

Vayaishev 5777

BS"D Parashat Vayaishev 5777

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Can a Tzadik Retire?

Our parasha begins with Ya'akov reaching "retirement age," after surviving extended periods of self-sacrifice and imminent danger to his and his family's lives. He is now well over 100 years old, having brought into the world the sons from whom will descend the 12 tribes of the future Am Yisrael, and has returned to reclaim possession of Eretz Yisrael for the Jewish nation.

Rashi quotes the Midrash that HaShem was "unhappy" with Ya'akov's choice of retirement. "Is it not sufficient for a tzaddik to have his reward of pleasure in the eternal next world, that he wishes to be rewarded also in this world," declared HaShem, and brought about in Ya'akov's waning years the loss of his beloved son Yosef.

Are you a Jew or Jewish?

A while back, I chanced upon a group of non-Jewish American tourists enjoying the Old City's atmosphere.

As is my habit, I greeted them and asked where they were from. They replied that they were from Texas. "Then we have something in common," I said. "We both have a lone star on our flags."

They were impressed that an Israeli should know of the 'Lone Star State'. Then one of the women asked me if I was Jewish.

I said, "I am not Jewish". They were all bewildered by my response. I explained that a color which is not really red but tends to be so is described as reddish, and a color that tends to brown is described as brownish. Since I am a total, absolute Jew, I cannot be described as Jewish.

I am quite certain that none of them understood what I was talking about.

Our people can be divided into two categories – Jews and those who are Jewish.

Non-Orthodox Jews, who live happily among gentiles in the galut, are barely Jewish. Being "Jewish" means that there is a smattering of Judaism in one's life, from enjoying a good piece of Levi's Jewish rye bread on Pesach to serving as a dedicated Orthodox rabbi 24/7 in a large galut community when the gates of Eretz Yisrael are wide open. In the galut, the vast majority of highly respected and learned rabbis and heads of ultra-Orthodox yeshivot are Jewish but not necessarily Jews.

Being a Jew means total commitment to whatever HaShem has dictated to us without pilpulistically rounding the corners and smoothing over the uncomfortable, unpleasant, rough edges of living the total life of a Jew.

What is the litmus test that differentiates one who is Jewish from one who is a "Jew"?

The formula is explicit in the Hagadah of Pesach when discussing the evil son.

The Hagadah states that in view of the evil son's attitude and beliefs, it would be correct to assume that, had he been in Egypt at the time of the exodus, he would not have been liberated.

What does this statement mean?

During the final year of our sojourn in Egypt, Pharaoh and his government were unable to enforce slavery on the Jews, because they had ceased working and were now viewing with pleasure the sweet revenge of the ten plagues HaShem was bringing upon the Egyptians.

The 15th of Nisan – Pesach – was approaching. It was the day HaShem had established to be our national day of liberation from Egyptian bondage and the fulfillment of what HaShem had told Avraham in the “brit baiyn habetarim” (the covenant of the severed pieces) that his descendants from Sarah would be slaves in a foreign land.

Moshe Rabbeinu announced that the next stage in the liberation process would be to leave the impure land of Egypt and enter into the desert towards the Red Sea and Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, prior to entering the holy land. The people were told to bake bread, take water with them and trust that HaShem would provide for all their needs in the hostile desert.

After Moshe’s announcement, the nation divided itself into two camps. Despite the obvious perils inherent in entering the desert without proper preparation, the camp comprising only 20% of the population believed in HaShem and in His messenger Moshe.

The larger camp of 80% adopted a “logical” approach. They rationalized that, for all intents and purposes, Egypt no longer existed as a united nation. The economy was in shambles. The religious principles of the ruling establishment were proven to be sterile and false. Every Egyptian family was emotionally demoralized at the loss of a family member. The Jews now ruled over the Egyptian empire, so why leave? They presumed that they could establish a Torah empire on the ruins of ancient Egypt with all the wealth of the land. The Egyptians were now the slaves. Former taskmasters were

“licking the boots” of their once Jewish slaves. It made no sense to start a war with the giants, Og of Bashan and Sichon of Emory. And, furthermore, who said that HaShem had even spoken to Moshe?

The rational and Torah-based approach captured the hearts and minds of the vast majority who saw the great financial benefit of remaining in Egypt.

These rational Jews died during the week of the plague of darkness. We are the descendants of the irrational 20% who survived.

The Hagada states emphatically that, had the evil son lived at the time of the exodus, he would certainly have been among the rational 80% and would not have followed Moshe into the wilderness.

To be Jewish means to pick and choose those aspects of Judaism that appeal to one logically, financially, socially, politically. To be a Jew means to travel the “high road” of the Torah, accepting the self-sacrifice it demands.

In our time, the litmus test is the same as it was in the generation of the exodus and the generation of Ezra the scribe. It is to live in Eretz Yisrael without hollow rationalizations to justify remaining in the galut: we must wait for the mashiach; I can't make a living in Eretz Yisrael; I'm waiting for my children to finish high school; and best of all, if my rabbi doesn't go to the holy land, why should I?!

HaShem demanded that the Jews in Egypt trade the good life there for an unknown destiny in the wilderness. He severely punished those who did not live up to His expectations. In our time, the call from Heaven is to leave the galut for a modern, highly developed country on the cutting edge of all human endeavor, where food is abundant, and the roads are crowded with the most modern and expensive vehicles. Even more compelling is that fact that we are the acknowledged Torah

center of the world, with second place too far behind to be seen.

A friend told me that if he sells his beautiful home in Florida on an acre of land, he would only be able to purchase a three-bedroom apartment in Yerushalayim.

Granted that living here has its challenges. But that's what this world was made for, as Ya'akov learned when he thought he could live the good life after all his challenges.

So, the choice is up to every individual to be Jewish or to live the life of a Jew.

Look into the mirror and ask yourself: "Had I lived at the time of the exodus, would I have been with the doomed 80% who chose to remain in the galut or with the 20% who established the foundation for HaShem's chosen people?"

Will you and your children stay in the galut and eventually disappear, or will you come to Eretz Yisrael and be part of the foundation stone of our future?

Tehilim 147,11:

יְהוָה יִשְׂמַח בְּאֵלֵינוּ
כִּי נִשְׁמָר בְּחַסְדּוֹ
כִּי נִשְׁמָר בְּחַסְדּוֹ
כִּי נִשְׁמָר בְּחַסְדּוֹ
כִּי נִשְׁמָר בְּחַסְדּוֹ

HaShem desires (delights in) those who fear him,

who put their hope in his unfailing compassion

Shabbat Shalom,

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