

13 Tevet 5776 | December 25, 2015

Parshat Vayechi:
From Alienation to Integration: Learning to Live
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Toward the end of last week's *parsha* (*VaYigash*), Yaacov, a new arrival in the land of Egypt, is brought before Pharaoh by Yosef. The exchange is cordial, if sad.

8 And Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" 9 And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojournings [*megura*] are one hundred thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and miserable, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojournings."

(Genesis 47:8-9)

ח וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יַעֲקֹב כַּמָּה יָמֵי שָׁנֶיךָ:
 ט וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-פַּרְעֹה יָמֵי שָׁנֵי מְגוּרֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה מֵעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שָׁנֵי חַיִּי וְלֹא הִשְׂגִּיחוּ אֶת-יָמֵי שָׁנֵי חַיִּי אֲבֹתַי בְּיַמֵּי מְגוּרֵיהֶם: (בראשית מז: ח-ט)

In response to a seeming formality, Yaacov reveals a devastating and damning assessment of his entire life. It's all been bad, he suggests, still reeling as he is from the trauma of the Yosef saga.

Rashi offers a subtle insight into the nature of Yaacov's suffering. Focusing on the word "*megura*" (translated as 'sojournings'), he sees an intimation of a perpetual state of *gerut*. He writes:

"The years of my sojournings": The days of my being a stranger. All my days, I have been a stranger [*ger*] in the land. (Rashi on Gen. 47:9)

שָׁנֵי מְגוּרֵי יָמֵי גְרוּתִי. כָּל יָמֵי הַיְיָתִי גַר בְּאֶרֶץ: (רש"י שם מז: ט)

Yaacov's experience thus far--whether due to his exile from his ancestral home, his maltreatment during his stay with Lavan, his loss of Rachel and then Yosef--was one of being unsettled, uncomfortable, not at ease. Like a stranger, a *ger*, he felt himself to be on the margins of every environment that he inhabited, never fully at home, never fully at rest.

In this week's *parsha*, *VaYechi*, the stranger finally finds a way back from alienation.

28 And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and Jacob's days, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty seven years. 29 When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called his son Joseph. . . (Genesis 47:28-29)

כח וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה וַיְהִי יָמֵי יַעֲקֹב שָׁנֵי חַיָּו שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה: כט וַיִּקְרָבוּ יָמֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת. (בראשית מז: כח-כט)

On the precipice of his death, we learn something about the latter parts of Yaacov's life. During that precious time-period of seventeen years in Egypt--seventeen years of family reunification, seventeen years of roots and growth (see Genesis 47:27)--something surprising happened. It seems that Yaacov learned how to actually live, *lichyot*. Commentators point out the unique use of the word "*vayechi*" here and see within it a swell of life (*chayim*) that overtook those many years that sapped life. In the words of Rebbe Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin:

The seventeen years that [Yaacov] spent in Egypt enlivened even those years already past. (Pri Tzadik, VaYechi)

כי השבע עשרה שנה שהיה במצרים החיה גם אותם השנים שעברו עליו. (פרי צדיק, ויחי)

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In the company of his full family, in a land not his own that became his own, Yaacov found a way, or the will, to let go of his painful wanderings and to give life back to his life, so to speak. He took hold of the years that were left and endowed them with a renewed energy.

The *Sfat Emet* offers one interpretation of how he did that.

The Torah could have said "And Yaacov was in Egypt..." [instead of "And Yaacov lived in the land of Egypt"]. The essence of this specific addition was the aspect of life that was possible [for Yaacov] even in the land of Egypt. The meaning of "life" is cleaving to the Root and Source from which one always draws vitality (*chiyut*). . . It says in the midrash on [the verse from I Chronicles 29:15] "We are strangers" that the creation of the human being in this world was not to cleave to this world alone, God forbid. But rather that through cleaving to the essence of vitality, this world will be drawn toward God. The word *ger* is related to "*maaleh gera*" [the term from kashrut meaning chewing the cud, referring to an animal that brings its food up more than once]. A person who is called a *ger* is also one who elevates him/herself. The *ger* finds a point of holiness that was lodged among the nations [and brings it to the Jewish people]. This also relates to the exile in Egypt about which it is said, "For your children will be strangers etc." [Genesis 15:13], for the meaning of this was to extract the point of holiness that was lodged in Egypt. (*Sfat Emet* on VaYe'echi, 1870)

דהנה לא הל"ל רק ויהי יעקב בא"מ. ומשמע
 דעיקר הרבותא מה שהי' בבחי' חיים גם
 בא"מ ופי' חיים הוא דביקות בשורש ומקור
 שמשם נמשך תמיד חיות. . . וכל במדרש
 גרים אנחנו כו' כי כל בריאת אדם בעוה"ז לא
 הי' כדי להידיבק ח"ו בעוה"ז. רק להיפוך
 שע"י דביקות האדם בעיקר החיות מתמשך
 גם עניני עוה"ז לה"י. וגר לשון מעלה גרה.
 שגם מה שנק' גר מי שמגייר עצמו. ג"כ על
 שם זה. שמוציא נקודה קדושה שהי' נטבע
 באומות. וכן ענין גלות מצרים של גר יהיה
 זרעך כו' ג"כ הפי' להוציא נ"ק שנטבעו
 במצריים. . . (שפת אמת, פרשת ויחי
 תרל"א)

Echoing Rashi's earlier understanding of the source of Yaacov's pain in his *gerut*, the *Sfat Emet* roots his redemption (and ours) there too. But he does so by reframing the core meaning of *gerut* altogether, shifting it away from alienation toward holy integration. To him, the *ger* (alternately translated as sojourner, stranger, convert) is not the quintessential outsider, but is rather the paradigm of the learned insider. She or he is one who ruminates and elevates; who traverses boundaries to bolster the strength of the foundations; who seeks to fully live in this world in order to uncover its holy relation to the next.

This is the *chiyut*, the "lifeliness," that Yaacov found in Egypt. Inextricably attached to the Source of his being, he consciously became a *ger*, a stranger in a strange land and rendered it strange no more. Egypt too could be a place for God and for ultimate redemption, as it had been the locus of his family's redemption. And so he got to work revealing just that, drawing out tastes of the world to come in and through his saturation in the here and now. Instead of alienating him from life, this self-conscious *gerut* became the tool he needed to finally learn how to live, *lichyot*.

As the book of Breishit ends and we head toward Shemot, the book which details Jewish captivity in Egypt, we ought to consider the possibility that the curse which brought us there--"*ki ger yehiyeh zarecha...*" (Gen. 15:13)--also endowed us with a spiritual charge in perpetuity: to learn how to be *gerim* so that we too might learn to live with awareness and sacred vitality wherever we might find ourselves.



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