The Faith of the Generations: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"Angel for Shabbat," Parashat Vayiggash
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

After 22 years of separation, Jacob was finally to be re-united with his beloved son Joseph. Jacob and family came to Egypt where Joseph had risen to a position second only to Pharaoh.

The Torah reports the long-awaited reunion of father and son. “And Joseph made ready his chariot, and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen: and he presented himself unto him, and fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while” (Bereishith 46:29). Joseph was obviously very emotional to once again see his father.

While Jacob was surely overwhelmed to re-unite with Joseph, the Torah does not describe him as embracing Joseph or weeping in joy. Rashi, citing a Midrash, explains Jacob’s lack of demonstrativeness: Jacob did not embrace Joseph or kiss him, because Jacob was reciting the Shema! At the very moment when Joseph was hugging Jacob, Jacob was busy saying the Shema!

This is a very perplexing Midrashic comment. Couldn’t Jacob have recited the Shema a few minutes earlier? Did he really need to recite the Shema at the very moment when Joseph was hugging him? And does it take more than a few seconds to say the Shema?

Even more perplexing is the fact that the Torah had not yet been given at that time. There was no Shema text for Jacob to recite! And to deepen the perplexity, a Midrash posits that the Shema verse was actually first stated by Jacob’s sons when Jacob was on his deathbed, years after Jacob’s meeting with Joseph.

What then is Rashi, and the Midrash before him, trying to teach by describing Jacob as reciting the Shema when he first met Joseph after so many years of separation?

Let us think more carefully about the Midrash that describes the origin of the Shema. Jacob was dying, surrounded by his family. The Midrash suggests that Jacob was worried: would his children carry on his teachings? Would they be faithful to the God of Israel (Israel being Jacob's other name)? Sensing his concern, his children said in unison: Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. This is the origin of the Shema! The children were reassuring their father that they would follow his teachings and his faith.

According to this Midrash, the Shema is not merely a general proclamation of faith, but is a very personal and direct statement connecting child and parent. It demonstrates an unflinching commitment to continue the faith and traditions maintained by the parent. It is a powerful link in the religious tradition, connecting the generations in a bond of faith.

With this idea as a backdrop, we may now revisit the reunion of Jacob and Joseph. Jacob was not really sure about the spiritual life of his son. After all, Joseph had lived in Egypt for many years, was dressed as an Egyptian, was married to an Egyptian woman, was raising his children in the midst of Egyptian society. Was Joseph still loyal to the God of Israel? Did Joseph still maintain the values and ideals of Jacob?

As they were about to meet, Jacob was not certain that Joseph still belonged to the people of Israel in a spiritual sense. But when Joseph was so effusive in his embrace of his father, Jacob realized that this Egyptian-looking man was in fact still a son of Israel. In a symbolic sense, Jacob recited the Shema, the proclamation of assurance that his child would indeed follow the faith and ideals of Israel. Although Jacob did not literally recite the Shema text, he deeply felt its message of unity among the generations.

When parents and children can recite the Shema together, the generations embrace each other in a mighty chain of continuity. When there is a generation gap—when either parents or children cannot or do not recite the Shema together—the Jewish tradition unravels.

In a sermon delivered at his grandson's Bar Mitzvah in May 1962, Rabbi David de Sola Pool spoke of the need for the generations of Jews to live their Judaism actively. "We must not allow ourselves to become decrepit veterans dreaming of past victories in the struggle for holiness. We have to be something more than feeble survivors of once glorious days…Our life as Jews must be the result of something more than inertia based on the physical fact that we were born into the Jewish people.…Within every one of us who is worthy of bearing the Jewish

name there must be a conscious sense of a divine call to serve our fellow men for today and tomorrow…. Weaklings among us may fall away as they have done in every generation. But the true spiritual descendants of Abraham, of Moses, and of all our heroic sages and saints keep the Jewish light kindled, and hand it down from generation to generation.”

When Jacob recited the Shema upon meeting Joseph, and when Jacob’s sons said the Shema at their father’s death bed, the generations were being united in a profound spiritual bond. We, their modern-day descendants, must also strive to say the Shema together.

Angel for Shabbat