. A student may suddenly become a matmid, learning with great diligence and succeeding in his studies, leaving all the other boys of his age far behind.

When asked about this mystery, the Chazon Ish replied: “Know that such a student benefits from many merits. It is possible that a boy who is not particularly gifted will exert tremendous effort in learning, and he will succeed because his mother or grandmother, or even the mother of his grandmother, possessed this merit. That is, at the time of candle-lighting, she prayed from the bottom of her heart and even shed warm tears for her descendants to learn Torah and attain a lofty level in the light of Torah. These tears from a mother or grandmother are what helps this youngster and enables him to become great in Torah.”

The Chazon Ish also composed a special prayer for a mother to say for her son, one that she may recite during Shema Koleinu of Shemoneh Esrei (see Iggerot Chazon Ish 74):

“May it be Your Will Hashem, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that You have mercy on my son [name], son of [mother’s name], and direct his heart to love and fear Your Name, and to be diligent in the study of Your holy Torah. May You remove from before him all circumstances that may deter him from the diligent study of Your holy Torah, and may You make ready all the conditions that will bring him closer to Your holy Torah.”

I Am Prayer

We must avail ourselves of every opportunity that presents itself in order to fulfill the goal for which it was given. If we soften our heart by pouring out bitter tears and praying to G-d, great spiritual progress will ensue, which is the reason for prayer. It is not only a mitzvah to recite words as they are written, for the essence of prayer is to affirm in man the realization that “there is nothing but Him.” Everything has been given by Hashem, and it is to Him that we must address all our demands, for everything depends on Him alone. When we address ourselves to Him with a pure heart, automatically our soul will be elevated and we will draw closer to Him.

We certainly have a clear obligation to make the Creator reign over us, but in reality we do not understand how to achieve this. The best time for this is during prayer, which is entirely filled with the knowledge of Hashem. If we use the time devoted for prayer in the right way, it will prove to be extremely useful.

– Ohr Yechezkel

Guard Your Tongue

Suspecting and Investigating

The prohibition against believing Lashon Harah applies even if the speaker says things in public, in the presence of several people. Nevertheless, it is forbidden to decide that what he is saying is the truth because of this. Listeners may only suspect what they hear and investigate it. If it proves to be true, they should reprimand the person in question.