

## Parshas Vayigash 5772

### TIMELY TOPICS

#### WHAT YA'AKOV REALLY SAW

Yosef's emotion-laden and dramatic saga finally reaches its zenith. Having been sold as a slave to Egypt years earlier by his brothers, Yosef's father (from whom Yosef's true fate had been hidden) had long mourned his "death." In reality, Yosef rose to great power in Egypt, and in this week's *parshah*, he is finally reunited with his beloved father Ya'akov.

At first, Ya'akov did not believe the claim that "Yosef is still alive." The verse tells us that he retained his denial until he saw the wagons sent to transport him to Egypt to meet his long-lost son. "And (when) he saw the wagons (עגלות) that Yosef sent to transport him, the spirit of Ya'akov was revived" (*Bereishis 45:27*).

What was so special about these wagons that they tipped the scale and convinced Ya'akov? Rashi explains that it was not the actual wagons that changed Ya'akov's mind; rather, the word עגלות alludes to another entity of the same root – namely, עגלה (calf). Yosef sent a message to his father, referring to the last topic the two had studied together before their fateful separation. It was the subject of עגלה ערופה (the broken-necked calf), the section of the Torah containing the ritual and procedure to be followed upon the discovery of a corpse (*Devarim 21:1-9*). (The Torah there mandates that when an unknown murder victim is discovered, the elders of the nearest city must bring a calf, break its neck and recite a particular passage.) It was the reminder of this study session that reinvigorated the grieving patriarch.

There is an aspect of this relatively familiar incident worth contemplating: namely, the choice of topic. Was it mere coincidence that the two were studying this particular topic immediately before the cataclysmic events were set in motion? In other words, could they just as well have been studying Maseches Beitzah in their final session (tractate dealing with an egg laid on Yom Tov and other Yom Tov-related *halachos*), in which case Yosef could have sent something like a fried omelet instead of wagons, as proof of his existence? Or, perhaps, was their a deeper significance to the fact that the subject matter was עגלה ערופה?

#### WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER

According to the Dubno Maggid (*Ohel Ya'akov, parshas Vayigash*), it is the latter – the selection of this topic was Divinely orchestrated, intended to convey to Yosef an essential message at this crucial juncture. (The Dubno Maggid there brings precedent for such a tactic. The Medrash [*Eichah Rabbah*] relates how two sages were once studying Megillas Eichah, and one of them injured his finger upon conclusion of their session. Reflecting back on the verse they had just been studying, they were able to ascertain therein the reason for the accident's occurrence.)

To better understand how the topic of עגלה ערופה relates to Yosef's personal set of circumstances, it is necessary to first contemplate some of the notions underlying the עגלה ערופה ritual. Specifically, the involvement of the nearest city is a curious point; why are *they* chosen to bring the "offering" in the situation of a corpse found under mysterious circumstances? Is there a suspicion that the elders of that city (who participate in the ceremony) had some-

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thing to do with the victim's demise? This assertion is rejected outright by the Mishnah in Sotah (9:6), which remarks rhetorically:

וכי על דעתנו עלתה, שזקני בית דין שופכי דמים הן!

“Could one reasonably entertain the possibility that the elders of the court are spillers of blood?!”

Furthermore, the Dubno Maggid adds, to assume that the murder occurred by the hands of anyone in the entire city is likewise a somewhat shaky prospect. The fact that the victim was found in the vicinity is no proof that the perpetrator was a local resident; he could just as well have been a foreigner who made a quick getaway. So why exactly does the Torah require this adjacent city to bring an offering of atonement in this instance?

It appears that the impetus for the offering is not directly for the act of murder, as for that, the citizens are not held

culpable. Rather, the Torah seeks to convey the significance of the location of the tragedy. Why did this unfortunate event happen to occur next to this city? Apparently, the inhabitants themselves were in need of atonement for their own personal misdeeds. This individual was selected to serve as their agent of atonement, a fact the city dwellers should derive by his tragic passing in their proximity.

The bottom line is that this person's location of death was Divinely orchestrated so this community would achieve much-needed atonement. Although this individual may not have been aware of the cosmic role he was playing, through Divine calculation, the members of community were the beneficiaries of his sacrifice and passing from this world.

Yosef's ordeal followed a similar pattern to the principle that forms the backdrop for the עגלה ערופה ritual, which made this topic a particularly appropriate one to study upon embarking on his long path. In fact, it was for this reason that Hashem arranged for Yosef to study this topic with his father immediately preceding his exile. As such, Hashem was providing a message of comfort to Yosef, reassuring him that his plight was not in vain. Rather, like the central figure of the עגלה ערופה section, his travails were calculated to improve the lot of the greater community.

In Yosef's instance, his transfer to Egypt set in motion a chain of events that served the benefit of Klal Yisrael for eternity. Ultimately, it brought the family of the Patriarch down to Egypt, setting the stage for the eventual Exodus. The entire ordeal was necessary, on a more esoteric level, to effect a certain purification process, which cleansed the nascent nation of spiritual impurities and readied them for the greatest benefit of all and the whole reason for their existence – the granting of the Torah.

And so for Yosef, the message of the עגלה ערופה was clear: He was the catalyst and benefactor for the greatest transformation his people could ever hope for.



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