

Reflections of Redemption

Essays on the Weekly Torah Reading and Moshiach,
Based on the talks of the
Lubavitcher Rebbe,
Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

Reprinted for Parshat Vayechi, 5781
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IN LOVING MEMORY OF
 Horav **Schneur Zalman Halevi** עי"ה
 ben Horav **Yitzchok Elchonon Halevi** הי"ד
Shagalov
 Passed away on 21 Tamuz, 5766

Reb **Dovid Asniel** ben Reb **Eliyahu** עי"ה
Ekman
 Passed away on 5 Sivan - Erev Shavuot, 5765

Mrs. **Devora Rivka** bas Reb **Yosef Eliezer** עי"ה
Marenburg
 Passed away on the second day
 of Rosh Chodesh Adar, 5766

Reb **Yitzchok Moshe** (Ian)
 ben Reb **Dovid Asniel** עי"ה
Ekman (Santiago, Chile)
 Passed away on the 24th day of Shevat, 5769
 ת. נ. צ. ג. ה.

AND IN HONOR OF
 Mrs. **Esther Shaindel** bas **Fraidel Chedva** שתח'ל
Shagalov

DEDICATED BY
 Rabbi & Mrs. **Yosef Y.** and **Gittel Rochel** שיחי
Shagalov

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by
Dovid Yisroel Ber Kaufmann

Vayechi

JACOB DID NOT DIE

Why must mitzvos be performed in a natural manner, even though spiritually both mitzvos and the Jewish people are beyond nature? We must “eat our meal,” work with the physical world, without relying on miracles. The true spiritual nature is not revealed before the times of Moshiach. Only afterwards, at the time of Redemption, will we see that “Jacob our father did not die.”

In the last Torah reading of *Bereishis*, *Vayechi*, which means, “he lived,” the Torah describes the death of Jacob. This seems to be a contradiction. If the Torah reading is named “he lived,” it should be about the life of Jacob, not his death. Perhaps the Talmudic assertion that “Jacob our father did not die” is addressing” this difficulty.

The last of the thirteen principles of faith, as enumerated by Maimonides, is the resurrection of the dead, which follows the coming of Moshiach. The Talmudic statement that “Jacob our father did not die” foreshadows the situation of every Jew after the coming of Moshiach and the resurrection.

However, the statement raises several questions. First, why is Jacob different than Abraham or Isaac – or any of the other righteous *tzaddikim*, for that matter? Why doesn’t the Talmud make the same observation about the other Patriarchs and other *tzaddikim*?

Also, the Torah describes at length that Jacob was embalmed, buried and mourned for thirty days. This seems a clear contradiction of the Talmudic statement. In fact, this very objection is raised.

The declaration that “Jacob our father did not die” occurs in a very unusual context. While having a meal together, Rabbi Nachman asked Rabbi Yitzchak to teach him some Torah. Rabbi Yitzchak replied with the following admonition: “Rabbi Yochanan said one

should not talk during a meal because it may be dangerous.” After the meal, Rabbi Yitzchak quotes Rabbi Yochanan again, saying, “Rabbi Yochanan said, Jacob our father did not die, but lived forever.” At this point, Rabbi Nachman protests, “Then for what did they mourn, embalm and bury him?” Rabbi Yitzchak gives a lengthy answer, “I am interpreting a verse, which says, ‘Do not be afraid, My servant Jacob, and do not fear, Israel, for I am your salvation from afar and for your descendants from the land of their captivity.’ Israel is compared to his descendants. Just as they are alive, so he too is alive.”

The incident and conversation that resulted bear directly on our situation. For it is more than an interpretive discussion. Rather, it tells us something deeply important about the Torah, the Jewish people and their interaction with the world. Understanding this gives us an insight into the era of Redemption and the Resurrection.

Let us look first at Rabbi Yitzchak’s admonition, that one should not talk during a meal because it may be dangerous, meaning, of course, one may choke on the food. Obviously, Rabbi Nachman also knew the law that one should not talk during a meal because of the danger involved. But he reasoned that this applied only to idle conversation. He thought that if one speaks words of Torah during the meal, there’s no need to worry, for Torah itself is a shield and protection. In fact, it may even be an obligation to speak words of Torah during a meal. Therefore one might assume that when Israel is involved in Torah, G-d protects them miraculously, even if according to nature we would otherwise worry about some danger.

Rabbi Nachman recognized that Torah transcends nature. Thus, he realized that one absorbed in Torah also transcends nature. Being involved with Torah unifies one with Torah. As Torah, being higher than nature, is unaffected by it, so the individual immersed in Torah is protected from hazards of nature.

So Rabbi Yitzchak answers at length, explaining that although one involved in a mitzvah is generally protected, a situation where the danger is commonplace – such as choking during a meal – is different. There one cannot rely on Divine assistance. One must interact with the world in a natural manner, not relying on the special spiritual status of the Torah or of the Jewish people.

The conversation between Rabbi Yitzchak and Rabbi Nachman takes place during a series of statements about the many occasions G-d performs miracles for the Jewish people. One might think that the Jewish people should be able to fulfill their purpose – making the world a dwelling place for G-dliness through the performance of mitzvos – in a miraculous manner. Rabbi Yitzchak teaches us, therefore, that Torah and mitzvos must be performed according to the nature of the world. Even though Torah provides protection, one should not rely on miracles in a situation that is normally dangerous. Paradoxically, the transformation of the world into a place of spirituality must take place in a completely natural manner.

Still, there are two possible reasons why performance of mitzvos must be in accordance with nature. First, it may be that since the laws of nature are also created by G-d, even the Torah and its mitzvos must be in accordance with or subject to the laws of nature. On the other hand, it may be that Torah and mitzvos in and of themselves are beyond nature, but by definition a mitzvah – to be a mitzvah – must have an affect on the natural world. The mitzvah must appear within nature and seem natural, even though its essence is beyond its physical existence or manifestation.

We now have a deeper understanding of the declaration that “Jacob our father did not die,” even though the Egyptians embalmed him and his family buried him and mourned for thirty days. Created entities, things which are physical, must decompose and pass away. “Jacob our father did not die” means that in essence he was not subject to the laws of nature; the limitations of the physical world did not affect him.

Of all the Patriarchs, Jacob is most closely identified with Torah. As mentioned earlier, Torah is higher than nature, and one attached to Torah is also automatically higher than nature. Thus, the association of Jacob with Torah leads immediately and inevitably to “Jacob our father did not die.” This also explains why the emphasis is on Jacob, as opposed to the other Patriarchs. The eternality of Jacob results most directly from his connection with Torah – G-d’s infinite Wisdom. And this unbreakable link between and unification of G-d, Torah and Israel is inherent in all the children of Israel.

But if nature has no rulership over Torah, why must the mitzvos be performed in a natural way in the physical world? Why is the coming of Moshiach – the culmination of existence – a physical phenomenon? As Maimonides says, Moshiach will heal the breaches in the observance of Torah, return the Jews to the land of Israel, rebuild the Temple, etc. Why is the ultimate result of Redemption a physical one – the return of the soul to the body, the resurrection? It would seem that if the Torah is higher than nature, the goal would be to go beyond nature.

Hence Rabbi Nachman asks about the mourning, embalming and burial of Jacob. How can we say “Jacob our father did not die” and not be allowed to discuss Torah during a meal because of a physical danger? If the inherent spirituality of the Jewish people overrides all, then just as “Jacob our father did not die” because of his association with Torah, so too we should be able to discuss Torah while eating without fear of choking to death.

Thus, Rabbi Yochanan explains that although the Jewish people and Torah, in and of themselves, are beyond the limitations of nature, G-d wanted the effect of the mitzvos to be felt in the natural world. From the perspective of the natural world – the Egyptians – it appeared that Jacob died. Therefore, according to nature, they mourned, embalmed and buried him. But, from Torah’s perspective, Jacob – even his body – did not die.

This explains why Rabbi Yitzchak waited until after the meal to declare that "Jacob our father did not die." When the Jewish people are "sitting at a meal," when they are involved in matters of the world, then the effect of their Torah and mitzvos is defined by the limitations of nature. But "after the meal," when they are higher than the world after refining it, then their true situation is revealed. Just as Jacob's body did not die, so every Jew, at the time of the resurrection, will have an eternal life in a physical body. As they are alive, so he is alive. 'Jacob our father did not die.'

(Based on Likkutei Sichos 35, pp. 223-228)

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