

Vayechi

When he meets Pharoah in last week's *parsha*

Vayigash, Jacob tells him:

יְמֵי שְׁנַי מְגוּרֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה מְעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יְמֵי שְׁנַי תַּיִי

“The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life...” (47:9)

This is a most revealing remark. Jacob describes the years of his life as “few and hard.” This admission gives us close insight into Jacob’s experience, and from what we, as readers, know Jacob’s account rings true. Perhaps the description of his years as

few doesn't. None of us has known a person to live one hundred and thirty years. But that Jacob's life is hard is, I believe, indisputable.

The book of Genesis devotes more verses to Jacob than it does to either Abraham or Isaac. Therefore, we really get to know Jacob quite well. We encounter him at birth, witness his marriages and the birth of his children, follow his travels, and see his death. Jacob is a fully developed character in our narrative. To understand why Jacob's account of his life as "hard" rings true, I'll review some of the most challenging experiences of his life.

- He is forced into exile because of a threat to his life
- He is tricked into marrying a woman he did not intend to marry
- He was exploited by his father-in-law for nearly twenty years.
- His daughter Dina was either raped or seduced by a Canaanite local
- Whichever was the case, that incident led his sons to massacre the residents of Shechem, an act that Jacob was deeply distressed by
- He was fooled by his sons into thinking that the son he loved the most, Joseph, was killed.
- Finally, he is forced to leave the land of Israel due to famine, and he dies in exile in Egypt

All these factors substantiate Jacob's

characterization before Pharaoh of his life as "hard."

When I consider Jacob's life, the issue that keeps coming to mind is suffering. Everyone in this room has experienced suffering. It is among the most universal of human experiences. Illness, the death of a loved one, ostracization, loneliness, persecution, severe anxiety and psychological distress are just several of the many forms in which suffering visits us. The Talmud in tractate Brachot has an extremely interesting discussion about suffering that I want to share with you. "Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: If one engages in Torah study, suffering stays away from him....Rava, and some say Rav Hisda, said: If a person sees that suffering has befallen him, he

should examine his actions. Generally, suffering comes about as punishment for one's transgressions, as it is stated: "We will search and examine our ways, and return to God" (Lamentations 3:40). If he examined his ways and found no transgression for which that suffering is appropriate, he may attribute his suffering to dereliction in the study of Torah. God punishes an individual for dereliction in the study of Torah in order to emphasize the gravity of the issue, as it is stated: "Happy is the man whom You punish, Lord, and teach out of Your law" (Psalms 94:12). This verse teaches us that his suffering will cause him to return to Your law.

Thus far, the discussion proceeds in an unsurprising direction. Rava says that suffering is how punishment is visited upon us. This accords well with the second paragraph of the Shema, which states that one who observes the *mitzvot* will be rewarded, and one who does not will be punished. Rather than quote the Keriat Shema, he quotes Lamentations to bolster that claim. Rava continues and states that perhaps suffering is not how punishment is executed. Neglect of Torah study, while not a transgression, can also be a basis for suffering. He supports this claim with a verse from

Psalms. At this juncture, the Talmud turns in a completely unforeseen direction.

“And if he did attribute his suffering to dereliction in the study of Torah, and did not find this to be so, he may be confident that these are afflictions of love, as it is stated: “For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes, as does a father the son in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:12). So too, Rava said that Rav Sehora said that Rav Huna said: Anyone in whom the Holy One, Blessed be He, delights, He oppresses him with suffering, as it is stated: “Yet in whom the Lord delights, He

oppresses him with disease; to see if his soul would offer itself in guilt, that he might see his children, lengthen his days, and that the desire of the Lord might prosper by his hand” (Isaiah 53:10). This verse illustrates that in whomever God delights, he afflicts with illness. Afflictions of love suffering that cleanses a person’s entire body. Additionally, it was taught in a baraita with regard to affliction: Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, all of which were given only by means of suffering, which purified Israel so that they may merit to receive

them. These gifts are: Torah, Eretz Yisrael, and the World-to-Come.

Astounding! Sufferings of love! This is an altogether original way to interpret suffering. Suffering, which is above all, painful beyond measure, is in fact an outcome of love.

I remember when I first encountered this teaching as a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. By that point, I was in my early thirties, and just as I could point to many happy moments in my life, I had also endured periods of intense

suffering. Somehow the notion that my suffering was an expression of love brought me relief.

I meet with a member of our congregation who is among the oldest people with whom I have interacted. Unsurprisingly, given his age, he is basically home-bound. When I visit him, he says to me, “God is punishing me.” I ask him what God is punishing him for? What has he done that has brought upon him punishment. He has no answer. I say to him, “I understand that you are suffering, but I don’t believe that you are being punished. In fact, you are clearly a blessed person because long life is the greatest of all the gifts that our tradition asks

God to bestow upon us. Your body aches because its aching is the only way to sustain you at your age.” I don’t believe I have persuaded him, and I haven’t tried to describe to him this passage about sufferings of love from the Talmud. Rather, I acknowledge that he is suffering.

That this man associates suffering with God’s punishment is not surprising. The standard view of religion is that this is what it teaches. While suffering and punishment may be correlated as they are in the second paragraph of Keriat Shema, other sources in our tradition speak differently. The great counterpoint to this view is the Book of Job. Job is a

prosperous man with *nachas*. Suddenly, all of his wealth vanishes and his children die. Lastly, he is afflicted with an insufferable disease that compels him to constantly scratch his body.

Job is visited by three friends. We will see what kind of friends they are. These friends are God-fearing men. They believe that God is just, and they reason in Job's presence that if God is just, and Job is suffering, then God must be punishing Job for his misbehavior because a just God would never wrongly punish someone. They encourage Job to admit his sin and repent. Remarkably, Job insists that he is innocent. He argues that his suffering is

uncaused. And while he doesn't blaspheme God, he asserts that he is unfairly afflicted. After several conversations between Job and his friends, God intercedes. He vindicates Job over his friends, but He also doesn't explain why He has allowed Job to suffer. He simply explains in a variety of ways that He is the Creator of the universe. He and His will are therefore unfathomable. To this Job listens and concedes God's greatness. His lamenting ceases.

What the book of Job does is it detaches punishment from suffering. No longer is suffering necessarily an indication of punishment. More than anything, suffering is not a test of the sufferer, it is a

test of those who surround him. Do they rightly comfort him, or do they berate him insisting that he must have done something wrong to deserve his fate. The sufferer provides God an opportunity to test those around him to see if they can respond to him with compassion rather than judgment. Will they flaunt their righteousness before the sufferer or acknowledge that we cannot truly know why a person suffers.

As Jacob reflects on his life, he acknowledges how prominent a role suffering has played in it. As I thought about him, I returned to the question that always troubles me when I consider Jacob. Did he

actually receive the birthright when it was sold to him by Esau? Did Isaac actually give him his inner blessing? If this is the life that is the outcome of the birthright and the inner blessing, then maybe he was better without them. The little we see of Esau suggests that he enjoyed a good life. The end of *parshat Vayishlah* concludes with forty three verses detailing Esau's progeny. That sounds like a blessed life to me.

I believe that Jacob himself has these thoughts. He must have wondered if the means by which he gained the birthright and the inner blessing negated

whatever good each of them contained. He must have asked himself why he suffered so much.

Nonetheless, we know that Jacob ultimately affirmed his life. He affirmed it in its totality. He affirmed the joys – which he certainly had as well – and he affirmed his sufferings. We know this because of the blessing he bestows upon Menasseh and Ephraim, Joseph's sons. When Joseph approaches his father for his blessing for his grandsons, he positions them so that the older, Menasseh, is to Jacob's right, and the younger, Ephraim, is to Jacob's left. Jacob, however, reverses his hands placing the right one on Ephraim's head

and the left one on Menasseh's head. Joseph protests, "Not so, Father...for the other is the first-born; place your right hand on his head" (48:18). In protesting, Joseph asserts the convention of antiquity that is continuously subverted in the Book of Genesis, by which the older son inherits from the father because he is older. Jacob replies to Joseph, "I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he..." (v. 19). Although he is talking about his grandsons, Jacob must have had his own life in mind, and his elevation of the younger over the older – thus highlighting merit

over convention – is the way by which he affirms his own life, Jacob, of course, was younger than his brother Esau. Perhaps, Jacob had learned to see his sufferings as the Talmud teaches, as signs of God's love. That Jacob is also called Israel is not incidental. Israel's sufferings, including our current sufferings, are sufferings of love.