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Vayechi – Reclamation and Redirection

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“And Jacob concluded commanding his sons, and he drew his legs [up] into the bed, and expired and was brought in to his people.” (Genesis 49:33)

With his sons gathered around his bed to receive final blessings and instruction from their beloved father, Yaakov drew his last breath. With his death came the end of an era. The sun of the Patriarchs had set as the sun of the nation of Israel began to rise. But Yaakov was much more than a father; he was a unifying force in an often-fractured family. In last week's Parsha, Yehuda pleads with Yosef (who had not yet revealed his true identity) to release Binyamin and he says, “For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not see the misery that will befall my father (Bereishis 44:34)!” It was the image of his suffering father that prevented Yosef from maintaining his detached façade and moved him to reveal his identity. Yosef proceeded to make a dramatic yet, puzzling statement, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive? But his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence (Bereishis 45:3).” Why did Yosef ask about his father? Just one verse earlier Yosef was moved by Yaakov's suffering. In fact, throughout the multiple conversations between Yosef and his brothers, Yosef always asks about the welfare of their father. Why during the moment of revelation did Yosef ask, “Is my father still alive?”

The commentaries offer differing approaches. Some explain that Yosef was asking if Yaakov was healthy. Others explain that Yosef wasn't sure if the brothers were telling the truth. Perhaps, they had conjured up the image of an elderly father to play off Yosef's sympathies. Still others explain that Yosef was rebuking his brothers; “Is it possible that after all you have done to my father, he is still alive?!”

There are two more interpretations that provide a dramatically different understanding of Yosef's question. Rav Shmuel Borenstein (1856-1926), the Rebbe of Sochachov in his work titled *Shem M'Shmuel* explains that Yosef was asking, “Is my father's spirit still alive? Does he still possess the Divine spirit within?” Yosef was asking his brothers if his father was the same man he had known twenty-two years ago or had he become someone different. Did he still possess the spirit of holiness or had it dissipated with time? Rav Meir Shapira of Lublin (1887-1933) explains that Yosef was posing the question to himself. He was asking, “*Ha'od Avi Chai B'Kirbi*, does my father still live within me?” Do I still feel that connection to my father? Do I desire to have him in my life? Do I still feel that love I once knew?

Yosef understood that traumatic life experiences change who we are. Truth be told, it is not just traumatic experiences – life changes us. As children we are loving, caring, trusting, optimistic and content. As we get older and experience failure, hurt, betrayal and setbacks we begin to replace these childlike qualities with sarcasm, cynicism and pessimism. Life changes us. In the moments after the revelation Yosef wonders to himself, “Can I become the person I once was? Can my father become the person he once was? So much has happened, so much has changed, *Ha'od Avi Chai*, does the father I knew still exist? Does the person I once was still exist?”

Thus, when Yosef asks the brothers this question, there is no reply. Because no one can answer this question for Yosef; he must decide for himself. Will let twenty years of difficulty and pain define him or will he choose to reclaim his former self? Yosef decides that he will be a loving benevolent brother who will work to repair his family. And he sends an important message to his father. He says, “Hasten and go up to my father, and say to him, 'So said your son, Joseph: "God has made me a lord over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, do not tarry." (Bereishis 45:9) The Hebrew phrase for “do not tarry” is “*al taamod*.” This can also be translated as, “do not stand in place.” Yosef was telling his father, “I know that the spirit of God has not been upon you for the last twenty-two years, I know that you have not been “alive” during these last two decades when you thought I was dead – but it doesn't have to continue like this. Don't stand in place – if you want to change your attitude and disposition you can do so. I have done it and father, so can you.”

In this week's Parsha Yaakov says to Yosef, “... God, before Whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked, God Who sustained me as long as I am alive, until this day. May the angel who redeemed me from all harm bless the



youths, and may they be called by my name and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and may they multiply abundantly like fish, in the midst of the land.” (Bereishis 48:15-16) Yaakov answers Yosef’s question. “I kept my connection to my God. I felt Him by my side every step of the way. I never lost myself to my suffering no matter how difficult things became. There were years of mourning and feeling bereft – but I never lost my relationship with my Father. I suffered and lost much. But throughout my life even when I have lost hope and optimism, I made the conscious decision to reclaim it. Yes, my son, I am still alive. The beracha I give to your children is that they should feel the connection and providence of Hashem even in difficult, tumultuous and turbulent times.”

As Yaakov drew his last breath he looked at his children and realized that they had managed to heal the wounds, mend the rifts and repair the broken hearts. They decided to reclaim the familial love they once had and to try to rebuild.

The era of the Patriarchs had ended, but their children continued to inspire. Yaakov and Yosef teach us one of our most important life lessons. We start out on the journey of life with hope, optimism and great dreams. But things happen. Trauma changes us, life changes us and circumstances often unfold in ways we did not expect. As a result, we lose parts of ourselves that were so precious and necessary. But we have the power to reclaim all that is lost. Because at the end of the day, we decide the kind of people we are going to be. We decide the disposition and the life outlook we adopt and maintain. We decide which traits and dispositions which will define us. We possess the power to reclaim all we have lost.