
פרשת וישב

פרק לז פסוק לד

וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלְתָיו וַיִּשֹׁם שָׁק בְּמַתְנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל-בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים:

רש"י

יָמִים רַבִּים. עֲשָׂרִים וּשְׁתַּיִם שָׁנָה מִשְׁפָּרַשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד שֶׁיָּרַד יַעֲקֹב לְמִצְרַיִם... כְּנֻגַד עֲשָׂרִים וּשְׁתַּיִם שָׁנָה שְׁלֹא קָיָם יַעֲקֹב כְּבוֹד אָב וְאָם.

מושג

כְּנֻגַד עֲשָׂרִים וּשְׁתַּיִם שָׁנָה שְׁלֹא קָיָם יַעֲקֹב כְּבוֹד אָב וְאָם.

Translation:

Parallel to the 22 years that Yaakov did not fulfill honoring his father and mother.

Explanation:

Yaakov mourns for Yosef for 22 years. The Gemoroh teaches that this was a punishment for Yaakov not returning home from the house of Lavan for 22 years. (Even though Yaakov was actually away for 36 years, he was not punished for the 14 years he spent learning Torah in the Yeshiva of Ever.)

While Yaakov had very good reasons to remain away for so long, he should have been sensitive to his parents suffering and returned home. As punishment, Yosef also displayed the same insensitivity, and let the reasons he had for not contacting his father for 22 years overcome his compassion for his father's suffering.

Looking in the Pasuk:

The words יָמִים רַבִּים do not seem to convey the suffering of a father that lasted for 22 years, not just many days! Rather, the words יָמִים רַבִּים are meant to be compared to the words יָמִים אַחַדִּים that Rivkah told Yaakov to remain in Lavan's home. Since Yaakov stretched those יָמִים אַחַדִּים into יָמִים רַבִּים he too lost contact with his son Yosef for the very same יָמִים רַבִּים.

NOTES

Rashi's explanation is taken from the (מגליה טז:) גמרא which seeks to prove that learning Torah is greater¹ than כבוד אב ואם. They prove it from the fact that although Yaakov was actually away from home for 36 years, he was only 'punished' for not honoring his parents for 22. This was because he was learning Torah in the Beis Midrash of Ever² for 14 years, and for those years he was not punished.

(When we say that learning Torah is greater than honoring one's parents it is not to be taken to mean that one may ignore honoring one's parents in order to learn Torah. Rather, it is to mean that in comparison to learning Torah, honoring one's parents is to be treated as all other Mitzvos. With all Mitzvos, if no one else is available to fulfill the Mitzvoh, or if he must do the Mitzvoh himself, then he is obligated to stop learning, do the Mitzvoh and then return to his learning³.)

There are two basic questions which must be answered: First, Yaakov did not leave his parents against their will, he was sent by them to Lavan! Consequently, being in Lavan's house was in itself a fulfillment of כבוד אב ואם, so why is Yaakov punished? Second⁴, it is quite obvious that Yaakov loved his parents, and would have certainly returned home at the first possible opportunity. He must have, therefore, had a very good reason why he felt it was more important for him to remain in Lavan's house. While we discuss his reasons in another essay⁵, we must still try to understand why he is punished if he had good reasons to remain.

We may answer these questions with another. Could we truly say that the whole episode of Yosef being sold to מצרים was simply a punishment to Yaakov? Are we to minimize the guilt of the brothers as being the cause of Yosef's fate⁶? Rather, we might propose that Yosef's being sold to מצרים was the fault of his brothers. However, what is not understood is why Yosef never sent a message to his father that he was alive. Why did he wait 22 years to do so? Obviously, Yosef had very good reasons⁷ to keep his predicament from his father! But, if he would have known that his father was in a state of mourning and in great pain⁸, he would have ignored his reasons and sent the message immediately. Why did Hashem let Yaakov suffer so, in a state of mourning for 22 years?

To this the גמרא answers that Yaakov was punished for doing basically the same thing to his parents. Yes, Yaakov surely had good reasons to delay returning home. However, if he would have taken into account the suffering he caused his parents by them not seeing him for 22 additional years, no reason would suffice. Even though his parents had sent him to the house of Lavan, he should have realized that they most certainly did not mean for the separation to last for so long. The

¹ The wording of the גמרא is כבוד אב ואם is greater than תלמוד תורה, which would translate as תלמוד תורה is greater than כבוד אב ואם. However, the fact that Yaakov was not punished for the years he was learning would only prove that learning Torah is equal, not necessarily greater (for even if it was equal he would not have been punished). The מהרש"א אלו דברים משנה (פאה א:א) teaches that the גמרא here is basing itself on the fact that the ש"א אדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרו קמת לו לעולם הבא. כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו ומלמוד תורה כנגד פלג:

² Although we usually say the Beis Midrash of Shem V'Ever, the מהרש"א explains that Shem had died at this point.

³ שלחן ערוך סימן רמו סעיף יח: ת"ת שקול כנגד כל המצות היה לפניו עשיית מצוה ות"ת אם אפשר למצוה להעשות ע"י אחרים לא יפסיק תלמודו ואם לאו יעשה המצוה ויחזור לתורתו:

⁴ The מהרש"א deflects the first question by answering that Rivkah had sent Devora her nursemaid to tell Yaakov that Eisav was no longer angry and that he could return home. When exactly this happened is not clear. If so, this would certainly strengthen our second question of why Yaakov ignored this message.

⁵ See Yaakov and Eisav, climbing the stairway to heaven.

⁶ We might compare this to the commentators who are of the opinion that Pharaoh would not have been punished for what he did to the Jewish people (since it was preordained by the בתרים) if not for the fact that his cruelty was above and beyond what had been prophesied.

⁷ See Miketz Musagim: Diber Kashot

⁸ The מפרשים explain that every mourner is given a special blessing from Above that after a while the pain of his loss is diminished. (See מועד קטן ה: and ברכות נח:) Since Yosef did not die, Yaakov was not provided with this blessing. He, therefore, mourned for the entire 22 year period.

fact that he was insensitive to this suffering, led to him being punished by Yosef doing the very same.

The above helps explain why the words ימים רבים, which relate to the long separation, are connected to the words ויתאבל. It was not the separation itself that was Yaakov's punishment; that was the fault of his brothers and had nothing to do with Yaakov. However, the pain caused by not knowing if Yosef was alive, ויתאבל, was his punishment for being insensitive to his own parent's suffering. Thus, the words ימים רבים are meant to be juxtaposed to the words of רבקה to Yaakov as he left for Lavan's house: (כו:מד) וַיִּשְׁבֹּת עִמּוֹ יָמִים אָחָדִים עַד אֲשֶׁר־תָּשׁוּב תָּמַת אָחִיךָ. For his lack of sensitivity to his mother's plea of ימים אחדים and for letting them stretch out to ימים רבים, he too is destined to endure mourning Yosef for ימים רבים .

Questions for Further Thought:

- a. Do you think that Yaakov was held to a higher standard of כיבוד אב ואם because Eisav particularly excelled in that מצוה?
- b. Can you think of any other parallels between Yaakov's time spent in the house of Lavan and Yosef's stay in Egypt?