



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

Parshas Vayechi 5771 פרשת ויחי תשע"א

APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

This week's *parshah* describes in detail the funeral service and burial of the patriarch Ya'akov.

Only it's not so clear that he actually passed away. The Gemara in Ta'anis (5b) makes a most remarkable statement: יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ לֹא מָת – Our forefather Ya'akov never died.

The meaning of this statement, and the obvious issues it raises, are dealt with by a host of commentators. The Ri'az (*Shiltei Giborim, Avodah Zarah 6a [in the folios of the Riff]*) indicates that the intent is not in the literal sense; surely, Ya'akov was deceased, but his name and memory perpetuate. The idea is similar to that which the Gemara states (*Berachos 18*) about *tzaddikim* (righteous people) in general: even after death, they are referred to as "alive," as their legacy and the impact of their deeds live on.

Others take issue with this approach, however. The aforementioned Gemara in Berachos, speaking of the continuing legacy of the righteous, was referring to all *tzaddikim*; the Gemara in Ta'anis' statement concerning Ya'akov Avinu – that he did not die – seems to be unique to him, as only he was singled out in such a fashion. The implication seems to be that Ya'akov's experience differs to a significant degree from that of other *tzaddikim* (*Ohr Yahel, vol. 3, p. 81*).

Indeed, both Rashi and Tosafos (*Ta'anis, ibid.*) seem to understand the Gemara in a somewhat literal sense. Commenting on the fact that Ya'akov was embalmed, Rashi explains that the embalmers thought that Ya'akov had died, *but that was only how it appeared to them*; the reality was something else. (The Alshich [*parshas Vayechi*] explains that they did not perform the usual type of embalming, which would entail a removal of

the internal organs; in Ya'akov's instance, the body remained intact during their ministrations.) And Tosafos draws from a parallel and supportive teaching of Chazal (from *Sotah 13a*). There, the Gemara presents an elaboration of the events surrounding Ya'akov's "burial" in the Cave of Machpeilah, in which Esav attempted to interfere. That narrative culminates with Chushim the son of Dan striking Esav's head with a club, which knocked his eyes out. This triggered a response from Ya'akov – he laughed mirthfully, something normally difficult for a deceased person to manage.

The interpretations of the various classical commentaries run the gamut. The Ri Pinto (*Ein Ya'akov, Ta'anis, ibid.*) maintains that, physically speaking, Ya'akov drifted into a state of unconsciousness, but his soul did not depart his body. The Yalkut Re'uveni (*parshas Vayechi*) cites an opinion that his being took on a form resembling that of Adam Harishon prior to the sin of the forbidden fruit (i.e., before the onset of the decree of mortality).

Alternatively, Ya'akov transferred to a manner of existence similar to that of Eliyahu Hanavi, whereupon he appears to worthy individuals on occasion (*Yalkut Re'uveni, ibid.*). It is interesting to note that it is recorded of the Vilna Ga'on – who was known, due to his pristine spiritual nature, to have merited communications with the celestial spheres – that he was visited and taught by Ya'akov Avinu, in addition to Eliyahu Hanavi (*Haga'on Hachassid Mivilna*).

THE REAL REALITY

While this whole notion might appear somewhat challenging for us to digest, R' Leib Chasman (*Ohr Yahel, ibid.*), perceives a powerful and compelling lesson emerging from this fascinating Gemara in

לזכר ולעילוי נשמת
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Ta'anis (5b). A closer look at its full context reveals a very noteworthy aspect.

The statement about Ya'akov's demise (or lack thereof) was actually part of a greater dialogue between R' Yitzchak and R' Nachman, where some of the aforementioned points were addressed. R' Yitzchak is the one who claimed that Ya'akov did not die. This prompted R' Nachman to point out the obvious issue: didn't a eulogy and embalming take place? R' Yitzchak, maintaining his stance, cites the following verse: "Do not fear, My servant, Ya'akov... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring..." (Yirmiyahu 30:10). R' Yitzchak derives his statement from here by employing an exegetical device known as *hekesh* (linkage), which connects two disparate entities. The verse compares Ya'akov to his offspring: just as his offspring are still amongst the living, so, too, is their forefather.

Thus concludes the Gemara's discussion of the topic. R' Nachman raises no more objections; apparently, he

was satisfied with R' Yitzchak's response.

R' Leib urges us to consider this most extraordinary dialogue. Had we been there, would we have been so readily appeased by the response? Here we are presented with a *machlokes* (argument) between apparent reality and a *d'rashah* (Scriptural expositions based on Talmudic formulas). Logic and reasonable observation seem to dictate that Ya'akov passed away; the *hekesh* states that he eluded death. To which would we grant more inherent credence?

R' Nachman, however, was unfazed. He didn't feel like he was choosing between reality and the Rabbis' interpretative ability. Since his *emunas chachamim* (reliance on the Sages) was so developed, to him the *hekesh* was reality.

Indeed, this trait forms a cornerstone of our overall faith in Torah. The Steipler Ga'on (*Introduction to Chayei Olam*) understands the Mishnah in Avos (4:12) as reflective of this idea. The Mishnah delineates the extent to which we should esteem these wise leaders:

ומורא רבך כמורא שמים.

"One's awe for his *rebbe* should be equal to his awe of Heaven."

The Steipler explains that these two elements are intertwined. The greater the veneration of our *rebbeim*, our Sages, and the transmission process they safeguard – leading back to Sinai – the more firm will be our belief in Hashem and His Torah.

So, what is the bottom line about Ya'akov's ultimate fate? What is the nature of his existence and the real meaning behind R' Yitzchak's amazing statement? The definitive answer is definitely beyond the department of this particular writer. What is clear, though, is to where we should turn for answers and guidance, in this and all issues: to the words of our Sages.

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