



Bringing Out Our Inner Strength

by Jacob Becker ('22)

In this week's Parashah, Parashat VaYechi, Yaakov Avinu blesses his children. In addition, he also blesses his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menasheh. He blesses them with the famous Brachah which we know as "*HaMal'ach*." Towards the end of the Brachah, the Pasuk (BeReishit 48:16) states, "*VeYidgu LaRov BiKerev Ha'aretz*," "may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth." Rashi explains that it refers to multiplying like fish. What does the Brachah mean? What is so important about multiplying like fish? Why fish of all creatures? What is so symbolic about the fish?

Rashi (s.v. "*VeYidgu Larov Bikerev Ha'aretz*") quotes the Gemara (Brachot 20a) that mentions instances where descendents of Yosef avoided Ayin HaRa. One of them is the story in which Rabi Yochanan, someone known for his good looks, would sit in front of the gates to the Mikvah. When the women would walk out he would say, "they will look at me and will have children as beautiful as me." The Chachamim asked him, "aren't you worried about Ayin HaRa?" He answered, "the Ayin HaRa is none of my concern as I am a descendent of Yosef, who is unaffected by the Ayin HaRa." The Gemara then cites the Pasuk later on in the Parashah, BeReishit 49:22, which describes Yosef as a "*Ben Porat Yosef Ben Porat Alei Ayin*," "a fruitful vine above the eye." Rabi Avahu went on to say, "don't read it as "*Alei Ayin*," but rather as "*Olei Ayin*," or those who rise above the Ayin HaRa.

To answer our question, we must return to the very beginning, Parashat BeReishit. The original instance where the fish were blessed to multiply is found at the beginning of BeReishit where the Pasuk (BeReishit 1:22)

says, "*Peru URevu UMil'u Et HaMayim*," "they should be fertile and increase and fill the water of the seas." Rashi, based on the Midrash (BeReishit Rabbah 11:2), says the Bracha was bestowed specifically upon the fish. The Midrash says, they were blessed because they were hunted. The Or HaChaim explains that it was harder for fish to reproduce due to the cold water; it is for this reason they were blessed by Hashem.

We are compared to fish for a reason; they clearly represent something significant. The Midrash (BeReishit Rabbah 97:3) says that just as a fish catches every drop of rainwater like they've never tasted it before, so too, we should receive every new thought of Torah with thirst as if we've never heard Torah before.

Rav Aharon Kotler adds something amazing. He observes, Torah is "your life and the length of your days" (Devarim 30:20). Torah, which we refer to as life, actually has a source to prove this. When it comes to someone who kills BeShogeg, by mistake, they must flee to an Ir Miklat. The Pasuk (Devarim 4:42) says that "he shall flee to one of the cities and live," implying that we must provide the proper necessities to live at an Ir Miklat. The Gemara (Makkot 10a) explains that a student cannot survive without the one who teaches him Torah. The Rambam too, in Hilchot Rotzei'ach 7:1, says that to those who are looking for the wisdom of Torah, living without studying is equivalent to not living at all.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner explains this idea to solve an inconsistency. He says material items can be classified as necessities, such as food and drink. On the other hand, we can easily live without luxuries. Usually, the more necessary the item, the less pleasure one derives from it, but the more one suffers from being without it. However, the fancier the item, the more pleasure one gains from having it, while suffering less when deprived of it.

How should we categorize Torah? Is it a necessity or is it a luxury? On the one hand, a Talmid Chacham suffers to a great extent when they separate from their learning, hence why we find it so difficult to refrain from Torah learning throughout Tish'ah Be'Av. Torah can be compared to food and drink, life's basic necessities. On the other hand, when a Talmid Chacham engages in Torah, his joy has no bounds. This would put Torah into

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the category of luxury. Into what category then, does Torah fall?

Rav Hutner explains that this distinction is true only with regard to luxuries and necessities. Torah, however, is neither. It is more than a necessity. Torah is life itself. Conversely, there is no greater joy other than being brought back from the brink of death. So too, one who views Torah learning as his life source will experience the greatest pleasure while engaged in his studies and feel the worst deprivation while unable to learn.

The Chidushei HaRim associates this teaching with an earlier Midrash that says that Yosef's descendants, like fish, will be immune to the harmful effects of the Ayin HaRa. He explains that one who views the Torah and Mitzvot as his source of life, making spiritual pursuits his main focus, while ignoring physical or materialistic pursuits, may be compared to fish. Just as the fish are covered in water, which protects them from the Ayin HaRa, so too, when one is engrossed in Torah study and Avodat Hashem, is protected from the Ayin HaRa. I think that we can take this idea to another level. We are all, in a sense, like "fish out of water." As we stated above Yosef is like that vine that rises above all. He rises above the Ayin HaRa. How can we, like Yosef, rise above the Ayin HaRa, which is so powerful?

The answer lies before us. Like fish which are surrounded by water, we are surrounded by Torah. We must grasp that which is close to us; Torah is "*Karov Eilecha... BeFicha UBilvavcha*" (Devarim 30:14); it is close to us; it is in our mouths and hearts. That is how we prevail in our struggle with the Ayin HaRa.

The Mishnah (Gittin 5:8) says that fish caught in traps are not acquired until we take possession of them. I think there is a deep idea involved. The Pasuk (BeReishit 1:28) states that man will "rule over the fish of the sea." The Ramban, Midrash, and other Meforshim on the Pasuk explain that we must rule over the beasts within us and if not, we will be dominated by the beast within us.

In addition to us being fish out of water, we have a fish within us waiting to be subdued, as well. However if it is not subdued we will be dominated. We will be dominated by the Ayin HaRa if we don't subdue our internal "fish". How do we subdue the fish within? We must rise above. We have to be like Yosef. We have to be like that vine that grows up and up and up. We have to imbibe the water - the Torah - which is close to us, "our life and days." We have to rise above like Ben Porat Yosef, but we need strong roots. What better way to "water our roots" than with water or Torah.

Maybe that is why Chazal say that when you teach someone Torah, it is as if you shaped them. Conquering the fish within us is an internal process which can help us

realize Torah values and actions in our lives and uplift us. That is the Brachah. It's about using what is around us to stay alive. Not just to live, but to rise above: to live a life of happiness, because that is what Torah is. May we all be able to catch every drop of water in our roots so that we can rise up like Ben Porat Yosef and pass this down to our children just like Yaakov did.

Mitzrayim: The Country of Brotherly Love

by Eitan Barenholtz ('23)

Sefer BeReishit is full of enchanting stories with lessons for everyday life. Therefore it is only fitting that the conclusion of Sefer BeReishit has maybe the most important one of all (at least according to your mother): don't fight with your brother; love him instead.

There are many subtopics about brothers throughout Sefer BeReishit: Kayin and Hevel, Yitzchak and Yishma'el, Yaakov and Eisav, Yosef and his brothers, and finally Ephraim and Menasheh. There is an interesting pattern within this group: except for Menasheh and Ephraim, all of these groups of brothers had a dangerous competition which ended up with someone on the brink of death.

This dominating narrative is turned on its head in VaYeichi. In last week's Parashah, Rashi comments on 45:13 that Yosef loves all of his brothers as much as he loves Binyamin. Additionally, in this week's Parashah, Yaakov famously switches the position of hands in a way that gives more honor to Ephraim even though he is Menasheh's younger brother: "וַיֵּשֶׁת עַל-יָרֵאֵשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וְהָיָא הַצְּעִיר וַיֹּאֲתֶ-שְׂמָאלוֹ עַל-יָרֵאֵשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה שְׂכַל אֶת-יָדָיו כִּי מְנַשֶּׁה הַבְּכוֹר" (BeReishit 48:14). Later on, Rashi comments that Yaakov placed his hands in that configuration because while Gideon - who performed great miracles for Bnei Yisrael - will descend from Menasheh, Yehoshua - who is even greater - will descend from Ephraim. Even with this sleight of hand, Menasheh doesn't object because he loves and respects his brother. When Yaakov then blesses Menasheh and Ephraim, he says "וַיִּשְׁמַךְ אֱלֹקִים בְּאַפְרַיִם וּבְמְנַשֶּׁה", Rashi comments that a man says this when blessing his sons. What better message to leave with them than love each other no matter who is more successful?

Importantly, the last conversation in Sefer BeReishit was between Yosef and his brothers, where they promised to return his body to Israel. This seems to be undoing their mistake of selling Yosef to Egypt which made him leave Israel. This message was uber-important at this moment because Bnei Yisrael was about to enter a turning point in history: slavery in Egypt. The next leader of Bnei Yisrael, Moshe, was greatly influenced by his kinship with his brothers. The Malbim comments on Shemot 2:8 that Hashem divinely influenced Yocheved nursing Moshe so that he would grow up with his brothers and maintain a

connection to them. This defining factor of Moshe Rabbeinu shows how strong and important brotherhood is. Good Shabbos, and don't hit your brother!

Ephraim and Menasheh - Sons of Yaakov

by Ariel Kryzman ('23)

At the beginning of the Parashah, right before Yaakov Avinu blesses Ephraim and Menasheh, Yaakov has a strange conversation with Yosef. First, Yaakov recalls Hashem's blessing of "והרביתך ונתתיך לקהל עמים ונתתי את-הארץ" "I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples, and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession" (BeReishit 48:4). Then, Yaakov Avinu adds in a strange comment about Ephraim and Menasheh: "ועתה שני-בניך הנולדים לך בארץ מצרים עדיבאי אליך" "And now, your two sons that were born in Mitzrayim, before I came to you in Egypt, they are mine, Ephraim and Menasheh will be mine just as Reuven and Shimon are mine" (48:5). This is an incredibly odd thing for Yaakov to say; what does Yaakov Avinu mean when he says that Ephraim and Menasheh are his?

Rashi explains that Yaakov says this to show that, along with the other Shevatim, Ephraim and Menasheh will receive their own Cheilek of Eretz Yisrael. Now, a new question arises: why did Yaakov Avinu place Ephraim and Menasheh on par with the Shevatim?

It seems like Yaakov Avinu was giving Yosef's sons preferential treatment. Did Yaakov forget all the suffering that he caused by favoring Yosef? The Gemara (Shabbat 10b) even uses Yaakov's favoring of Yosef as the source for the principle of not displaying partiality towards your children. How could Yaakov Avinu be so naive?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky offers a potential solution. He suggests that Yaakov Avinu believed that Yosef's sons required special attention because they were born in Egypt. Unlike Yaakov's other grandchildren, who grew up in their grandfather's holy household, Ephraim and Menasheh grew up in the unholy atmosphere of Mitzrayim, which Yaakov feared would have a lasting impact on them. By saying "אפרים ומנשה כראובן ושמעון יהודים" "אפרים ומנשה כראובן ושמעון יהודים" Yaakov hoped to show Ephraim and Menasheh that they were his children, and they did not belong to the immoralities of Mitzrayim. Yaakov wanted to instill in them the understanding that they were part of Bnei Yisrael and part of an ongoing Mesorah.

This goal is why Yaakov placed Ephraim's name before Menasheh's, suggests Rav Kamenetsky. Ephraim was an Egyptian name; this indicates that Ephraim was farther away from the ideals Yaakov was trying to impart to his children and grandchildren, making Ephraim in

greater need of Yaakov Avinu's encouragement and support. Yaakov, therefore, thought that it was necessary to give Ephraim extra attention and mention Ephraim's name first in Yaakov's Beracha.

There may be times where we see members of Klal Yisrael who are headed on the wrong path in life. Instead of scolding or ignoring them, we should try to be like Yaakov and support them and help them understand that we are all part of a bigger Mesorah.

War and Peace: Knowing When To Move On

by Rabbi Shaya First

The Haftarah for Parashat VaYechi tells the poignant story of David HaMelech giving his final instructions to his son and successor Shlomo. In reading the story, one cannot help but think of the parallel image of Yaakov Avinu, delivering his own set of deathbed instructions, messages and Berachot for his sons and family. I have no doubt that this similarity played a large role in Chazal's decision to choose this particular Haftarah for Parashat VaYechi. However, a closer look at David's instructions reveals that they contain an even deeper message for readers of Parashat VaYechi, and help shed light on one of the biggest decisions ever made in the history of our nation - a decision Yosef faced at the end of our Parashah.

To begin, let's look at David's instructions. After telling Shlomo to be strong, be a man, and follow the Torah, David advises Shlomo how to relate to a number of characters who had played a large role in David's rise and struggle to maintain his kingship. And the very first of these - and by far the most prominent - is Yo'av: "וְגַם אֶתְּךָ יוֹאָב בֶּן-צְרוּיָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְשֹׁנֵי-שָׂרֵי צְבָאוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַבְנֵר בֶּן-נֵר וְלַעֲמָשָׂא בֶן-יֵהוּרָם וְיֵשׁוּס דָּמִי-מִלְחָמָה בְּשָׁלֹם וַיִּתְּנוּ דָּמִי מִלְחָמָה בְּהַגְרָתוֹ" "אֲשֶׁר בְּמִתְּנוֹ וּבְנִצְלוֹ אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלָיו: וְעָשִׂיתָ בְּהַכְמָתָהּ וְלֹא-תִנְרָד שִׁבְתוֹ בְּשָׁלֹם שְׂאֵל:" "And you know what Yo'av ben Tzeruyah did to me, what he did to two commanders of Israel's forces, Avneir son of Neir and Amasa son of Yeter: He killed them, mixing the blood of war into peace, staining the girdle around his loins and the sandals on his feet with the blood of war. So act wisely, and see that his white hair does not descend to the grave in peace."

To understand the underlying subtext of David HaMelech's words here, one needs to understand the historical circumstances surrounding Yo'av's murder of each of these generals. Following the death of Sha'ul HaMelech, many Jews remained loyal to Sha'ul's family, and appointed his son Ish Boshet as king. Avneir was the most prominent of these, effectively serving as Ish Boshet's general and chief of staff. Much time passed during which Ish Boshet's forces - led by Avneir - fought with David's, until finally Ish Boshet and Avneir had a falling out, and Avneir decided to throw his support

behind David. David, seeking to bring an end to what had been a bloody conflict, embraced and welcomed Avneir. But Yo'av, David's chief general at the time, did not. Claiming he didn't trust Avneir's sincerity, Yo'av casually engaged Avneir in conversation, then brutally stabbed him, murdering him while his guard was down. When David HaMelech heard, he was furious, but could do nothing about it at the time other than to disavow Yo'av's actions. But was Yo'av at least sincere in his desire to protect David from what he thought was a spy? It's hard to know for sure, but Yo'av certainly had ample personal motive to bring about Avneir's death. He may have been worried about his own position as general now that Avneir was around. He may have been looking to avenge his brother Asahel's death, who Avneir had killed in what he claimed was an act of self-defense against Asahel's attacks. And he may have just been still angry at Avneir for all the battles he had fought against Yo'av and his family, unwilling and unable to trust Avneir, to forgive and forget their bloody past together in the interest of peace.

Similarly, Amasa was a leader who had fought many a battle against Yo'av and David, supporting Avshalom in his rebellion against David. When David HaMelech's forces finally managed to subdue Avshalom in battle, Yo'av disobeys David's explicit instructions to keep Avshalom alive, instead choosing to have him killed. David is again furious with Yo'av, and briefly demotes him in favor of General Amasa, who declares his renewed loyalty to David now that the battle with Avshalom is over. Some time later, Yo'av sees Amasa, and as Yo'av pretends to greet him with a friendly kiss, he surreptitiously stabs him to death, accusing him of betraying David.

What emerges from a comparison of these two murders is Yo'av's resistance to making peace with those who have fought with him in the past. Ironically, as can be seen from the way in which Yo'av kills each of these two generals, Yo'av has no qualms pretending to be at peace with someone as a means of getting close enough to kill them. As David says, "He placed the blood of war in peace." Yo'av just could not stop being at war with his enemies, and did not believe them when they tried to stop fighting him.

David HaMelech took strong issue with these life philosophies, especially as the Jewish people transitioned into a time dominated by peace in the early days of Shlomo HaMelech. By advising Shlomo to dispense with Yo'av, David was sending a message that Yo'av's philosophy had no place in the society Shlomo would strive to create. In order to have lasting peace, one must be willing to overlook the injustices of the past, and move forward by building sincere relationships with former opponents when it is clear that's what they also want.

Sincere peace sometimes requires a suspension of what may feel like justice, no matter how challenging that may be.

Bringing things back to our Parashah, when Yaakov Avinu died, Yosef faced a similar dilemma. Without causing distress to his father, he now had the opportunity to take revenge against the brothers who had so grievously wronged him in the past, selling him into slavery, exiling him and separating him from his beloved father for so many years. And despite the peace that had dominated Yosef's relationship with his brothers of late, his brothers were terrified that Yosef had been following a Yo'av-esque philosophy of feigning peace while secretly waiting for a chance for revenge and war. They approached Yosef terrified, nervous that he had just been feigning peace all these years for Yaakov's sake. Thankfully, they had nothing to worry about. Similar to David HaMelech hundreds of years later, Yosef recognized the importance of being willing to forgive and move on, the importance of creating a lasting peace even when you have been seriously wronged. He comforted them, saying that their actions were all part of Hashem's master plan to bring the Jews down to Egypt, and saying he held nothing against them.

Editors-In-Chief: Ezra Lebowitz and Aidan Samet
Publication Editors: Chanan Schreiber, Kivi Davis, Ariel Kryzman, and Azarya Tiger
Layout: Chanan Schreiber
Communications: Helen Zelig
Rabbinic Advisor: Rabbi Chaim Jachter
Questions, comments? Contact us at:
Phone: (201) 837-7696
webmasters@koltorah.org