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a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Reacting to Reunion

PARSHAS VAYIGASH 5776

Finally, after twenty-two years of separation, the seminal moment had arrived. After having learned the truth about his beloved, missing son – “Yosef is still alive, and behold, he rules over the entire land of Egypt” (*Bereishis 45:26*) – Ya’akov was to be reunited with him at last.

This week’s *parshah*, describes the emotional scene when father and son once again stood face to face: וַיֵּאָסֶר יוֹסֵף מְרַכְבֵּתוֹ וַיַּעַל לְקִרְאֵת־יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גֹּשֶׁן וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוְנָרְיוֹ וַיִּבְכֶּה עַל־צַוְנָרְיוֹ עוֹד – “And Yosef harnessed his chariot, and he went up to Goshen to greet Yisrael, his father; and he appeared to him and fell on his neck and cried further on his neck” (*ibid.* 46:29). A careful reading of the verse reveals something curious: It intimates that Yosef fell on his father’s neck and wept; when it comes to Ya’akov, however, no mention is made that he did the same.

Indeed, Rashi picks up on this anomaly. Citing the teaching of Chazal, he explains that such was, indeed, the case: Only Yosef cried on Ya’akov. While this was happening, Ya’akov was involved in something else entirely: he was reciting the *Shema*.

This revelation of Chazal sparks some robust discussion among the commentators, who note Ya’akov’s curious choice for reacting to this monumental meeting. It may be argued that Ya’akov’s conduct was driven by technical considerations: perhaps it was, after all, the time to say *Shema*. But if that was the case, wouldn’t Yosef also have to act accordingly? And if it was not the time for *Shema* – then why in fact was Ya’akov reciting it now instead of greeting the long-lost and beloved son he was seeing for the first time in decades?

Time for Both

The Steipler Gaon (*Birkas Peretz*) suggests an approach involving the obligation of *kibbud av va’eim* (honoring one’s father and mother). Earlier (*parshas Vayeitzei*), we addressed the question of priority in a conflict between *kibbud av va’eim* and Torah study. The Steipler here addresses the notion of *mitzvos* in general vs. honoring parents: What is one to do when simultaneously faced with two different prospects: either honoring one’s parents, or performing a mitzvah? (The incidence of a parent commanding one to violate a precept is a different matter altogether. The issue being considered here simply involves choosing between two mitzvah opportunities: A need for parental care arises, while at the same time, another mitzvah obligation presents itself. Which takes precedence?)

The operating principle regarding this issue, as emerges from the Gemara (*Kiddushin 32a*), is as follows: אָבָא אוֹמֵר הַשְּׂקִינִי מִיָּמִים, וּמִצְוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת... אִם אֶפְשֶׁר לְמַצְנָה לַעֲשׂוֹת ע”י אֲחֵרִים תִּיעָשֶׂה ע”י אֲחֵרִים, – “If one’s father requests of him to procure a drink of water, and at the same time there exists another pressing mitzvah need... if the other mitzvah can be handled by someone else, then he himself should attend to his father’s honor.” In other words, the Steipler deduces, the determining factor in “a mitzvah vs. *kibbud av va’eim*” conflict is feasibility: only if the two are mutually-exclusive (e.g., the time for fulfilling the other mitzvah will pass if he first involves himself in attending to his father), will the other mitzvah prevail. But if the mitzvah will not be lost, than he should first attend to *kibbud av va’eim*.

And this is what governed the actions of Ya'akov and Yosef. Indeed, it may be that the (earliest) time to recite *Shema* had arrived just at that moment, which accounts for Ya'akov's involvement in this mitzvah. But Yosef had two *mitzvos* to address: *Keriyas Shema* and honoring his father. Optimally, one should recite *Shema* as soon as possible (which is why Ya'akov did so), but the deadline extends for another few hours. Thus, since Yosef had the option to recite *Shema* afterward, he was obligated to first attend to properly greeting his father.

Expert Concentration

The above, as stated, assumes that the reunion took place as the time for *Keriyas Shema* arrived. Based on the words of the Maharal (*Gur Aryeh*), the Steipler outlines another approach. He demonstrates that the episode can be explained even if the time for *Shema* had not yet arrived.

The sticking point, of course, is to explain why Ya'akov was reciting the *Shema* just then if there was no obligation to do so. The Maharal asserts that, indeed, Ya'akov's recitation of the *Shema* at that time had nothing to do with the conventional, time-related mitzvah of reading the *Shema*. Rather, it was a statement of gratitude, for such is the manner of the righteous: when a great benefit is bestowed upon them from Heaven, they are filled with love for Hashem and immediately reciprocate with a renewed commitment to serve Him from intense love. This is the essence of the *Shema* passage, which contains a declaration of loyalty to Hashem, as well as the commandment to "love Hashem... with all your heart..." (*Devarim* 6:4,5).

In this regard, explains the Steipler, Ya'akov was in a league of his own. Reciting the *Shema* requires an investment of substantial *kavanah* (thought and concentration) – something the average person finds difficult to achieve when his mind is otherwise occupied. In fact, it is for this very reason that we find that a groom, on his wedding night, is (technically) exempt from reciting the *Shema*. As stated in the Mishnah (*Berachos* 3:5):

חָתָן פְּטוּר מִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע בַּלַּיְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד מוֹצָאֵי שְׁבֵת אִם לֹא עָשָׂה מֵעֶשֶׂה.

"A groom is exempt from reciting the *Shema* on the first night of his marriage until after Shabbos, so long as the marriage was not yet consummated."

Thus, Ya'akov's reaction to a potentially overwhelming situation was completely the opposite of the way the average person would have reacted. Others in a similar instance would be too preoccupied to recite the *Shema* with any level of proper concentration. But for Ya'akov it was different. In perhaps the most significant, life-changing moment he had experienced in decades – a moment for which he had pined with all his being – he was actually moved to declare the sentiments expressed in the *Shema* with *intensified* feeling and concentration.

Yosef, for his part, was similarly overwhelmed; no doubt, he would have also wanted to harness his feelings of exhilaration and gratitude in the same way – by declaring his loyalty and love for Hashem. But while such an act is certainly praiseworthy, it is not obligatory. And so he first had to attend to his responsibility of the moment – namely, properly greeting his father. Only after satisfying his parental obligations could he join his father in the voluntary *Shema* recital.