

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Vayigash

Throughout Parshiyot Mikeitz, Vayigash, and Vayechi, the name of G-d appears almost exclusively as "Elokim." The shift from the more often-used four letter name of G-d occurs when Joseph starts interpreting the dreams of the baker and the butler in the end of Parshat Vayeishev (Genesis 40:8). Prior to this point in the story of Joseph, the Torah uses the four-letter name, Hashem, to tell us G-d helped Joseph when he worked in Potiphar's house and also when he watched over the inmates in the prison.

From the time Joseph interprets the dreams of the baker and butler until the end of the book of Genesis, the name Hashem appears only in Jacob's blessing to Dan (49:18), "For Your salvation I long, Hashem." The change from Hashem to Elokim occurs at the beginning of Joseph's ascent from living as a prisoner in jail to becoming ruler over Egypt. What is the significance of G-d's name appearing as Elokim throughout the saga of Joseph's rise in the land of Egypt, his brothers' reunion with him, and the descent of Jacob and his whole family to Egypt?

Jacob's plea for salvation in his blessing to Dan, praying to G-d with the name Hashem, clues us into an understanding of the change of name. Jacob uses the name Hashem, which refers to G-d running the world with his attribute of mercy, in his plea for G-d to show compassion and save. Similarly, the Torah calls G-d Hashem when he appears to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4), the beginning of the Jews' redemption from Egyptian slavery.

By using the name referring to G-d's attribute of justice (Elokim) throughout the entire story of Joseph and Jacob in Egypt, the Torah puts the whole story of Joseph and his extended family's descent to Egypt into perspective. Even after Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, Jacob descends to Egypt, and the whole family seems to live peacefully and securely there, G-d continues to express his divine attribute of justice. Why does this story relate more to G-d's justice than to his attribute of mercy?

The brothers' struggles with Joseph until he reveals himself to them serve as a punishment for hating him and selling him to Egypt. Similarly, the midrash says Joseph's separation from his father served as a punishment to Jacob for neglecting honoring his own parents during all of the years he lived in Laban's house. Clearly, Joseph's brothers and his father suffer as a result of G-d's execution of justice.

In contrast, it would seem G-d blessed Joseph by enabling him to rise to a position of political power in Egypt, so why does Joseph himself repeatedly describe G-d as Elokim during this story? Despite all of his prestige and influence in Egypt, Joseph and his family remained distant from Israel and strong Jewish surroundings, constantly struggling with the test of resisting assimilation into Egyptian culture. Similarly, as long as Jacob and his family remain in Egypt with no clear vision of a return to Israel in sight, Joseph sees G-d running the world with his attribute of justice. Joseph indirectly teaches us that even in the best of situations, whenever G-d forces the Jews to live out of the land of Israel, this exile comes from his strict providence and not from his boundless compassion.



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Joseph teaches us another lesson by constantly talking about Elokim during his tenure as viceroy in Egypt. He never questions G-d, always maintaining a positive attitude in all his different positions in life. Whether talking to his fellow inmates, to Pharaoh, or to his brothers, he always says Elokim put him in his position. He says his talent to interpret dreams comes from G-d (Genesis 41:16), and he tells his brothers not to be distressed for selling him to Egypt (45:5), “For to be a provider Elokim sent me ahead of you.” Joseph accepts fully that his life has not been a smooth ride and sometimes sees G-d treating him with his attribute of justice, but he always maintains his faith in Elokim.

Similarly, Jacob suffers through many trials and often does not see the merciful side of the divine providence, but he strongly holds on to his faith. Rashi (46:29) quotes a midrash that when Jacob embraced Joseph, separated from him for so many years, Joseph cried but Jacob read the Shema. Of all Torah excerpts, why would he read the Shema?

“Hear Israel, Hashem is Elokeinu” means on a basic level that Hashem who reveals his attribute of mercy is the same Elokim of justice. Elated to see Joseph after assuming he was dead, Jacob senses the kindness of G-d and does not question why this all happened to him. He recognizes and accepts that all of his suffering over the last number of years came from Elokim, the just G-d. Jacob’s declaration of accepting whatever G-d gives him, whether it comes in the form of an obvious blessing or in the form of a difficult pill to swallow, becomes the statement of belief for every Jew.

Likewise, we express this belief in the Aleinu prayer that we say thrice daily. We quote from Deuteronomy (4:39), ‘And you should know today and take to your heart that Hashem is Elokim.’ The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 32b) says this verse should be used to describe G-d’s kingship in the standing prayer on Rosh Hashana, and the rabbis felt it was so fundamental that they incorporated it not only in the Rosh Hashana standing prayer but also as part of Aleinu.

We learn from the stories of Joseph and Jacob in Genesis to see G-d in all types of situations, whether in good times or in trying situations. Like our great ancestors, we constantly work to strengthen ourselves in this conviction, both in the Shema and in Aleinu prayer that we recite several times a day.

Shabbat Shalom

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