

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayigash

In this week's parsha the events of Bereishit climax. Yosef reveals himself, the brothers are reconciled, and the entire clan moves down to Egypt. The stage is set.

On the road to Egypt, Yaakov receives a prophecy in the dark of the night. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back again" (46:3-4). Yaakov knew what was coming and he was frightened. Hashem's response was to tell him, I will not be abandoning the Jews in Egypt. On the contrary, it is there in exile that I will be making you a great nation. There are going to be times that you will wonder where I am, so I am telling you now: I'm going down with you.

Yaakov arrives and his long lost son, his beloved Yosef, comes to greet him. A father who had mourned inconsolably for twenty-two years is reunited with his son. Can we picture the scene? The Torah tells us how Yosef reacted, "[Yosef] presented himself to [his father] and threw himself on his shoulders, weeping on his shoulders for a long time"(46:29). What about Yaakov? How did he react at this fulfillment of his wildest dreams? The Torah does not say, but the Midrash tells us that he was reciting the Shema. Forgive me for asking, but couldn't he find a better time? Why would Yaakov say the Shema now? Rabbi Zelik Epstein explains this Midrash beautifully. In the Shema we say, "Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is one". There are two different names of G-d that are used in this verse; the Tetragrammaton (yud kay vav kay) and "Elokim". The Tetragrammaton refers to G-d's attribute of kindness (chessed), Elokim refers to G-d's attribute of strict justice (din). Let us now retranslate the Shema: "The G-d of Kindness is our Divine Judge, the G-d of Kindness is one." In other words, even judgment is ultimately kindness. G-d judges us as a parent would a child, because He cares about us and is concerned about our growth and development (Derech Hashem). Often when times are hard we cannot recognize the caring Hand of G-d directing matters and it can be difficult to recite the Shema with a full heart. When Yaakov was reunited with Yosef after so many years of not comprehending G-d's plan, he could now, in retrospect, recognize and appreciate G-d's orchestration of events. G-d had made Yosef a leader, responsible for sustaining the family, not to mention the inhabitants of the entire region, in a time of famine. Now Yaakov could truly proclaim, "G-d is One!" Yaakov could now see that G-d had actually been with him all along.

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In the book of Shemot (33:23), Hashem tells Moshe, "You will see my Back, my Face you shall not see." The Chasam Sofer explains that this means we cannot recognize Hashem while events are happening. Only in retrospect can we see G-d.

Can we imagine the confusion of the brothers prior to Yosef's revealing to them who he really was? What they were going through was just incomprehensible. As the brothers themselves fearfully cried out, "What is this that G-d has done to us?" (42:28). However, once Yosef said the words, "I am Yosef," at that moment everything became perfectly clear. The brothers then understood everything that had happened to them. The Chofetz Chaim said that the same will be true at the end of history when G-d will reveal Himself and proclaim, "I am G-d." With that one statement the purpose of our long and painful history will become clear and understood. We will look back and be able to see that G-d was together with us in our exile. Just like "I am Yosef" for the brothers, "I am G-d" will itself answer all our questions.

We can now understand the meaning of what we say in the Aleynu prayer at the end of every davening, "On that day G-d will be one and his name will be one". In fact, Rashi says that when we say in the Shema "G-d is One" we are not really talking about today, we are talking about that day in the future when we will be able to see and understand that the G-d of Judgment is synonymous with the G-d of Kindness. May that great day come soon.

Shabbat Shalom!

