

פרשת ויגש

OVERVIEW

Forcibly returned and brought before Joseph, Yehuda speaks for his brothers by justifying their purpose in coming to Egypt and emphasizing their special responsibility for Binyamin. He implores Joseph to allow him to return home with them. At this point Joseph cannot restrain himself any longer. He reveals his identity. Stunned, the brothers fear his revenge, but he reassures them and assigns them living quarters in Goshen.

Yaakov, finally convinced that Joseph is alive and that his invitation is genuine, travels to Egypt with his family accompanied by a large retinue.

COMMENTARY

Joseph reunited with his brothers

Joseph's joy in being together with his brothers knows no bounds. But there is one haunting question: why did he fail to give a sign of life during the long years of separation from his beloved father? Knowing his family's exact whereabouts it would have been easy for him as viceroy of Egypt to send a message. He must have known the endless grief he caused his father in his assumption that his favorite son was dead. Undoubtedly he understood that the extraordinary course of his life was part of a divine plan to save Yaakov's tribe from a famine that could have wiped it out. To intrude in the course of events by sending a sign of life would have amounted to interference in a divine plan.

Without realizing it, the brothers' evil deed involving the young Joseph, set in motion a chain of events that eventually resulted in their survival and reunion. For Joseph, whose unshakeable faith in G-d had sustained him through every trial, the happy developments gave him a sense of profound gratitude to Him Who guides the fate of men. He puts his feelings into words that will serve as a guiding principle for an oppressed people: "G-d will surely remember you and bring you up from this land to the land which He swore to the forefathers".

Yaakov moves to Egypt

Yaakov receives the stunning news of his son's miraculous survival and spectacular advance, with intense excitement and gratefulness. Without a moment's hesitation, he decides to join his son. G-d reassures him: "Do not fear to go down to Mitzrayim for I will make a great nation of you there" (46:3). Why the need for reassurance? Was not Yaakov impatiently looking forward to be reunited with his long-lost son?

An old fear mars Yaakov's joy: the dread of leaving a land that would be the rallying ground for the future history of his descendants. Abraham had left his parental home in order to reach this land. G-d's renewed promise calms Yaakov's fears and he peacefully leaves the land that he will not see again during his lifetime.

The brothers settling in Goshen

Pharaoh wishes to meet the viceroy's family. Joseph knows the customs of Pharaoh's royal court, and

prepares his brothers for the audience. The first question will concern their occupation. The inhabitants of ancient Egypt were not "citizens" in the modern sense but were "classified" as workmen, farmers, warriors etc. Egyptian culture considered the herdsman or shepherd as being on the lowest level of the social scale. This attitude poses a serious problem for the brothers' stay in the land. On the positive side it prompted Yaakov's tribe to isolate themselves from the rest of the population and create conditions that ensured the family's spiritual independence.

Pharaoh and Yaakov

First Joseph presents the brothers to the king. They are followed by Yaakov. He reasons that the brothers would find it easier to pay homage to the mighty ruler than Yaakov, the great individualist, who cherished his independence and freedom above all. Still, the meeting between the king and Yaakov becomes an encounter between two men of equal status. Pharaoh addresses the old patriarch in a respectful and refined manner that is surprising considering the ruler's autocratic ways. "How many are the days of the years of your life" he enquires. Pharaoh knows that it is given to few outstanding men to assess their lives, not in years, but in days. In Yaakov's life every day was a day of ascent, of self-perfection, of sanctification. "Teach us to count our days" (Psalm 90).

"The days of the years of my wandering are one hundred and thirty years; the days of the years of my life have been few and unhappy". With profound wisdom and characteristic

modesty, Yaakov distinguishes between the years of his wanderings and adversities, his trials and hopes, and those days of his life when he was able to fulfill the tasks to which his descent and conviction summoned him. He tells the king that he does not know whether he has truly fulfilled his tasks and achieved the goals that were always before him, in his dreams, his hopes and the long years of his suffering. Only G-d knows, He Who holds in His Hand the scale of life and death. Yaakov's words are not meant to be a complaint. They are words of humility uttered by a truly great man.

"Nationalization" of Egyptian lands

The text provides a detailed description of Joseph's plan to contain the famine. In return for their landed property, the people can obtain provisions directly from the silos. Only lands belonging to the priests are exempt. (Note. this rule is in stark contrast to the Jewish law that prohibits priestly ownership of land). After this, an annual rent in form of one fifth of the harvest is to be paid to the tax collector. This system effectively prevented the individual person from being reduced to the status of a slave. The only provision was that land could not be sold or given away without permission of the actual owner, the state. Thus Pharaoh remained the undisputed ruler of his kingdom.

First publication in the French Language during WWII in Occupied France as "La Tohra Commentée" © 1945 Marc Breuer. Translated to English by R' Marc (מרדכי) and Jacob Breuer זצ"ל. Missing parts translated from the original French text by Elie Winsbacher. Edited and Published in English with permission of the author's family by Elie Winsbacher . © 2003. Based on the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch זצ"ל. To receive electronically, please send email to: e.w@att.net or download from the website of the Central Organization for Jewish Outreach at <http://www.cojo.net>.