Surviving or Thriving?
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Option 1: Buried in Egypt - A Sign Of Strength!?

This Shabbat we finish the Book of Genesis, the first of the Five Books of Moses. Quick, anyone know the first verse in Genesis? (In the beginning, G-d created...) Of course! Now how about the last verse? Anyone know the closing verse of the Book of Genesis?

It's a hard verse to know, most aren't familiar with it. It is even more difficult to appreciate this closing verse.

It reads: "And Joseph died... They embalmed him, placed him in a coffin (and buried him) in Egypt."

The verses just before this one are beautiful verses, they describe Joseph telling his brothers that a time will come when G-d will surely remember them and they will return home to the Land of Israel. He asks his brothers that he be remembered at that time and taken out of Egypt along with them. The final words of Joseph to his brothers, "Pakod Yifkod" reverberate to this day, they are words of a covenant, they are full of promise and hope. It would have been much more uplifting and inspiring had the Book of Genesis ended on this theme.

There's a classic rabbinic rule, "Msaymim B'Tov" which means we should end on a good note. So why end the book of Genesis with this verse about the burial of Joseph in Egypt? Why end on a downer?

Have you ever been in synagogue when one of the Five Books is completed? There are 3 powerful words that the whole congregation says aloud, in unison. Chazak, Chazak, v'Nischazek! Let us be strong, Let us be Strong, Let us strengthen each other!

Joseph’s promise can lead to that declaration of strength. But how can the verse about Joseph’s Burial in Egypt lead to a declaration of Jewish strength?!

(We know from the beginning of this Torah portion how adamant Jacob was not to be buried in Egypt. He asked of Joseph to bring him back to be buried with his fathers, he insisted and made Joseph swear to fulfill this request. It seems rather obvious from that part of the story that the ideal is to be buried in Israel).

The Rebbe insists that this last verse of Genesis be read as a positive verse. Joseph’s burial in Egypt must be seen as reassuring and uplifting, and as the declaration of Chazak, Chazak! implies, the knowledge that Joseph remained in Egypt as long as the Jews there did, that must be a great source of strength.

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1 A Personal Note: I (Mendel Rubin) came to study in NY at age 10 in 5744. I didn’t have a “place” by the Rebbe’s Farbrengen, so I stood on “The Bleachers”. It was hard to hear the Rebbe on Shabbos from that distance, (though Yidden like R’ Eliezer Zirkind and R’ Azriel Wasserman, both OBM, would hear and give some Chazara in between Sichos) and my Yiddish was poor at first, so I stayed mostly for the total experience, the Niggunim, and because my father insisted “the Neshoma hears.” (I went out once to play Sticks and Belts in the Library driveway, but that didn’t end well - a different story - so I never went out again). Late 5746 or early 5747 was the year I “inherited” a closer place from which I could much better hear the Shabbos Farbrengens. The Rebbe did not yet farbreng every Shabbos. This Farbrengen of Parshas Vayechi 5747 was one of my first “hearing” Shabbos Farbrengens. I do distinctly remember the Rebbe’s question in this Sicha. I remember being struck that Torah MUST (according to the Rebbe) end on a positive note; leave us with an uplifting message.

2 There are (at least) two different Sichos (Vayechi 5747 and LS 25) that deal with this question, and the Rebbe answers it somewhat differently in each one. In the 5747 Sicha the Rebbe speaks (quite strongly and directly) about the Freidiker Rebbe’s Ohel, like
Jacob and Joseph were father and son, but they were different people, with different missions.

Both Jacob and Joseph dealt with foreigners and the outside world. Jacob had his share of Esav and Lavan. He did come down to Egypt. But Jacob only involved himself to the extent necessary. Even in Egypt he established a House of Study and a secluded Jewish enclave in Goshen. And he didn’t want to stay there one unnecessary moment. After his passing he wanted to be brought home to Israel.

Joseph’s mission was to be IN Egypt. Even after his passing, he belonged there. And his commitment to his brothers that his remains would stay in Egypt as long as the Jewish people were there was a source of solace, comfort and inspiration. It gave the Jews strength. That’s why this verse gets us to say Chazak! We are not alone; we are not abandoned as we face new challenges. Joseph is with us! Not from a distance, but right here, where we are!

Chabad shares this Joseph’s spirit. Chabad Houses are here to stay. The Rebbe encourages Chabad Shluchim to stay at their posts for lifetime missions. It’s not always possible and sometimes changes need to be made, but for the most part Shluchim don’t move to places for 2 year stints or until a better opportunity arises.

Some agencies or organizations are there to help people move on to bigger and better places. Chabad can help with that, too, but its core mission is to build and support and strengthen individual Jews and Jewish community wherever Jews live. Chabad sets down roots, and raises children and lives their lives – in and with those communities.

(Dirah b’Tachtonim, etc... you can go on).

Deep down Chabad shares Jacob’s spirit too. There’s a part of each Chabad that yearns to go back home, and that tension and synthesis defines us. But that’s a different story. Tonight we’re talking about Joseph and that sense of responsibility and commitment to one’s mission, don’t abandon ship or put yourself first. Be there and be there 100%.

(You can do the speech about the balance between Yaakov and Yosef models, rotzuy and shuv in this context, “In Velt and Ohys Fuhn Velt” at the same time, etc)

There’s a message here for each of us. Often we sit here in our Jewish life-situations dreaming and yearning for something more ideal. (A campus with more Jews? A city with a kosher restaurant? A summer spent in Jerusalem?) Like Jacob, sometimes those are goals to pursue, especially longer-term.

But like Joseph there’s a lot to be said about being Jewishly committed, at least for now, to the place where you are now. No matter how small, regardless how lowly and distant. Even a place like Egypt!

Like the Mall-sign says: You are HERE! This is our mission, this is our place, and our job is to make a dwelling place for G-d right here, to maximize its potential, make the most of what we have, to be invested, to discover hidden resources we never even knew it had. Be here – and give it all you got!

**Option 2: Switching of the Hands**

Guys, everyone show me what a spiral staircase looks like. (Everyone does a little wiggle with their finger). Ok, so everyone knows that. It’s almost a universal symbol.

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Yosef’s burial in Egypt, as a source of uplifting inspiration and reassurance and connection. Remember this was very soon after Hey Teves, when much of the opposition’s argument was that the Freidiker Rebbe’s legacy did not live on. In Lekutei Sichos vol 25 the Rebbe differentiates between the styles and avodah of Yaakov and Yosef. I tried to blend both in this speech.
(Now cross your hands like Yaakov did with Menashe and Efraim) See how I am holding my hands here? Ask any kid who studies the weekly Torah portion and they will tell you this hand-positioning symbolizes the story of Jacob and Joseph with Menashe and Efraim.

Here’s what happened: Jacob is dying. Joseph his beloved son comes to see him on his deathbed, and brings along his two sons, Jacob’s grandsons, who are named Menashe and Efraim. Joseph sits his two sons down so his father Jacob can bless them before he dies. He puts the older son Menashe at his father’s right hand and his younger son Efraim at his father’s left hand.

Jacob switches his hands. He puts his right hand on Efraim’s head and his left hand on Menashe’s head. Menashe is the oldest, so Jacob’s right hand should be on his head. Joseph tries to correct his father, and wants to move his father’s hands to what he thinks the correct position should be. But Jacob is insistent. He explains: “I know my son, I know. But the younger son will be greater than him.”

You got the basic story?

There are a number of reasons why Jacob put his right hand on the younger Efraim. Some explanations have to do with Efraim’s future descendents, or psychologically it can be a way to keep checks and balances between siblings.

Now, what does this story mean? What’s the point of this story for us today, sitting here in Maryland or Texas etc.?

This is more important than it may seem at first. Jacob says that Jews will bless their children, “May G-d make you like Efraim and Menashe” and that blessing is indeed still in use today. So it’s significant!

The Rebbe takes a closer look at their names. This insight gives us tremendous perspective for our times.

Menashe and Efraim were both children of the exile. They were in fact, the first Jewish children born in exile. Joseph was far from his father and brothers, living in an alien society and culture.

The Torah tells us that their names had connection to this growing up in exile experience.

EFRAIM – comes from the Hebrew for forgetfulness. Joseph struggled to remember his father, and forget his troubles. MENASHE is the first born son, his name represents SURVIVING in a strange and challenging environment.

EFRAIM – comes from the Hebrew to be fruitful. The verse says, “For G-d caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.” Efraim is the second son; he symbolizes THRIVING, turning challenge into opportunity.

The Rebbe explains that Jacob’s switching hands, was his way of saying: Surviving is important of course, and that’s often people’s first steps in challenging situations, but ultimately surviving isn’t enough. Thriving is where it’s at.

Here’s one more visual, with the same point:

Do you know the signs of a Kosher fish? It needs both fins and scales.

Here’s something interesting the Rebbe points out, he wrote this in 1941: Fins propel a fish forward, they help with navigation and movement. Scales are a form of protective armor to defend and protect the fish. Fins are like offense and scales are like defense. To be Kosher, says the Rebbe, we need both offense and defense.
Judaism is filled with both offensive and defensive Mitzvot. Take Shabbat for example. Kiddush, Prayer and Shabbat meals and enjoyment are examples of offensive (well, not offensive in that sense...) Mitzvot; while abstaining from weekday activities and certain forms of prohibited work would be considered defensive Mitzvot.

Some Jews put much more emphasis on offense, but not as much into their defense. They do a lot of good, but don’t defend and protect their Judaism. Others are very protective and defensive, but aren’t as forward, active and positive.

This need for both Jewish offense and defense is especially critical for those on the front-line of Jewish survival, like on a college campus. Both approaches are incredibly important to incorporate into our lives and perspectives, each person according to their level and circumstance.

No question about it, we need a good Jewish defense. Defense can win championships, as they say. But when Jacob put his right hand on Ephraim, he was saying, Judaism is more about an offensive game. It's more about thriving than surviving.

Menashe is about status-quo, holding the line. Ephraim is about getting ahead, reaching new goals, opening new horizons. Let's not be satisfied with our existing accomplishments. Let's be proactive and dynamic with our Judaism, move one step forward, add another Mitzvah, learn a little more Torah.

Remember these two visuals: The switching of the hands, and the fins and scales on a Kosher fish.

And yes, about the spiral staircase, that's a Jewish message, too. (Tanya mentions Sayser HaMadreigos...) One step at a time, even if you can't see the top rung from the bottom step, if you go one step at a time, you will get there!

**Option 3: Shema Yisrael**

The verse Shema Yisrael doesn't appear in the Torah until the last of the 5 Books. A Medrash tells us that it actually originates in this week's Torah portion, as a reassuring confirmation by Jacob's sons to their father: Hear O' Israel (as in Jacob), we believe in One G-d!

*Here are a few Shema stories, (collected from a class I did on Shema) you can use one or two... Shema is always relevant, can be shared by davening, a meal or class or anytime:*

**Shema - the quintessence of a Jew**

After the Holocaust, there were Jews who went from monastery to monastery, from nunnery to nunnery, trying to find hidden Jewish children who had been entrusted to the Church by their Jewish parents. There are stories of an American Jew named Lieberman, and Rabbi Chazkel Besser, who simply walked inside and called out “Shema Yisrael!” and looked for the children who responded. These children were then returned to their families or raised as Jews.

On a flight to Warsaw in 1994, Minister Shulamit Aloni of Meretz objected to Prime Minister Rabin’s intention to include mention of the Shema as the affirmation uttered by Jews as they entered in gas-chambers in his Holocaust memorial speech. Her comment made its way to the Israeli press, and many otherwise secular Israelis were outraged and offended by it.

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak describes in vivid detail, a bomb attack on a Warsaw street by the Nazi blitzkrieg in 1939. Dozens of Jews were crowded together in a home or shelter and as the shrieking planes and exploding bombs reached a fiery crescendo, a tremendous cry of Shema Yisrael! rose in unison from every heart. There
were religious Jews of different persuasions, secular Jews, young and old - and the power of that Shema Yisrael stayed with him forever.

**A personal favorite from my Zeide Moshe: Confirming that which we have affirmed in the Shema**

A parable told by Zeide, R' Moshe Rubin: After the Shema, the chapter beginning 'vyatziv' has 15 synonyms "True, and confirmed, and proper, and correct, and right, etc." Why all these synonyms?

A wealthy man had engaged his daughter, but looked very sad. "Why aren't you happy?" asked his poor brother. The rich brother, a miser, lamented. "It is so difficult being rich. I can't make a cheap wedding, and the thought of wasting my money on strangers kills me."

The poor brother advised him: "Here's an idea. Make a grand impression, by letting the whole town know that you're cooking up a big wedding. Go into the Fish Store on Friday when it's full, stand at the end of the line, and yell to the storekeeper to prepare a lot of fancy salmon. Then proceed to the butcher, and loudly order the most expensive meat, and so on. Then, as soon as the wedding ceremony is over, I will stage a scene. I will scream that we had a fire! The food is all gone! People will be sympathetic, and you will be able to serve the guests cheap herring and kichel, while your own family will feast privately on fancy foods!"

As planned, his brother ran in right after the ceremony, pale as a sheet. "Oy! Oy! A fire! There's been a terrible fire," he shouted, "all the food is ruined!"

But the rich brother sensed that his brother sounded too real. So he asked him, "mit an emes? Is it really true?" "Yes, it's true," his brother answered. "But c'mon, just between me and you," he asked, "is it really true?" "Yes, yes, true unfortunately, very true." "But you know what I mean," he asked."True??" "Absolutely," his brother kept on repeating, over and over again to convince him that this was not game, there really was a fire.

We must confirm that we really, sincerely, and truly mean what we had just said in the Shema, that G-d is One. We ask it of ourselves again, and again, to be totally convinced by affirming it once more, again and again...

**Shema = Lift Your Eyes Heavenward**

Here's the short version (longer, original version below)

About 150 years ago, in the mid-1800's there was a simple Chassid named Pesach, like the holiday. He was a wagon-driver, who drove out on the open-roads in the Eastern European country-side. One Rosh Hashanah he went to visit the fourth Rebbe of Chabad. The Rebbe told him, "You drive on an open-wagon, so you can always fulfill the verse that says "Seu Marom Eineichem" Lift Your Eyes Heavenward, of which the first letters spell Shema.

Pesach took this quite literally. He lived with this teaching all his life. Years later when he moved up in life and had a thriving business; he made sure his offices had extra large windows so he could continue to fulfill the Rebbe's advice of lifting his eyes heavenward.

This simple Chassid needed the literal explanation, but obviously there's more to it. It's how the Shema can lift us out of our own existence and circumstance and acknowledge that which is above us. Like Emeril says, Kick It Up a Notch! Or as Chassidim would say, a Tefach Hecher, just a little bit higher.

Maybe we can use the literal meaning too. Walk down the street or sit on a bus, we see too many people looking downward at their phones. Back in the mid-1800's the Rebbe Maharash told this Chassid, Shema means to Look Up!
I (Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, sixth Chabad Rebbe) knew one of my grandfather’s Chassidim named Reb Pesach, a very simple person. He married into a family from Homel (Gomel) and did well selling (wholesale) merchandise to storekeepers in nearby towns. For Rosh Hashanah of 5627 he traveled along with other Chassidim, including the famous Chassid Reb Mordechai Yoel, to be with the Rebbe Maharash in Lubavitch. In the note he handed to the Rebbe he described his livelihood, and pointed out that he travels in the open wagon along with his merchandise.

“So you can always fulfill “lift your eyes heavenward...” (Isaiah, 40:26) the Rebbe continued, “Shema is Yisrael.”

When Reb Pesach left his private personal Yechidus with the Rebbe Maharash, he went to Reb Mordechai Yoel and asked him to explain what the Rebbe had told him. In simple terms, Reb Mordechai Yoel explained that synagogues make large windows, not only for better natural light, but also to be able to see the heavens, which represent the Heavenly Throne, and all this can lead to increased fear of heaven. The Rebbe says, by traveling in a wagon on the open road, you are able to fulfill this constantly. The abbreviation of these three Hebrew words spell SHEMA, and when you reach this level of Shema, then one is at the level of Yisrael. Reb Mordechai Yoel explained the difference between Yaakov and Yisrael, and explained that when one lives by “Seu Maron Eynechem” one reaches the level of Yisrael.

Reb Pesach would visit Lubavitch every two or three years. I saw him the first time on Erev Rosh Hashanah of 5652 as he was walking from the ohel to the synagogue, and he told me the story of his first Yechidus with the Rebbe Maharash that had taken place on the 4th of Tishrei 5627 between Mincha and Maariv. He said, “After Reb Mordechai Yoel explained the Yechidus to me, a light went on in my heart, and I wanted to understand more. My neighbor was the Chassid Hirshel, he studied with me from time to time until years later I was able to study on my own a few lines of Tanya, Torah Ohr and Lekutei Torah. That Yechidus stood me on my feet.”

I was young at that time (says the Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak). But I was old enough to sense and appreciate the energy and deep pleasure that R’ Pesach was experiencing as he told me his story. What was most incredible to me was that 25 years had already passed since that first Yechidus, and he was still felt energized and pleasure when talking about it.

Today, I look back at my notes from more than 50 years ago; my memory comes alive with the imagery of the Ohel, the synagogue, the Chassidim in the background that I remember, and those whose faces I don’t know...

Years passed and Reb Pesach became wealthy, and went to live in Lodz, Poland and became a prominent manufacturing merchant. In 5688, he was already a very old man, at least 90, and he once again told me of that original Yechidus in 5627, all said with the same energy as if it had happened only yesterday. He said that while he no longer travels by wagon all the time, he made sure to have large windows and to sit near them all the time to fulfill the words of the Rebbe. “More than 60 years passed. Yet every time I say Shema in the prayers, or when the Ark is opened, or during Kedusha, or even at the closing prayers of Yom Kippur – and I pray that the same will be at my final Shema Yisrael – I always think of the words of the Rebbe to me: “Shema is Yisrael.”

I will admit unashamedly, (says the Freidker Rebbe), that when I looked upon this simple merchant, Reb Pesach the son of Reb Yisrael of Homil, when I saw his white beard and sincere sensitivity written on his face, and his dedication and connection with a few words from his Rebbe – I was jealous of him. (Sefer HaSichos 5703, Achron shel Pesach)