

“On Condition”

D’var Torah for *Par’shat Vayigash* December 25, 2020  
Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

Our patriarch Jacob-Israel comes down to Egypt upon learning that his long-lost son Joseph is still alive. As big a shock as it was for Jacob’s sons, led by the repentant Judah, to see Joseph’s face and learn his true identity, it is perhaps an even bigger shock for Jacob.

And even when Jacob finally embraces his son (or is it the other way around?), he is still dumbfounded. What does he proclaim? *Amuta ha-pa’am acharey r’oti et panecha*. “Now I can die, having seen your face.”

It means the obvious, but it suggests so much more. It suggests the idea that seeing one’s child alive when heretofore one had no expectation of that pleasure can cause one to collapse and die: of joy, perhaps, but also of sadness. Joy for what might still be to come, but sadness for all that is irretrievably lost.

The precursor of Chassidic thinking, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, writes in his commentary *Sh’ney Luchot Hab’rit* (known by its acronym Sh’lah) that when a parent in old age needs to depend on the “table of his children,” meaning their financial support, the parent “tastes the taste of death.” Thus Jacob’s reference to dying.

For now Jacob will be entirely dependent on the largesse and good will of his children, especially Joseph. It was with great reluctance that he journeyed down to Egypt in the first place. Having spent his entire youth in exile in Aram-Naharayim, he had vowed never again to leave the covenantal land of Canaan. Now, having broken that promise to himself and his destiny, he wanders into exilic territory.

But more than that he makes himself dependent on Joseph et al for his physical sustenance, he has agreed to stake his very destiny on the hope that his children will pick up the relay baton and carry on the covenant.

The leap of faith comes when Jacob is still in Cana'an, after learning that Joseph is alive, and after realizing that the only way for him to see Joseph is to go there, rather than hope that Joseph will come to him.

In a mystical vision, God comes to give Jacob permission to leave. God says, *anochi ered im'cha...v'yosef yashit yado al eynecha*. "I will go down with you, and I will surely bring you back, and Joseph himself will close your eyes." It literally means that Joseph will tend to him on his deathbed, and God will guarantee that Jacob's remains will return to the covenantal site at the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron. It's as if God will independently carry out this promise, no matter what else transpires.

But the Midrash hears something else. It hears God saying to Jacob that yes, God will accompany him both going and returning, but *al m'nat*, only "on condition" that Joseph himself closes his eyes. God's promise is not self-containing. It is conditional on the willingness of the next generation to cooperate.

The S'fas Emes, inheriting from the tradition of the Sh'lah, says that this passage teaches us about the generational nature of our existence as Jews. God makes a promise, but it is a promise that is generational, not unconditional. *Havtachah l'dorot*, says the S'fas Emes. "A promise for the generations to come."

Yes, God will be with us in our "narrow places," our "goings down" into Exile. But God can only remain with us, much less emerge with us back into the light of redemption, if our descendants are willing to pick up the baton and carry on the tradition.

How poor we are, the Sh'lah would say, that we have become so dependent on the support of our children that we can almost taste death. But in this case, the opposite is true. How *rich and happy* we are that we can rely on our children to carry on the promise of Torah that we bequeathed to them. That's *if* we can rely on them. It's a big *if*.

This story teaches us about how anxious we are vis a vis the future, but also how hopeful we have a right to be. For thousands of years our children have come into their adulthood and seen the worthwhileness of Torah not only as a precious

link to their past, but as a powerful force in their own lives. Why would they fail us now?

Jacob-Israel, by daring to go down to Egypt, knowing he will die there, and by throwing his arms around his son, shows us how important it is to trust our children to come through, to keep our covenant alive, to keep the flame lit, not only for our well-being as we come to our own inevitable end, but for their own prosperity as Jews and as human beings.

*Va'anochi a'al'cha gam alo* – “I myself will surely come with you out of Exile and into Redemption,” and if not with you, then with your children and the generations to come. Trust them. Trust *in* them. They have always kept the promise, and they will surely do so again and again.