

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayechi

The five books of the Torah are broken up into many smaller portions known as 'parshiyot.' In the formal Torah scroll each one of the 'parshiyot' are separated from one another by a blank space the length of nine letters. However, this week's portion, 'Parshat Vayechi' is not separated from the portion that it follows. The previous portion seems to lead into this week's portion as if it was a run-on sentence. The very first Rashi in this weeks 'parsha' is troubled by this deviation from the normal format. Rashi comments, "Why is this portion 'closed'? Because the passing away of Yaakov caused the eyes and heart of the Jewish nation to close, out of apprehension of the slavery that was about to befall them." The words of Rashi are somewhat cryptic and difficult to decipher. Why does the absence of a blank space separating the two portions indicate the closing of the "eyes and heart of the Jewish nation"?

To fully understand the message that Rashi is teaching us, it is necessary to preface it with a Rashi found in Parshat Vayikra. Rashi writes in Parshat Vayikra that when Moshe studied the Torah from G-d, he was unable to comprehend the entire Torah without pauses in which to contemplate and digest the material that he was taught. The section breaks between the portions represent the pauses that Moshe utilized to absorb and master the material that was being presented to him. Even Moshe, who was presumably one of the most intelligent individuals of all time, recognized there was a limit to the amount of information that any human being can grasp in one lesson. Undoubtedly, people who are less intelligent than Moshe would need time to fully grasp and absorb the same material. The Torah, therefore, provides section breaks to give us an opportunity to discuss and review the material of the previous section that we have studied.

A man from France once planned on visiting the United States for the very first time. He was excited about his trip and began doing some research into the various tourist attractions in New York City. He took particular interest in the Statue of Liberty, which was presented by his home country to the United States over one hundred years before. The books described the awesome size of the statue and its princely appearance. He was intrigued by the history of the statue and decided that his first stop upon arrival in the United States was going to be a tour of the massive statue. After landing in JFK he jumped into a yellow cab and instructed the driver to drive him to the Liberty Island ferry. When the cab stopped he saw that the ferry was about to depart, he quickly purchased a ticket and jumped onto the ferry. The tourist was in the rear of the boat and he watched the ferry drift from the mainland but had not looked ahead to see the statue from a distance. When the ferry docked on Liberty Island, the tour guide began to explain all the nuances of the statue.

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He began to point out the intricacies in the construction of the statue and its rich history. However, the tourist's excitement began to dissipate; the statue no longer intrigued him. He had not yet seen the statue in its entirety and now, standing at the foot of the 300 ft. structure, he was unable to see past the pedestal on which it stood. All the minor details of the statue can only be fully appreciated after seeing the massive figure in its entirety, from a distance. Often when one looks at something too closely without seeing the larger picture, he cannot fully comprehend its true meaning.

Rashi tells us that although the Torah portions are normally separated by a blank space, signifying the pauses necessary to comprehend the information, Parshat Vayechi has no break. As has been explained, the purpose of the breaks is contemplation and investigation of all the details. A break at the start of Parshat Vayechi would signify that one should, at this point, begin to delve into the depths of why the Jews came down to Egypt and begin to understand the nuances of the story. The Torah is trying to teach us that the story cannot be understood in bits and pieces. The only way that one can fully understand the significance of the Jews' sojourn in Egypt, and can discover the rebirth of a Jewish nation, is to continue reading the Torah without a pause. One must continue studying the passages that describe the suffering in Egypt and eventually lead to the prominent Exodus. Only after stepping back and seeing the entire picture does one fully appreciate that the Jewish nation went down to Egypt with only 70 members and after only 210 years they marched proudly toward Mount Sinai over 600,000 strong. This is the message that Rashi is teaching us. Why is the portion 'closed'? Because looking at the present situation from the perspective of a narrow scope, the eyes and hearts of the Jews become closed. They can see very little hope for the future of a Jewish nation. The prospects seem to indicate that the 70-person nation will assimilate in the land of Egypt, never to be recognized as an independent people. Only through the 'closing' of the adjacent portions does the Torah indicate to us that this is not the time for contemplation, not the time to examine the details of the story. Only after we see the entire picture and see the mighty nation of 210 years later are we able to appreciate the minor details in the story of traveling down to Egypt.

The message of seeing the entire picture is not limited to studying textual information. It is a message for life as well. At times we are in despair when we look at our present situation. The Torah teaches us that we always must look at the entire picture, and then very often things don't seem that bad after all.

Shabbat Shalom!

