

Parshas Vayechi

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SHMUZ #24— Understanding Life Settings

The Parsha opens up with the statement “Vayichi Yaakov b’eretz Mitzrayim shevah esreh shanah.” “And Yaakov lived in Mitzraim for seventeen years.” The Bal HaTurim explains that the Gematriah of Vayichi (lived) is seventeen. The Torah is telling us that Vaychi — the life of Yaakov was seventeen years. Up until that point, he had suffered so much that his years couldn’t rightfully be called a life. The sum total of the years that he spent without torment was the seventeen years that he lived in Mitzraim. That was his life.

With this, the Bal Haturim gives a very different perspective on the life of Yaakov — he had a rough existence. For the first sixty-three years of his life, he suffered at the hands of his twin brother Aysav. From the time that they were in the womb together, they were fighting about this world and the Next. That period ended when he ran for his life because his dear brother was plotting his murder. He then spent the next fourteen years hiding out as a fugitive in the Yeshiva of Shem VaEver.

When it was time to marry, he found himself in the house of Lavan, “the devious one.” For the next twenty years, Yaakov was an unwelcome intruder in a culture alien to his nature, eating at the very table of a father-in-law who attempted in any way possible to swindle and cheat him. That period came to an end when Lavan chased him down. Once again, he escaped as a fugitive. Immediately after that, he met up with Aysav, who had set out with 400 men to kill him. Barely escaping with his life, he settled in Eretz Yisroel, only to have the tragedy of the taking of Dina befall him. After this, his most beloved and precious son, Yosef, was stolen from him, and for the next twenty-two years he lived in a state of mourning, not sure if Yosef were alive or dead. Finally at the age of 130, he settled in Mitzraim, where he enjoyed seventeen years of peace.

The Bal Haturim is telling us that the Torah uses the expression, “Yaakov lived for seventeen years in Mitzraim,” to teach us this point. He suffered so acutely during the earlier part of his life that it wouldn’t be called living. This was the first time that he’d lived without affliction.

This concept becomes difficult to understand when we focus on who Yaakov Avinu was. Chazal tell us that Yaakov was the greatest of the Avos. He was born with a father and grandfather who were his Reibeim. From the time of his earliest youth, he spent his days in the tent of Torah, completely immersed in the sea of learning. Surely he didn’t need a difficult life. Surely he could enjoy this world and not become distracted by the glitz and the glitter. So why did he need to suffer?

The answer to this question can be understood with a Moshol.

THE GYM AND THE SPA MOSHOL | Picture a very exclusive health club with two separate sections. On the left is the spa, and on the right is the gym. The spa is where people relax. Whether sitting in the steam room, lying in the Jacuzzi, or lounging in the sauna, the mode of activity is to loosen up and enjoy. The gym is where people exercise. They push themselves, they strain, and they challenge their bodies.

Imagine that the first time you visit this health club, you decide to go right to the spa. By mistake, instead of turning left, you turn right

Gadolim Had It Easy

ספר בראשית פרק מז | (ח) ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים שבע עשרה שנה ויהי מי יעקב שני חייו שבע שנים וארבעים ומאת שנה:

בעל הטורים על בראשית פרק מז פסוק כח | ויחי יעקב בארץ. שלא היה ימים טובים בלא צער אלא כמנין ויחי. י”ז שנה משנולד יוסף עד שנמכר וי”ז שנה במצרים. ד”א ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים שבע עשרה שנה. שהראשונים לא היו חיים

and find yourself in the gym. You look around, and all you see are red-faced men lifting heavy loads, grunting, groaning, and sweating away. The first thought that comes to your mind is, “What kind of lousy spa is this? What is all of this straining? The red faces? The grunting and groaning? I thought people are supposed to be lying around, chilling out, enjoying?”

This is a very apt parable for life. When HASHEM made man, He created two worlds — this world and the World to Come. Each has its purpose.

This world is the place of growth. The World to Come is the place that we enjoy that which we accomplished.

We are put into this world so that we can go through all of the challenges of life: resisting temptations, choosing that which is right, and thereby shaping ourselves into who we will be for eternity. We were put into this world to grow. This world is the gym. The World to Come is the spa. It is the place where we enjoy the fruits of the work that we put in while in this world. It is the place of reward.

The reason that many people have difficulty understanding life is because they confuse this world for the World to Come. As a result, they have many, many questions. Why does man have to work so hard? Why are there so many challenges? Why is there suffering in the world?

Once a person clearly understands the purpose of life, so many of his questions naturally fall away. But until a person adopts an Olam Habbah approach to life, nothing makes sense — not work, not challenges, and surely not pain and suffering. However, once a person adopts a World to Come perspective, these questions fall away.

If you ask a person who regularly works out if he enjoys the training, the answer will be a resounding “Yes!” But it is work. It is focused and often difficult. To grow one must strain. No pain, no gain. On the whole, the activity may be enjoyable, but it often isn’t easy.

HASHEM created us to use this world for its intended purpose — to grow. Should life be fun? The answer is yes. But it is focused. It has a plan and a purpose.

GADOLIM DIDN’T HAVE IT EASY | We often take the attitude that Gadolim had it easy. Sure to be Avrohom Avinu, that would be a cinch. After all, HASHEM spoke directly to him. He knew where he was headed in life. For him, life was a walk in the park. But me, I suffer. I have it rough.

The reality is that every human suffers. That is a part of life. But it’s not by accident, and it’s not because HASHEM isn’t clever enough to figure out a way to create man without pain and suffering. Quite the opposite, these situations were hand-crafted as part of the challenges that man needs to grow. This life is the great laboratory of growth. When a person understands this perspective, life itself has meaning and significance. He will understand both the purpose of his existence and reason for his life settings. With this vantage point, he can truly enjoy his stay on the planet, knowing the meaning and depth behind everything that he lives through.

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