

Believe in Yourself

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

With Parshas Vayechi, the fascinating sefer of Bereishis draws to a close. Without giving any detail about anything that went on in Yaakov's life during his seventeen years in Mitzrayim, the Torah skips to the period when he was weakening and approaching death. Yaakov called for Yosef and made him swear that he would guarantee his burial in the Meoras Hamachpeilah with Avrohom and Yitzchok.

The pesukim go into detail about Yaakov's discussions with Yosef concerning Efraim and Menashe before telling us that Yaakov gathered his sons for them to hear what would happen to them in the times of Moshiach. The pesukim don't tell us what he told them, and Chazal teach that Hashem prevented him from revealing those secrets.

Yaakov then launches into a poetic conversation with his sons. The conversation is referred to by the posuk (49:28) as brachos that Yaakov transmitted to his beloved children prior to his passing. However, if you examine the pesukim and what he told them, they don't appear to be brachos, but rather a verbalization of each son's attributes, mostly positive, but some negative. If so, why do we refer to what he said as brachos?

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik was once trying to make a point to a student at the Volozhiner Yeshiva who was falling behind in his learning. He spoke to him and said, "You know, my dear talmid, that the horse is a very strong animal, constructed of muscle. It can work hard, run fast, pull heavy loads, and perform a variety of tasks. Yet, this animal is pulled by a youngster with a rope and never thinks of trampling the youngster and breaking free. When the horse's owner, who has ridden on its back for long stretches of time, reaches his destination, he ties his horse to a simple post with a simple rope, and the horse just stands there and doesn't try to run away.

"Why is it that such a strong beast is so docile?" asked Rav Chaim. "It is because the horse doesn't appreciate its strength. If it would, a piece of rope would never be able to contain it.

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"The reason you are not doing better in your learning is because you don't appreciate your kochos."

Similarly, Yaakov, upon addressing his children one last time, gave them what they needed to excel and carry out their missions. He did this not by blessing them per se, but by enumerating

for each one their strengths and abilities. By doing this, he gave them the encouragement and motivation they would need to be proper Shivtei Kah. Thus, they and their shevet would be able to live up to what was expected of them in Eretz Yisroel and in golus, building and strengthening Yiddishkeit and preparing the world for the ultimate geulah.

There is no better brocha than appreciating our gifts and using them for the tachlis for which Hashem placed us on this earth. Otherwise, we can go through life living simply, not learning or accomplishing much, blissfully unaware of our potential for greatness and ability to accomplish great things.

A person who doesn't appreciate his strengths, or is not aware of them, is held back from excelling and fulfilling his shlichus, much the same as that Volozhiner talmid who was not able to keep up with the others.

Also, the ability of a person to recognize his gifts and strengths is vital for personal growth, fulfillment, and contributing meaningfully to society. When a person acknowledges his abilities, he not only gains self-confidence, but also cultivates a deeper sense of purpose. This awareness enables us to navigate challenges, pursue goals, and contribute positively to the world around us.

Self-awareness is key to unlocking our potential. Moreover, recognizing our strengths builds self-confidence. Confidence is not about arrogance or superiority, but about a grounded belief in a person's singular abilities. Appreciating the gifts Hashem has endowed us with also helps us face challenges with a sense of assurance, knowing that Hashem provided us with the tools and skills to navigate difficult situations. Life is full of ups and downs, and those who understand their strengths are better equipped to overcome setbacks with a positive attitude.

This also answers the Ramban's question of why Yaakov made Yosef swear that he would make sure that Yaakov would be buried in the Meoras Hamachpeilah. Why was it necessary for Yosef to swear that he would fulfill his father's request? Did Yaakov not trust his beloved son?

We can explain that Yaakov feared that the Mitzriyim would raise objections to removing him out of the country for burial. He wanted Yosef to know that his father believed that he had the ability to carry out his wish. By swearing, Yosef confirmed that he recognized that despite how difficult this would be, he possessed the power to see it through to the end.

Often, when people would ask the Steipler Gaon to daven for them, he would tell them that they should daven for themselves. Every person has the ability to cry out to Hashem, and if he does so with proper kavonah, emunah, and bitachon, Hashem will respond to his tefillos. Hashem never forsakes a Jew and is always watching over him, waiting for the person to properly reach out to Him. No Jew is ever alone.

The Klausenberger Rebbe was raising money to build his Laniado Hospital in Netanya. He went to see a wealthy man and asked him for a handsome donation for the project. The man heard

the pitch, but was noncommittal in his response. He told the rebbe, "I'll do what I can," which usually means not too much.

The rebbe responded, "Do you know what you are capable of doing? Do you really think that you know what you can do? A person has no idea of his capabilities."

He continued, "Let me tell you about myself. I was already a Rebbe before the war. I lived in the city of Klausenburg and was immersed in avodas Hashem day and night. As a result, I was weak and sickly. When I wanted to bring a Gemara to the shiur I was saying, I didn't have the strength to carry it and would ask a talmid to carry it for me. The gabbai would carry my tallis and tefillin because they were also too heavy for me to carry.

"Then the war broke out and I was imprisoned in numerous labor camps. When I was in the Mühldorf concentration camp, the Nazis would give me 110-pound bags of cement to carry on back. And, do you know what? I did it!

"How was it possible? The answer is that a person does not know what he is capable of doing. He thinks that a task is too difficult for him, but he really has the strength to do that and a lot more. So be careful when you say that you will do what you can, because you have no idea what you are obligating yourself to!"

Yosef had been tested and had demonstrated his spiritual strength in a degenerate society. Mitzrayim was infamous for its culture of moral decay. By maintaining his righteousness in such an environment, Yosef attained a stature almost comparable to that of the avos. He imbued his descendants and all of Klal Yisroel with the spiritual fortitude to rise above temptation and seductive influences in all their lands of exile.

When Yosef brings his sons to Yaakov for a final brocha, Yaakov blesses them with the immortal words, "Becha yevoreich Yisroel leimor, yesimcha Elokim k'Efraim v'ch'Menashe." For all time, Jewish fathers will bless their children that they grow to be like Efraim and Menashe, the sons of Yosef.

A hint to the reason why may be found in the first Rashi of the parsha. Parshas Vayechi is unique in that it is setumah, meaning that there is no extra space between it and the preceding parsha, unlike the general rule that a parsha begins on a new line or that it is separated from the previous one by a space of nine letters. In explaining why the parsha is setumah, Rashi notes that with the passing of Yaakov Avinu, the shibud intensified. In other words, the golus of Mitzrayim – particularly the pain and the challenge of being a lonely minority in a hostile environment – first began to manifest at this point.

When Yaakov realized that his end was near, he decided that it was time to prepare his children and their children and descendants for life in golus.

Yosef was the son who had arrived first in golus and had paved the way for the Bnei Yisroel there. Though Yosef lived alone in golus, he lived an exemplary life, raising worthy, upright children. Yaakov singled them out for praise and showcased them as an example of how Jews all through the generations would be able to survive the golus.

Living alone in the swamp of evil, their father imbued them with the strength he knew that he had and made sure they did too. Yaakov demonstrated to the other shevotim and to Jews for all time that even in darkness, even in exile, even when all alone, they all possessed the strength of Yosef and his children and would be able to remain gutteh Yidden.

Yaakov turned to Menashe and Efraim and said, “Becha yevoreich Yisroel,” because although they were born in and grew up in Mitzrayim, before Yaakov came and before Yehudah set up yeshivos in their country, they still were as holy as their cousins who had grown up under the direct influence of Yaakov.

Yaakov said that for all time, wherever they find themselves, Jews should study the example of these two scions of greatness and point to them as examples of how they want their own children to develop, despite the tumah and moral bankruptcy around them.

Yosef and his children not only demonstrated that the offspring of Yaakov have the ability to live and excel anywhere the golus leads them, but Yosef is also the one who paves the way for geulah. He is the one who returned Yaakov to Eretz Yisroel. He is the one who will defeat Eisov. He is the one who will herald the coming of Moshiach, because he was the first to be tested in golus and thus first to recognize his strengths, which lifted him and enabled him to raise children equal to the shevotim, showing them and us the way, not only to survive, but to be a shining example for all time of tzidkus and prishus.

Let us never say that the task is too difficult for us. Let us never say that we are doomed to mediocrity and the limitations of what we can learn and accomplish.

At times, people fall into the trap of believing that their current circumstances or past failures define their potential. This mindset can create a false sense of security in the ordinary and prevent one from striving for excellence. Mediocrity, though comfortable, stifles growth and keeps people from reaching the heights of their true capabilities. When we view ourselves as incapable of more, we shut the door on the opportunities that lie beyond our self-imposed boundaries.

When we say that Gemara is too difficult for us to understand, when we say that we can never understand a Reb Chaim, when we say that our minds weren't made to work out a machlokes between Rashi and Tosafos, it is because we sell ourselves short and don't believe in our brainpower. If we would apply ourselves, believe in our abilities, and work hard, horeving on the sugya, we would understand it and enjoy it.

People are usually capable of more than they think. Growth requires a shift in perspective. We must be able to understand that we are not limited by past experiences or present circumstances, but are capable of learning, evolving, and surpassing what we think is possible. Mediocrity sets in when we settle for “good enough” and don’t push ourselves to do better, be better, and reach higher.

Excellence is not reserved for a select few. It is within everyone’s reach. To attain it, we need to have the courage to push beyond self-doubt. The path to excelling in life is paved with tefillah, emunah, and bitachon, along with hard work and self-belief.

We would do ourselves well to constantly be aware that Hashem endowed us with tremendous strengths and abilities, and every person’s strengths are different. Hashem gave us what we need to pursue excellence in Torah, in tefillah, and in doing mitzvos properly and in a timely and preferred fashion. He gave us what we need to do well in yeshiva and school. He gave us what we need to get married and then provide for our families. He gave us what we need to get through life in a successful and fulfilling way.

All we have to do is appreciate those gifts, recognize how blessed we are as children of Avrohom, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, and know that each one of us can be like Efraim and Menashe.