



The Amazing Connection between the Promise “Yosef will place his hand over your eyes” and the Fact that Yaakov Recited Krias Shema when He Reunited with Yosef

In this week's parsha, parshas Vayigash, we read about the emotional reunion of Yaakov Avinu and Yosef HaTzaddik in Mitzrayim. They had been apart for twenty-two years, and Yaakov thought that his favorite son had been devoured by a wild animal. Here is how the Torah chronicles their reunion (Bereishis 46, 29): **“וַיֵּאסֹר יוֹסֵף מִרְכַּבְתּוֹ וַיַּעַל לִקְרַאת אָבִיו וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים וַיִּפֹּל עַל צַוְאָרָיו וַיִּבֶךְ עַל צַוְאָרָיו עוֹד.”** **Yosef harnessed his chariot and went up to meet Yisrael, his father, to Goshen; and he appeared to him, fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck excessively.** Rashi comments: **But Yaakov did not fall on Yosef's neck, nor did he kiss him. Our Rabbis said that it was because he was reciting Shema.** The commentaries try to make sense of Yaakov's behavior. Why did Yaakov Avinu see fit to recite Krias Shema at that precise moment? Couldn't he have recited Krias Shema either before embracing his long-lost son or afterwards?

Several of our esteemed, righteous scholars provide an explanation that is well-known throughout the Torah world. Among others, it appears in the Sefas Emes (Vayigash 5631) and the Maharal's Gur Aryeh. They write that Yaakov Avinu wished to elevate his intense love for Yosef exclusively to Hashem. Therefore, he recited Krias Shema with all of his heart.

Yosef Will Cover Yaakov's Eyes after He Passes Away

Since it is the nature of Torah to be elucidated from seventy different aspects, it is fitting that we present a novel approach to this subject. We will focus on the words of encouragement and moral support HKB”H offered Yaakov Avinu before his descent to Mitzrayim (ibid. 3): **“וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי: הֲאֵל אֱלֹקֵי אֲבִיךָ אֶל תִּירָא מִרְדֵּה מִצְרַיִם כִּי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימְךָ שָׁם, אֲנֹכִי אֲרַד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנֹכִי אֶעֱלֶךָ גַּם עִלָּה, וַיֹּסֵף יִשִׁית יָדוֹ עַל עֵינָיִךְ.”** **Do not be afraid of descending to Mitzrayim, for I shall establish you as a great nation there. I shall descend with you Mitzrayim, and I shall also surely bring you up; and Yosef will place his hand on your eyes.**

Here HKB”H promises Yaakov Avinu: (1) That his descendants will become a great nation, and (2) that HKB”H Himself would accompany him on this journey into galus and would also accompany him after his passing away to his burial in the Me'aras HaMachpeilah. What greater “chizuk” could one ask for?! As Rashi comments on the words **“and I shall also surely bring you up”:** **He (HKB”H) promised him (Yaakov) that he would be buried in the Land (of Yisrael).**

We find an incredible remark from Rabbi Chiya in the Zohar hakadosh (Shemos 5a) regarding this last promise:

“אי בני עלמא ידעין יקרא סגיאה דינעקב בשעתא דאמר ליה קודשא בריך הוא אנכי ארד עמך מצרימה, הווי מלחכי עפרא תלת פרסי קריב לקבריה.”

If human beings recognized the tremendous honor given to Yaakov when HKB”H told him that He would descend with him to Mitzrayim, they would lick the ground around his grave for three parsahs.

There is, however, a third promise contained in the pesukim cited above. HKB”H also promises Yaakov: **“And Yosef will place his hand on your eyes.”** What is the significance of this promise? Surprisingly, our esteemed teacher and commentary, Rashi, z”l, does offer any clarification. Nevertheless, we do find clarifications in the commentaries of the Ibn Ezra and the Chizkuni. It is customary for the living to close the eyes of the deceased shortly after they pass away. Here, HKB”H promises Yaakov that Yosef will be there when he passes away, and he will be instrumental in getting him out of Mitzrayim and transporting him to the designated burial cave.

The Zohar HaKadosh Learns from Here that a Son is Obligated to Cover His Father’s Eyes

The Zohar hakadosh (Vayechi 226a) learns from here that when a man passes away, his son is obligated to cover his eyes with dirt when he is buried. In this way a son honors his father by demonstrating that this world is now closed off to him, and his son is inheriting his place in the world.

It behooves us to present the comments of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh apropos this matter. He explains why this divine promise was so important and reassuring to Yaakov: (a) Yaakov mentioned Yosef’s death when he said (ibid. 37, 33): **“חיה רעה אכלתהו טרוף טורף יוסף”—an evil beast devoured him! Yosef has surely been torn to bits!** Yaakov also said (ibid. 35): **“כי ארד אל בני אבל שאולה”—for I will go down to the grave (hell) mourning over my son.** So, it is conceivable that Yaakov feared that his remarks exemplified the dictum (Koheles 10, 5): **“כשגגה שיוצא מלפני”—as if it was an error proceeding from the ruler,** i.e., a royal decree made in error. In other words, Yaakov feared that his erroneous utterances might have caused Yosef’s death. Therefore, HKB”H assured him: **“Yosef will place his hand on your eyes”—**that Yosef would not die

during his (Yaakov’s) lifetime. Furthermore, Yosef would be there to cover his eyes.

(b) HKB”H was informing Yaakov that he would not be permitted to leave Mitzrayim and go to Eretz Yisrael while he was still alive. Only after dying in Mitzrayim, would Yosef place his hand over his father’s eyes. This explains why do not find that Yaakov made any attempt to return to Eretz Yisrael while he was still alive; it is because he recalled HKB”H’s decree: **“ויוסף ישית ידו על עיניך”.**

Notwithstanding, we must still endeavor to explain why it is so important for a son to cover his father’s eyes. Clearly, it was important enough for HKB”H to reassure Yaakov Avinu that Yosef would perform this act for him. Thus, we find that HKB”H encouraged Yaakov not to fear going down to Mitzrayim by making him these three promises.

A Wonderful Chiddush from the Chasam Sofer concerning Krias Shema

Let us begin our journey by presenting a novel idea to our esteemed audience. We will explain why Yaakov chose to recite Krias Shema precisely at the moment that he reunited with Yosef based on a precious, enlightening teaching from the Chasam Sofer, zy”a, (Acharei Mot). He reveals to us a novel understanding concerning the mitzvah of Krias Shema. He focuses on the fact that our sacred sefarim emphasize that when a person utters the first passuk (Devarim 6, 4): **“שמע ישראל ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד”**, it is imperative that he has the following in mind: When uttering the word **“אחד”**, a person should be willing to sacrifice his life for the sanctity of Hashem.

Sources for this requirement are found in the Tikunei Zohar (Intro. 10b) and the Arizal’s Sha’ar HaKavanos. According to the Tikunei Zohar, a person who expresses his willingness to sacrifice his life with the utterance of **“echad”** truly loves HKB”H. The Arizal specifies that a person should be willing to sacrifice his life while articulating the **“dalet”** of **“echad.”** Furthermore, he should have in mind a willingness to accept upon himself the four (the gematria of **“dalet”**) forms of capital punishment (execution) decreed by Beis Din—deaths by stoning, burning, sword, and choking.

The Chasam Sofer wonders as to the purpose of having this intent and focus when uttering the first passuk of Krias Shema. Seemingly, it would be more appropriate to be willing to sacrifice one's life when uttering the passuk that follows (ibid. 5): "ואהבת את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך"—**you shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and all your soul.** In fact, they expound on this passuk in the Mishnah (Berachos 54a): "ובכל נפשך, אפילו הוא נוטל את נפשך"—**"and with all your soul" means even if He takes your life (soul).** So, why is it necessary to have this willingness in mind to sacrifice one's life already when uttering the declaration of accepting upon ourselves the yoke of the sovereignty of Heaven—"ohl malchus Shamayim"—the passuk of "שמע ישראל"?

To explain the matter, the Chasam Sofer refers to that which is written (Yeshayah 43, 12): "ואתם עדי נאום ה' ואני אל"—**you are my witnesses, the word of Hashem, and I am G-d.** He is relying on a comment by the Ba'al HaTurim (Devarim 6, 4): According to tradition, when inscribing the passuk of "Shema Yisrael" in a sefer Torah, the letter "ayin" of the word "שמע" and the letter "dalet" of "אחד" are to be enlarged. Together, they spell "עד", meaning "witness." This indicates that when reciting the Shema, a person becomes a witness attesting to the **Oneness** of Hashem.

Now, to be a qualified witness, one must be completely impartial. So, how are we able to testify twice a day with love to the oneness of Hashem? Clearly, we are not impartial; we are biased and have a vested interest in the matter. For this testimony, we are rewarded by HKB"H both in Olam HaZeh and in Olam HaBa. Hence, the Chasam Sofer concludes that this is only possible if we are ready and willing to sacrifice our lives in Olam HaZeh and to also forgo any reward accruing to us in Olam HaBa should it be necessary for us to sanctify the name of Heaven in this manner. Thus, we will be completely unbiased.

Without a doubt, the Chasam Sofer is teaching us an incredible chiddush. Ordinarily, we understand from our sacred sefarim that when reciting Krias Shema, a person must have in mind a willingness to sacrifice his life for the sake of "Kedushas Hashem." According to the Chasam Sofer, however, we must have something even more profound in

mind. We must be willing to sacrifice our lives both in Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa, forgoing any possible reward. Only in this manner are we qualified to attest to the oneness of Hashem without any hint of bias.

It seems to me that the Chasam Sofer is being consistent with his approach in Toras Moshe (Ki Sisa). There he presents the view of a particular "chassid" that "**mesirus nefesh**" implies also giving one's spiritual self and soul to Hashem—in other words, to be ready and willing to forfeit one's portion in Olam HaBa. For, if a person only sacrifices his physical self in Olam HaZeh, we cannot truly call it "**mesirus nefesh**" but rather "**mesirus guf.**" Here is a translation of his sacred insight:

In the "mussar" sefarim, it is brought down in the name of a particular chassid that if it was decreed from above that for a mitzvah we would be punished and for an aveirah we would be rewarded, I would still perform the mitzvah and not the aveirah out of love for Hashem—knowing that it is the will of my Maker to perform the mitzvah . . .

He explains there that this is the true meaning of "mesiras nefesh." If we merely sacrifice our lives for the honor of Hashem, we have not sacrificed our souls but only our bodies . . . but if we perform an act that causes the forfeiture of the soul, knowing that one's soul will descend to hell to be lost forever, and nevertheless one does not desist, because Hashem will be sanctified by this act, this is a true act of "mesiras nefesh."

"Now, I can die"—Sacrificing My Life with the Utterance of Krias Shema

It is with great joy that we can now begin to comprehend Yaakov Avinu's profound rationale for uttering Krias Shema upon reuniting with Yosef. Let us refer back to Rashi's comment on the passuk (Bereishis 37, 35): "**For I will go down to the grave (hell) mourning over my son.**" According to a Midrashic interpretation, this refers to Gehinnom. Yaakov said, "**This sign was transmitted to me from the mouth of the Almighty: If none of my sons die in my lifetime, I am assured that I will not see Gehinnom.**"

This is also apparent from what Yaakov remarks when he meets Yosef after their long separation (ibid. 46m 30): **“וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יוֹסֵף אֲמוֹתָהּ הַפַּעַם אַחֲרַי רָאוּתִי אֶת פְּנֵיךָ כִּי עוֹדֶיךָ חַי—** **Yisrael said to Yosef, “ I can die this time, after my having seen your face, because you are still alive.”** Rashi comments in the name of the Midrash: **I was under the impression that I would die two deaths—one in Olam HaZeh and one in Olam HaBa—since the Shechinah departed from me. And I used to say that HKB”H would hold me accountable for your death. Now that you are still alive, I will only die once.**

Thus, it is apparent that during the twenty-two years of Yosef’s absence—when Yaakov thought that Yosef had been devoured by a wild animal—he was unable to recite Krias Shema with the proper intent. He could not express his willingness to sacrifice his life in both worlds. For, due to his intense grief over the death of Yosef, he no longer had a life in Olam HaZeh to sacrifice. Additionally, he did not think that he deserved a life in Olam HaBa, because he felt that he was responsible for Yosef’s demise and, as a consequence, he was doomed to go to Gehinnom.

When he met up with Yosef after their prolonged separation, however, he was privileged to reclaim both worlds in a single instant. On the one hand, the joy of Olam HaZeh returned to him upon seeing that not only was his beloved son still alive, but he had remained righteous. On the other hand, he realized that he still possessed a place in Olam HaBa, seeing as Yosef did not die in his lifetime. Thus, Yaakov was now able to recite Krias Shema with the proper intent, with the ability to sacrifice his life in both worlds. Therefore, it was the optimal, opportune time for him to recite Krias Shema; so, he proceeded to do so immediately, something that he had been unable to do properly for twenty-two years.

This explains beautifully the juxtaposition of pesukim in the narrative: **“Yosef harnessed his chariot and went up to meet Yisrael, his father, to Goshen; and he appeared to him, fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck excessively.”** Rashi comments: **But Yaakov did not fall on Yosef’s neck, nor did he kiss him. Our Rabbis said that it was because**

he was reciting Shema. Clearly, Yaakov wanted to explain to Yosef why he chose to recite Krias Shema at that precise, emotional, momentous point in time.

So, the Torah informs us: **“Yisrael said to Yosef, ‘I can die this time.’”** Now, after not seeing you for twenty-two years, I can sacrifice myself mentally to die both in Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa with the utterance of Krias Shema. For, now, I see that you are still alive, and you are still a tzaddik. Hence, I still possess portions in Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa. With this newfound reality, I feel compelled to recite Krias Shema with the proper “kavanah,” which has escaped me for all these years. As such, I qualify to attest to the Oneness of the Almighty.

The Secret Meaning of Krias Shema

Following this fascinating line of reasoning, we will now proceed to elaborate on the words of encouragement—“chizuk”—HKB”H offered Yaakov Avinu: **“Do not be afraid of descending to Mitzrayim.”** Included in His words of “chizuk,” HKB”H informs Yaakov: **“And Yosef will place his hand on your eyes.”** According to the Shu”t (Responsa) Kol Aryeh, we learn from a Midrash Pliah: **וַיֹּסֵף יִשִׁית יָדוֹ עַל עֵינַיִךְ, דָּא רִזָּא דְקִרְיָאָת שְׂמֵי”** **—this is the secret of Krias Shema.**

To explain the matter, let us refer to the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 61, 5): **It is customary to place one’s hand over the face when reciting the first passuk, so as not to look at anything else that may prevent him from concentrating.** The Sha’arei Teshuvah adds (ibid. 3): **When the Shulchan Aruch writes “over their faces,” it means over the eyes. And this is also what the Pri Eitz Chaim (attributed to the Arizal) writes: A person should occlude his eyes with his right hand.**

I had a wonderful thought regarding the rationale for covering one’s eyes when uttering the first passuk of Krias Shema. As we know, HKB”H created man with two eyes—a right one and a left one. The Avodas Yisrael (Shoftim), citing the Tikunei Zohar, suggests an explanation. It is so that a person will see the greatness and awesomeness of the Creator with one eye and recognize his own lowliness with the other.

But let us propose a novel explanation based on a teaching in the Mishnah (Avos 4, 16): **רבי יעקב אומר, העולם הזה דומה לפרוזדור בפני העולם הבא, התקן עצמך בפרוזדור כדי שתיכנס לטרקלין.** **Rabbi Akiva says: Olam HaZeh resembles an antechamber to Olam HaBa. Prepare yourself in the antechamber, so that you will be able to enter the banquet hall.** Now, since Olam HaZeh is only the antechamber; this implies that man is only placed in Olam HaZeh in order to learn Torah and perform mitzvos, so that he can earn his way into the main hall, Olam HaBa.

Now, we can propose that this is why HKB”H created man with two eyes. One eye is to see Olam HaZeh for what it’s worth, and to do what is necessary to live, succeed, and prepare for the world to come—as it is written (Vayikra 18, 5): **”וחי בהם אני ה’”—and live by them; I am Hashem.** The second eye is to envision that which pertains to Olam HaBa. Thus, by combining these two visions at all times, a person will always remember that this world is merely a preparation and stepping-stone to the world to come.

Envisioning Olam HaBa in Olam HaZeh

This alludes very nicely to a teaching in the Gemara (Berachos 17a). We learn that Torah-scholars used to bless one another as follows: **”עולמך תראה בחייך ואחריתך לחיי העולם הבא—you will see your world in your life, and your end will be for the life of Olam HaBa.** Let us suggest that saying **”you will see your world in your life”** means that a person should always use both eyes simultaneously to see their magnificent synergy—how what we do in Olam HaZeh is a preparation and prerequisite for life in Olam HaBa. If we use both eyes in this manner, we will indeed merit **”and your end will be for the life of Olam HaBa.”**

We can find support for this idea from Shimshon. He prayed to HKB”H to give him the strength to topple the two pillars supporting the structure of the Pelishtim (Shoftim 16, 28): **”ויקרא שמשון אל ה’ ויאמר ה’ אלקים זכרני נא וחזקני נא אך—Shimshon called out to Hashem and said, “My Lord, Hashem! Remember me and strengthen me just this one time, O G-d, and I will exact vengeance from the Pelishtim for one of my two eyes.”**

Rashi explains that Shimshon pleaded that the merit of one of his eyes should suffice to exact vengeance against the Pelishtim, but the merit of his other eye should be reserved for his reward in Olam HaBa. Rashi’s source is a teaching in the Yerushalmi (Sotah 1, 8): **”אמר לפניו, רבונו של עולם, תן לי שכר עיני אחת בעולם הזה, ושכר עיני אחת מותקנת לי לעתיד לבוא.** This concurs magnificently with what we have just discussed. A person’s two eyes are for two distinct types of vision—one focusing on Olam HaZeh and one focusing on Olam HaBa.

We can now appreciate the significance of the established Jewish minhag to cover one’s eyes while reciting the first passuk of Krias Shema. As we know, this passuk is a testimony to the oneness of HKB”H in the universe. We learned from the Chasam Sofer that with this testimony every Jew must be ready and willing to sacrifice his life in both worlds for HKB”H. Hence, we cover both eyes when uttering this proclamation—alluding to the fact that we are forsaking all matters pertaining both to Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa represented by our two eyes.

At this point, we can begin to comprehend the Zohar’s interpretation of the passuk: **”Yosef will place his hand over your eyes.”** A son covers his father’s eyes with dirt to demonstrate that this world is closed off to the father, and his son is taking his place in the world. We can explain this as follows: The son is conveying to his father that by passing away and leaving this world, his two eyes have been shut. He can no longer see matters related to Olam HaZeh, and he does not need to envision Olam HaBa with his corporeal eye, because his neshamah itself will ascend to Olam HaBa.

Thus, by covering his father’s eyes, it is as if the son is saying to him: My dear father, while it is true that you are closing your two eyes and no longer need to envision matters pertaining to Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa; nevertheless, I want you to know that from now on, I will take your place and serve Hashem with this dual vision. With one eye, I will see what is important and required of me in Olam HaZeh. Simultaneously, with the other eye, I will keep in mind the life to come in Olam HaBa, knowing that everything I do in Olam HaZeh is merely a preparation

and prerequisite and antechamber to gain access to the true life in Olam HaBa.

With great joy, this illuminates for us the tremendous “chizuk” HKB”H offered Yaakov Avinu: **“Do not be afraid of descending to Mitzrayim, for I shall establish you as a great nation there.”** And should you say that you are worried that your children will be corrupted in Mitzrayim, the most immoral place on the planet, know full-well that **“I shall descend with you to Mitzrayim, and I shall also surely bring you up”**—to safeguard the kedushah of your children by making sure that they refrain from immorality.

Then, HKB”H reinforces these words of “chizuk” by pointing out that Yaakov’s beloved son, Yosef HaTzaddik, maintained his kedushah in Mitzrayim. Furthermore, **“Yosef will place his hand over your eyes.”** In other words, he will cover your two eyes when you pass away and leave this world, indicating that he is carrying on your

sacred work in this world—that he will always utilize both visions simultaneously, understanding the intimate relationship between Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa.

After all, we are taught in the Midrash (V.R. 32, 5): **Yosef descended to Egypt and safeguarded himself from immorality; in his merit, Yisrael also safeguarded themselves** from immorality. **Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said: The guarding against immorality alone was sufficient cause for Yisrael to be redeemed.** This confirms beyond a question of a doubt that Yosef was worthy of covering Yaakov’s eyes. For, he did indeed fill his father’s shoes employing both types of vision. As the Viceroy of Mitzrayim, he did not focus only on Olam HaZeh. On the contrary, he always kept in mind the significance and eventuality of Olam HaBa. He never forgot that everything we do in Olam HaZeh is merely a precursor akin to an antechamber to gain access to the main hall.



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