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Gematria on the Parshah: Reaching the Heart of Others

By: Moshe Herskovits



In Parshat Vayigash, we reach the climax of Yosef and his brothers' story. In last week's parshah, Yosef tests his brothers by framing Binyamin with the theft of his silver goblet. The Or HaChaim explains that Yosef's goal was to give his brothers a chance to do teshuvah for selling him into slavery. After 22 years, had they changed? Did jealousy still linger? Were they willing to risk their lives for Binyamin, the son of Rachel?

Yehudah rises to the occasion. He delivers a speech from the depths of his heart, offering to become a slave in Binyamin's place. This act of selflessness pierces Yosef's heart, moving him to tears and compelling him to reveal his true identity.

What does Yehudah's speech teach us about connecting with others? Yehudah speaks not only with words but with an open heart, expressing his father's deep love for Binyamin and pleading, "Please, let me remain a slave in his place. How can I return home and witness my father's suffering?"

The Or HaChaim notes that Yehudah thinks he is speaking to Pharaoh's viceroy, yet he focuses on connecting to his humanity, by speaking heart to heart. Too often, our conversations lack heart and remain superficial. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that when speaking to others, to make a real connection we must remember that we are speaking to a neshamah. Chazal says דברים נכנסים אל הלב, היוצאים מן הלב נכנסים אל הלב (words from the heart enter the heart). The gematria of אל הלב (enter the heart) is 298, the same as רחמים (compassion). True empathy for others only arises when hearts connect. The true purpose of conversation is to bridge one heart to another.

After the Holocaust, the Klausenberger Rebbe met a young man in a DP camp. The young man was a genius in Talmud, and he had abandoned Torah and mitzvot. Other rabbis had tried and failed to reach him, but when the Rebbe spoke with him personally, they embraced for a long time. The young man returned to prayer and Talmud study. When asked why, he replied, "Everyone before spoke to my mind, but the Rebbe spoke directly to my heart."

On a deeper level, the Chafetz Chaim explains that the meeting of Yehudah and Yosef alludes to the future Geulah. Yehudah believes he is standing before Pharaoh's viceroy, fearing disaster if Binyamin does not return, when in truth he is speaking to Yosef himself. In the same way, Hashem directs every event in the world, even when His hand is hidden from us. When the Geulah arrives, the veil will be lifted, and we will finally see how everything, even our troubles, were orchestrated by Hashem, and all our questions will be answered.

How do we hasten the final redemption? Through selfless action that places another before ourselves. The gematria of 396 יהודה אליו (And Yehudah approached) equals to בנימין בן יעקב (Binyamin the son of Jacob). This reveals that Yehudah's entire plea was for his brother Binyamin alone. When we are prepared to sacrifice for another Jew, we awaken Divine compassion, we cause Yosef to reveal himself, meaning we reach Hashem's heart, and this in turn, awakens Hashem to reveal Himself behind the veil.

There is a story of the Zhiviller Rebbe, who was imprisoned in a Soviet prison for spreading Judaism. After a long time as a prisoner, he was called in by the head of the prison along with another non-observant Jew. The top officer proposed, "If you sign this release paper on Shabbat, I will let you go." The Zhiviller Rebbe thought to himself, "I cannot do this. It would desecrate Hashem's name, and this man seeks to dishonor Hashem." So he refused.

The officer replied, "You foolish Jew, you will die in this prison." He then turned to the non-observant old man and asked, "Are you a fool like the Rabbi?" The man said, "I refuse to sign just like the Rabbi." The officer responded, "You foolish Jews will both perish here together."

As the officer was about to leave, the Zhiviller Rebbe called out to the officer. The officer asked, "Did you change your mind?" The Rebbe replied, "I will not sign for myself, but I will sign for this old man. I believe I can survive here, but he cannot." The officer was moved by this act of selflessness and responded, "No, you will not sign. I will sign for both of you."

So too, what will cause Hashem to "sign our release" from Galut? When we act like Yehudah, when we stand up for our brothers and put everything on the line for them, when we care for others as deeply as we care for ourselves, this speaks directly to Hashem's heart and hastens the geulah. May it happen now.

Do We Really Have Free Will?

By: Rabbi Avraham Gislason



Parshas Vayigash begins with the epic moment of the meeting of the two great leaders of the Jewish People, Yehuda and Yosef. Yosef represents the preparatory force of geula of Moshiah ben Yosef, and Yeudah, as the patriarch and originator of the royal line of kings of Klal Yisroel, represents Moshiah ben Dovid. It is a spiritually cosmic collision that reverberates through all of time and space.

There is, however, a very important lesson that is hidden within this story that can provide a sense of consolation and hope for all of us when we are struggling through spiritual and emotional lows. The story begins years earlier with the abduction and sale of Yosef by his own brothers. He is

thrown into a pit, and sold to a passing caravan of middle eastern barbarians to face, at best, a life of slavery.

The Nesivos Shalom asks a piercing question. How is it that the Yud Beis Shivtei Kah, the Mita Shleima of Yaakov Avinu, the towering tzaddikim that represent the combined sparks of holiness that make up the collective soul of the Am Kadosh, could engage in such a disgusting and lowly behaviour to accost, imprison, and sell their brother into slavery? Then, afterwards, to lie to their own father about the incident, condemning him to decades of bitter sadness at the loss of his cherished son? We would expect this type of behaviour from only the most twisted individuals from the lowest echelons of society, not from these ten tzaddikim. How could it be?

The Nesivos Shalom's answer challenges some of our basic beliefs and forces us to open ourselves to a much deeper and broader understanding of a concept we hold to be of prime importance - free will. He answers that really the brothers were tzaddikim, and they actually would never engage in such behaviour. However, Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, determined that the Jewish people needed to end up in Mitzrayim, and that their descension into the ervas ha'aretz needed to happen in a certain way.

Going down to Egypt was a necessary reality. It was the crucible in which the B'nei Yisroel would be heated in fire, broken down, and purified, in the same way that a base metal is mined from the earth, then smelted and forged. This was nothing less than the creation of the Nation of Israel, which emerged out of slavery alongside the ten miraculous plagues culminating in the splitting of the sea and the receiving of the Torah on Har Sinai. Shibud Mitzrayim wasn't a punishment - it was the purification and creation of Am Yisroel. This was the beginning of the fulfillment of the purpose of creation - bishvil Yisroel sh'nikra reishis. Hashem was guiding the entire bria through the steps of history. In His wisdom he, so to speak, "forced" the brothers' hand to sell Yosef into slavery in order to prepare the path and lay the groundwork for Goshen and the ability for the Jews to come willingly to Egypt, for Yaakov to be brought down in a manner fitting of his righteousness, for the bnei Yisroel to be able to live in Mitzrayim in a certain level of comfort, while still remaining a separate and distinct people.

According to this, Hashem took away the free will of the brothers, forced their hands in selling Yosef, made Yosef the Mishneh L'Melech, and brought them down with honour before beginning the process of the forging of the holy nation. Some people get very upset when we speak about G-d taking away free will. Isn't free will a cornerstone of our faith? It certainly is. However, if one takes the time to think a little deeper and look a little bit beneath the surface, one will see that while we do indeed have free will, we don't

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always have free will. Looking at the "point of free will" maamar of Rav Dessler, we see that even on a basic level, most of our decisions are not a function of free will. Only those particular points that represent a challenge in our avoda are a point of free will. Choosing which type of sauce to have on our chicken wings, or which route to take to the grocery store may not be a monumental moment of exercising free will. Whereas, choosing to be dan l'chaf zechus, containing anger, avoiding physical desires, doing chesed when it is hard or annoying, spending time with our children instead of our smartphones, all represent a spiritual challenge – a point of free will. Maybe we do have free will, but not always at every moment?

We don't always know how we got ourselves into certain situations. We don't always understand why Hashem puts us in situations of challenge or pain. Sometimes the worst pain and suffering come when we think that every negative thing in our lives is a result of our own failures. We can feel the tremendous weight of embarrassment and depression, feeling like a failure. It is of utmost importance that we take responsibility for all of our actions, to be misvadeh, and to do teshuva every day. However, atzvus and mara shechora are 100% from the side of tuma. This type of sadness and hopelessness will only pull us farther into a place of tuma and evil. At such a time, it is important to flex our emunah muscles and to know that Hashem led me to the place that I am in right now for a reason. While I take responsibility for my own actions, at the same time, I know that Hashem is guiding every step of my journey, to the extent that sometimes my freewill is suspended in order to bring me to the place I need to be.

The antidote to sadness and self loathing is to look at every moment with emunah shleima, knowing that Hashem does everything for my own good, and knowing that whatever has happened has been part of what was necessary for my path and my growth. Facing every challenge with simcha aligns us with the hashgacha pratis of Hashem and creates a real time bond and awareness of the fact that G-d is holding my hand through my journey.

In this weeks parsha, Yosef reveals himself by saying two words, "Ani Yosef." With those two words every moment of the entire story becomes clear, and the brothers see the guiding hand of Hashem in every moment of their story. They realize that everything that they thought was their own sins and failures and the tearing apart of their family was actually the guiding hand of G-d. We should all be zoche to hear those words in our own existence, and to see how Hashem was always with us, guiding us, and leading us through our painful challenges to the present moment. IYH, we should all see the coming of Moshiach Tzidkeinu, and to hear with own ears, the words we long to hear, "I am Hashem."

The Wisdom of Goshen

By: Avraham Oziel



In his classic work, Hovot Halevavot (Sha'ar HaTeshuva, Ch. 1), Rabbeinu Bahye delineates the different ways in which a person might end up in a situation which necessitates teshuva. One of the ways that he mentions is associating with

bad friends who would cause one to have lapses in judgement and therefore make bad decisions.

The Hatam Sofer comments on this point, and explains that there are two kinds of tzadikim. One is a tzadik who is so strong his convictions that it doesn't matter where he is. Even in the darkest of places, he needn't worry about whether or not he can maintain his righteousness. The other kind of tzadik is one whose ways are not yet strong or deeply rooted enough to withstand temptation in dark places.

With this in mind, the Hatam Sofer asks the following question regarding this week's Parasha: Surely Yaakov Avinu and his sons were of the first class of tzadikim, whose righteousness flourishes regardless of the surrounding environment. Why, then, did they choose to settle in the land of Goshen instead of Mitzrayim proper? Why did it matter where they settled?

He answers that it's true that these were all tzadikim of the highest calibre. But they were not thinking only of themselves. They knew that a great and plentiful Nation was about to spring forth, and they were concerned for its spiritual wellbeing. Would Klal Yisrael be able to withstand the empty glitz of secular society? And even if they could, would they be able to foster the same fortitude in the next generation and the next and so on?

This, says the Hatam Sofer, was why Yaakov and his sons chose the land of Goshen. Yes, it was still within the Mitzrayim region, but it was separate from everything else. It functioned as a safe haven where we could cultivate our own Jewish sense of purpose as well as that of our children.

The truth is, our situation today isn't so different. We are now living in what is quite possibly one of the most twisted, depraved societies in recent history. Evil is encouraged, while a life of truth and virtue is considered foolish and outdated. How are we to cope with these influences? And how can we impress upon our children the emptiness of the secular lifestyle while demonstrating the richness, beauty and fulfillment of our own?

As the Ramban points out, the lives of our forefathers are full of instruction. In this week's Parasha, Yaakov Avinu and the Shevatim showed us the way to approach life in the secular world: Distance yourself! We all have our own little land of Goshen. It's called the Jewish home. What we do there is what we and our children will carry from generation to generation. Even if we are of the highest order of tzadikim, it's not enough to think about ourselves. It still behooves us to establish as much distance as we can for our children's sake as well as our own.

The mitzvah of lighting the menorah lends itself to this discussion as well. It reminds us that from the warmth and safety of our own homes, we can radiate light outwards to the rest of the world. We don't even need to go outside! The fact that people are walking by means that we can assume they will see the brilliant glow of the menorah in our windows. So too, as Jews, we must assume that we are being looked to for guidance. We are a testimony to HaShem's Oneness and the Torah way of life. We don't need to be in the mix to make an impact. They will look to us and we will show them the way.

Leaving it or Living with it

By: Rabbi Joshua Kaller



Shortly after every single holiday, there's often a kind of postpartum blues — a quiet sense of longing mixed with reflection. We ask ourselves: Did I get it right? Did I take as much as I could from the holiday? Was I present enough?

Sometimes that reflection can slip into guilt, shame, or a vague wondering about what should have been. But I want to offer a different challenge — especially now, just after Chanukkah.

Instead of leaving Chanukkah, how can we live with its light?

On the final night of Chanukkah, a group of us gathered together, and I asked everyone to focus on the lights. Not just to look at them — but to feel what they represent. The warmth. The closeness. The relationship with Hashem.

Those flames carry a message: that Hashem desires proximity, connection, and relationship with us — and that we desire the same with Him.

I encouraged the group to imprint that moment deeply — to emblazon it into the essence of their soul. To place it in the vaults of their psyche and their heart. To capture it in their mind and, in a sense, to create positive trauma.

Not trauma that wounds — but trauma that anchors.

This is something I learned from my own rabbeim: the power of creating spiritual moments so strong and vivid that they can be called upon later. Moments that replenish, restore, and reinvigorate the soul when life feels distant, cold, or overwhelming.

The holidays are not meant to pass through us lightly. They are meant to leave an impression. We shouldn't walk away thinking they're gone — because in truth, they're meant to become part of who we are.

But that requires homework.

We have to learn how to withdraw from our spiritual bank accounts — to access the feelings, messages, and closeness we once experienced and bring them forward into ordinary days.

So here's the challenge:

Now that Chanukkah has "passed," don't leave it. Live with it.

Sometime in the next eight days, find one moment — just eight seconds. Close your eyes and recall the most inspired, connected, or meaningful moment you experienced this past Chanukkah. Just eight seconds to tap in. To remember. To feel.

Eight powerful seconds — to echo eight powerful days.

The light is still there. The question is whether we'll choose to live with it.

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