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בס"ד

Parashat Vayhi Part I Genesis 47:28–48:22

1. Joseph's Vow

When Jacob sensed he was close to death he summoned Joseph and requested that when he died Joseph bury him in his ancestral tomb in Canaan (Gen. 47:29). As he considered this a matter of great importance, he wanted Joseph to take an oath that invoked the solemnity of the Covenant in a tangible manner. He asked him, as Abraham had done in adjuring his servant when sending him to find a wife for Isaac (24:2), שִׁים נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי, “place your hand, please, under my thigh.” Surely he realized his request was a major imposition on Joseph. It would require many days of traveling, special permission from the king and might create an impression of ungratefulness to Egypt in view of the favorable treatment Jacob and his family had been accorded.

But Jacob recognized the benefit that burying him in Canaan would have on his descendants' consciousness of their identity and on their sense of attachment to their own land and destiny. Joseph responded אֲנֹכִי אֶעֱשֶׂה כְּדַבְרֶךָ (“I will do in accordance with your words”), consenting to the basic request but apparently resisting the taking of an oath. Jacob then insisted on an oath and Joseph complied.

When Abraham asked his servant to place his hand under his master's thigh, he complied immediately, whereas Joseph apparently had preferred to commit himself without taking an oath. Rabbi Isaac (*Gen. Rab.* 96, Theodor-Albeck edition) addressed this contrast: “The servant did as is consistent with servitude, the freeman did as befits his autonomy.” Nehama Leibowitz explains it thus: “In the case of a servant, who is subjugated to the will of others, there is need to bind him...; a free man should be subjected only to his conscience and act from his own free will, doing what is right because it is right, in accordance

with his ongoing evaluation of the situation. The Malbim explained it similarly.... This reflects the disapproving attitude of the Torah and the Sages to vows, which bind with external bands, preferring that one offer his dedication from free will and not tie himself up with vows” (*Iyunim Besefer Beresheet*, translated from the Heb. p. 382).

Yaakov Elman (via private communication) commented on this matter as follows: The Midrash and the Leibowitz elaboration are too literal-minded. A slave need not be sworn since he is obliged to obey his master; a free man requires an oath. Abraham's servant was a servant or hired hand, not a slave, the administrator of Abraham's property. Joseph was a son and in any case obliged to bury his father. He would have been obliged to accede to his father's request, but since circumstances may have made it extremely difficult Jacob insisted on the oath.

In any event, Leibowitz points out that the Torah's narration of Joseph's request to Pharaoh and the latter's granting of permission seems to imply that Jacob was prescient in insisting on a vow. It appears to have played a role in Pharaoh's consenting to the request. When asked, his response was, “go bury your father as he had you swear” (50:6).

2. Adoption (Gen. 48)

At a subsequent time, an anonymous individual notifies Joseph that his father was ill. Joseph takes his two sons and goes to visit him. He (again, an anonymous individual) informs Jacob, “Behold, your son Joseph has come to you.” Jacob musters his strength and sits up to greet his son (48:1-2). The reader may wonder at the mention of these apparently trivial details in introducing this chapter, a sharp departure from the Torah's usual style of narration.

Joseph had made a point that he was settling his father near to him (45:10) and seventeen years had now passed; surely he had visited him many times. In the previous paragraph father and son had conversed without any preliminary textual ado. Why are we now told about an intermediary who invites the guest and announces the visit?

Some interpret the insertion of these unusual details near the end of Jacob's life as an indication that through the years Joseph had avoided being alone with his father; he did not want to provide him an opportunity to ask about what exactly had transpired that he ended up in Egypt. But surely that is not *peshat*. We will return to this question shortly.

On this occasion, Jacob intended to implement a momentous change in the family's internal structure: he would adopt Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, as his own. Thus, not only would he essentially be granting Joseph firstborn rights with the extra portion they entail, but he would be going a step further. By substituting Manasseh and Ephraim for Joseph, the two grandsons would henceforth be equated with Jacob's own sons in every way. (It is significant that by dividing Joseph into two tribes the nation is transformed from being constituted of twelve tribes to thirteen, which likely symbolizes an advance from the "old order." See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.)

Many unusual textual features of this chapter are explainable in the light of relevant adoption procedures that were usual in the ancient Near East. Jacob abided by contemporary custom, thus making the act legal beyond challenge.

In this light, the chapter's opening verses become clear. The summoning of Joseph and announcement of his arrival constitute notice that on this occasion Jacob had specifically sent for him and that he had prepared himself for the visit. These formalities signal to us, as they undoubtedly did at that time to all present, that the ceremony of adoption that was then performed did not result from a spontaneous, impulsive or private decision, and therefore perhaps of questionable status. It was performed in an "official" manner, with pre-planning and proper procedure.

Jacob began by relating to Joseph details of the prophecy he received at Luz on his return from Aram. G-d had then promised him, "a nation, [truly] an assembly of nations shall stem from you" (35:11) and confirmed that He would grant him and his descendants the land He had promised to Abraham and Isaac. (Jacob's language in our passage is slightly varied from G-d's words of the prophecy as is common in biblical quotations.) Since the forthcoming adoption involved the creation of a new tribe together with its allotment of land, it was appropriate that he first cite this prophecy to establish his right to what he was doing.

He declares that Joseph's two sons "born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you to Egypt are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be like Reuben and Simeon to me" (48:5). Although Joseph had no other sons, in accordance with adoption protocol Jacob had to be specific and identify his grandsons by name and affirm that he is making them equal to his own sons, citing his own first- and second-born sons by name. He further states וּמוֹלֵדְתָךְ אֲשֶׁר הוֹלֵדְתָּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם לְךָ יִהְיוּ ("the children that you begot after them are to remain yours" [v. 6]), that is, they are to be included in the inheritance of their brothers. Since Joseph had no other children, this statement also appears to be recited in accordance with a formulaic requirement. (It appears grammatically strained to translate וּמוֹלֵדְתָךְ אֲשֶׁר הוֹלֵדְתָּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם as directed to future children although there is a bit of ambiguity in the word הוֹלֵדְתָּ that suits the formula more precisely – "begot" or "beget.")

He then mentions Rachel's premature death on his return from Paddan and the necessity to bury her by the side of the road to Ephrath, that is, not in *me'arat hamakhpela*. We will discuss why he raised this topic at the point he did later in this study.

Next, Jacob – from this point through the end of the chapter conspicuously called Israel – "sees Joseph's sons" and asks, "Who are these?" Possibly, he asked because he could not see them well, in accordance with what we learn two verses later that his sight had severely diminished. But the text may be structured as it is, mentioning that he saw them and asked who they were, to fulfill another feature of the formulaic procedure. It may have been necessary for the father to himself declare their identity to indicate that there

was no mistake and that he consented to the adoption. The subsequent mention of Jacob's diminished sight introduced the actual need for Joseph to bring them right up to him.

After kissing and embracing his grandsons, Jacob apparently held them at his knees (v. 12), from which Joseph took them to present them for the blessing. (The text is ambiguous.) Having the children upon, or if impractical, at the knees, may be another adoption ritual. When Rachel suggested that Jacob take Bilhah as a concubine, so that "I may also be built through her" (30:3), referring to adoption, she also said that "she should give birth on my knees."

3. Blessing Manasseh and Ephraim

Jacob pronounces the blessings – a form of prayer – of his two grandsons with his hands placed upon their heads. Such physical contact helps the individual reciting the blessing concentrate more intensively and focus his attention on his purpose, thereby more fully summoning forth his inner spiritual resources, heightening the potency of his prayer. In addition, placing hands on the head symbolizes the action being undertaken; it represents the request that G-d should transmit unto the recipients emanations of spirituality and potential for success. It is G-d alone who fulfills or does not fulfill the blessing, but the more thoughtful, appropriate and sincere the prayer the more it can be hoped to be acceptable to Him and be efficacious. In this case the blessing recited accords with the prophetic vision then being granted Jacob, who perceives aspects of the future not accessible to ordinary individuals.

In his blessing, he first invokes G-d "before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac had walked" (i.e., had been thoroughly faithful). Citing the "merit of the fathers" adds an important dimension to his prayer. It connotes personal humility and gratitude to his worthy ancestors, identification with their goals and appreciation of their accomplishments. The concept of זְכוּת אֲבוֹת ("merit of the fathers") acknowledges that a man struggles in his lifetime in order to benefit his children and his children's children and that G-d honors that motivation. Accordingly, Jacob asks G-d to "bless the lads and [ensure] that my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac be called upon them [and their progeny]" (Gen. 48:16). This

means that the principles of spiritual achievements that the patriarchs stood for and promoted would be transmitted to his descendants and that they should be worthy representatives of their forefathers' heritage.

Praying for such intervention from G-d is not to be understood as contradicting the free will of the descendants but rather as requesting that He place the latter on a higher platform while assisting them with their ancestors' merit. That provides the possibility for greater achievement. He concludes this blessing with "they should multiply greatly in the midst of the land."

In his invocation he had also referred to G-d as, "Who has shepherded me from my birth until the present day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all trouble" (48:15-16). Looking back on his life he discerns his being the recipient of ongoing, caring divine providence. G-d had related to him as a shepherd tending his flock, assisting him throughout. G-d's angel (used interchangeably with the mention of G-d, as the angel has no independent existence and is only a manifestation of Him) had rescued him from all difficult situations. This insight surely heightened his gratitude and concentration.

Jacob had placed his right hand, that which symbolizes strength and ascendancy, upon the younger Ephraim and his left hand upon Manasseh. Joseph, probably thinking his father's poor eyesight was the cause of an error, objected that Manasseh was the firstborn but Jacob assured him that he was fully aware of what he was doing. Both boys were going to grow into a "people" but the younger was destined to become *melo hagoyim* ("[as] the fullness of nations"). Again, primogeniture is rejected. The annals of Israel bear out that eventually, and for a lengthy period of biblical history, the tribe of Ephraim was the greater of the two, being the leader of the Northern Kingdom.

It is important to note that, as taught time and again in Tanakh, blessings do not guarantee success (as curses do not guarantee condemnation); ultimately, it is the behavior of the recipient of the blessing that is the key determinant of divine favor or the lack of it.

Jacob's blessing of Joseph and his sons is summarized in Genesis 48:20: "By you shall Israel bless, saying, 'G-d should make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

Their success should be so manifest that the people of Israel will bless others by referring to them.

After Jacob expresses his certainty that G-d will one day return the Israelites to the land of their forefathers, in the final verse of this segment, he recapitulates the essence of what he has accomplished in the ceremony just concluded. A brief summary at the conclusion of a relatively long statement that contains a legal procedure conforms to the long-standing practice of providing a brief review of the essence at the end. (See our study on *Parasahat Behar Part I*.)

He tells Joseph that he has given him *שְׁכֶם עַל אֶחָיִךְ* (NJPS: “one portion more than to your brothers”) from that which he has taken from the Amorites (the present occupiers of the promised land) with his sword and his bow (v. 22). There is no record in Scripture of Jacob having appropriated land through military conquest or in any manner that may justify the locution “with my sword and my bow,” employed in a past tense statement. It appears that he is speaking in a prophetic mode; he envisions the future conquest of the land as already having occurred. The previous verse, “G-d will bring them to the land of their forefathers,” indicates that mode.

What does *shekhem aḥad* mean? *Targum Jonathan* renders *shekhem* as the city of Shechem, where Joseph was buried and which was part of Joseph’s sons’ inheritance (Josh. 24:32). According to him, Jacob told Joseph he gave him that city as an extra portion. To explain Jacob’s following statement, “which I have taken from the Amorite with my sword and my bow,” he resorts to an *aggadah*: After Jacob’s sons’ massacred the men of Shechem the local Amorites attacked the family and Jacob and his sons were militarily victorious. Others accept Jonathan’s interpretation of *shekhem* without the *aggadah*, considering Simeon and Levi’s exploits in Shechem as described in the Torah as here attributed to Jacob. But since he was critical of his sons’ deed, it is highly unlikely that he would glorify that action in any way. Moreover, to justify understanding *shekhem* as the city, Jonathan must introduce an expansion into the phrase *aḥad ‘al aḥekha* to account for the word “portion,” not a straightforward translation.

Onqelos, followed by most of the classical commentators, in what apparently is also the view of

many sages (see *b. B. Bat.* 123a, *Sifre* on Deut. 21:17) translates *shekhem* as “portion,” rendering *שְׁכֶם עַל אֶחָיִךְ* as “one portion more than your brothers.” This reads smoothly and fits well, but this translation of *shekhem* appears to be assumed from our context, as the root is not definitively known or clearly attested elsewhere as meaning “portion” but “shoulder.” NJPS, after translating it as “portion,” notes that the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain and that others translate “mountain slope.” The latter interpretation is based on the resemblance of a mountain slope to a shoulder, and would mean that Jacob bequeathed Joseph a mountainous range as an extra portion over his brothers.

In the single other biblical attestation of our phrase, the *shekhem eḥad* of Zephaniah 3:9, G-d declares that he will intervene to make major transformations in the peoples so that “they serve Him *שְׁכֶם אֶחָד*.” The translation “one portion” does not fit the context. The meaning might very well be “with one shoulder,” that is, “with united effort.” The KJV and old JPS translate “with one consent” while the NJPS translates “with one accord.” Basing himself on these latter translations of the Zephaniah phrase, Robert Alter maintains that our *shekhem aḥad* should not be understood as the object of “have given” but as an adverb describing the giving, indicating “concerted, unswerving intention and execution, and as such is perfectly appropriate to the legal pronouncement of legacy by Jacob in which it appears. Once the phrase is seen as adverbial, the relative clause, ‘what I took...,’ falls into place with grammatical preciseness as the object of the verb ‘have given.’”*

It is noteworthy that in this passage – from *petuḥah* to *petuḥah*, which comprises all of chapter 48 – Jacob is called Israel eight times and Manasseh and Ephraim are mentioned eight times each. This appears to signal a covenantal association to the adoption and blessings. It is also noteworthy that Manasseh is an anagram of the word for eight, *shemona* (m-n-sh-h – sh-m-n-h). By being placed second of Joseph’s sons he occupies the eighth slot in the official count of the tribes (following the six sons of Leah and Ephraim). Whatever it represents, in the Numbers 26 census we note that Ephraim had decreased by exactly eight thousand from the first census.**

4. מְתָה עָלַי רַחֵל (Gen. 48:7)

Why did Jacob raise the issue of Rachel's death and burial to Joseph while he was engaged in adoption procedures? A number of classical commentators assume that he brought it up to justify his not burying her in the family burial cave, an apology of sorts that he considered relevant since he had burdened Joseph with the responsibility to bury him there. But if so, why did he not mention it in the previous episode that dealt with his request regarding his own burial?

An answer might be that at the time of his request regarding his burial this matter would have been a diversion from his objective. The focus of that conversation was on the importance of recognizing that Egypt was not the promised land, no matter how good things were there. It was the time to highlight the symbolism of the ancestral burial place and point toward future national return to the homeland. In the present ceremony, on the other hand, there was an unspoken focus on Rachel. The adoption was for Joseph's sake, but it also served as a token of love for Rachel, out of consideration that Joseph was her firstborn. Hence, as the occasion was a remembrance of Rachel, it was a fitting time to bring up the subject of her burial.

In addition, as Jacob was now expressing his feelings for Rachel through a substantial act on behalf of her descendants, he could feel comfortable in explaining why he was unable to do something important for her at her death. He informs Joseph that she had *מָתָה עָלַי*, literally "died upon me," understood to connote "suddenly," and thus explains why he had to bury her then and there on the side of the road.

However, it is possible that mention of Rachel's early death was part of the adoption procedures. Jacob had to provide the necessary reason for the unusual adoption, as his grandchildren had a devoted father capable of providing for them. He explained that he was substituting grandchildren for the children Rachel lacked the opportunity to have because of her premature death.

The purpose of furnishing the details concerning her burial on the side of the road may also have been associated with the adoption, as a matter of prudent practice. It may have been intended to preclude a future challenge based on the fact that she was not buried in the ancestral tombs and hence not

considered equal to Leah (suggested by Dr. N. Roumi).

It has been conjectured that *מָתָה עָלַי* may be translated "she died because of me," apparently similar to two other Genesis usages of this phrase. G-d told Abimelech, *הַנָּךְ מֵת עַל הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְתָּ*, "you will die because of the woman you took" (Gen. 20:3), and Isaac told Abimelech, *פֶּן אָמּוּת עָלַיָּהּ*, "lest I die because of her" (26:9).

Accordingly, Gordon Tucker*** suggests that Jacob may have employed this term as a double entendre, serving as a catharsis of sorts. Jacob would be stating to Joseph, without the latter understanding the hidden meaning, that he deemed himself the cause of Rachel's death. When he told Laban that the one with whom his *terafim* (idols) might be found should "not live" (31:32) he placed a curse, unknowingly, on Rachel, who had stolen them. Although inadvertent, perhaps he considered it valid in accordance with the then accepted view. He may have discovered her guilt when his entourage was preparing to go to Bethel for a major spiritual experience; he asked everybody to remove any "alien gods" that were in their possession, which they handed to him for burial (35:2, 4). The subject following Bethel is Rachel's childbirth and death. Had a fearful Rachel not handed over the *terafim* and entered Bethel with them, she would have violated the sanctity of the holy place, and that would explain her early death. Jacob would have then discovered the *terafim* among her personal effects. Jacob's statement, "when I was returning from Paddan *מָתָה עָלַי רָחֵל*," links Rachel's death with Paddan, which they had left a number of years before her death. This seems to implicate the *terafim* episode that occurred in Paddan in her death.

However, this interpretation is problematic. First, Jacob may have never uttered a curse. In his eagerness to express what he believed to be the innocence of his family members and household, he may have impulsively told Laban that if a thief is discovered among his people he should be put to death. That would have been a more meaningful response to Laban, for in accordance with the beliefs of the times, he probably believed that in any event a curse would befall the thief of such idols. Jacob's response appears to have been similar to that of his sons when they were accused of stealing the viceroy's goblet, "with

whomever of your servants it be found shall die” (Gen. 44:9). When people feel certain of their innocence they speak with exaggeration and bravado.

Concerning the *terafim*, after hearing Jacob’s curse or decree on their possessor, is it likely that Rachel had maintained them in her possession where they might inadvertently be discovered? If Jacob believed he caused Rachel’s death, it is difficult to imagine waiting until close to death before attempting a catharsis and then in language only he understands.

The reason Jacob associates his returning from Paddan with Rachel’s death is because at the time he still was returning home to his father from his stay by Laban, regardless of the number of years that had elapsed.

Finally, concerning the meaning of the phrase *מֵתָה עָלַי*. The basic meaning of *עַל* is “on,” “upon,” “above,” “over,” and also “by” and “near.” It may mean

“because,” since “on” or “over” something, in many contexts, means “because” of it. It is only the context that gives *עַל* the meaning “because.” In the cases of *מָת עַל* and *פֶּן אָמוֹת עָלֶיָּהּ* cited earlier, the context does give “on” the meaning “because of.” In our *מֵתָה עָלַי* case, however, the context gives the word “on” following “died” the meaning of “died *on* me,” not “*because of* me”; thus, translating it as “because of me” appears to be inappropriate, even as a double entendre.

Endnotes

* Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* [W.W. Norton & Co., 2004], 281.

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

*** Gordon Tucker, “Jacob’s Terrible Burden,” *Bible Review* 10/3 (June 1994): 20–28.

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