

Advanced Age

It is known that Hashem treats *tzadikim* with tremendous exactitude. As our *avos* exemplify how one should act and comport oneself with the highest ideals, we look at their speech, action and behavior to determine the standard to become our best selves. Chazal note an interesting exchange in our *parashah* between Paroh and Yaakov Avinu that carries a fundamental lesson for us. Paroh asks Yaakov how old he is, Yaakov responds with his age and adds that his years have been full of challenge and tribulation (*Bereisheet* 47:8-9). We find that Yaakov Avinu is punished for this response, his lifespan was decreased by 33 years, one year for each word he uttered. Why indeed did Yaakov Avinu supply this extra information? Further, the calculation of years for words includes Paroh's question, not only Yaakov Avinu's reply. Why should this be so?

Vayavinu Bamikrah addresses our first question by focusing on Yaakov Avinu's assessment of Paroh's motive. Yaakov was concerned that since he brought blessing to Egypt, Paroh would want to appoint him as an advisor to his court. But that did not interest Yaakov Avinu, he wanted to spend his final years teaching his

children and grandchildren Torah in an unencumbered manner. Thus, he added that his years were full of suffering and heartache and would not be an asset to the royal court.

Rabbi Shmuelevitz in *Sichot Mussar* suggests a different approach that elucidates both our questions. The fact that Paroh even inquired about the age of Yaakov Avinu indicates that "he wore his age on his face." Had Yaakov not looked beleaguered Paroh would not even have inquired as to Yaakov's age. Hence, the question itself is part of the punishment. Rav Yisrael Salanter would often remark how one's heart is private property yet one's face is a public domain. One must be careful what expression is worn on his face since it can evoke powerful, telling responses from those around us.

Rav Ezrachi in *Birkat Mordechai* contends this supposition. Is it not natural for one who has suffered difficulties in life to look like he has had a hard life? Yaakov Avinu faced numerous challenging conditions; the conflict with his brother Eisav, living in Lavan's home for years, the abduction of Dinah, and the sale of Yosef. How can he be faulted for looking old and distressed? Rav Ezrachi explains, when one focuses on all his blessings in life, when he is overwhelmed with appreciation for all

the good, it can erase a life of hardship. Because simcha did not overtake his entire being, on Yaakov Avinu's high level, it indicates that he still felt the challenges, they were not completely forgotten. Rav Ezechiel emphasizes here the importance of always living with the feeling of '*chasdei shamayim*'.

Rav Chasman shares the following *mashal* to help us relate to this attitude. Imagine winning a lottery worth a few million dollars and simultaneously finding out that a treasured precious object of yours had shattered. The loss of the object pales in comparison to the joy of winning the fortune. Although you may be upset, you certainly do not focus on the loss. The gift of life is the greatest joy that one can possibly experience in this world, we must condition ourselves to appreciate and celebrate its reality.

Rav Cohen in *Otzrot HaTorah* reminds us of Chazal's instructive perspective. One should habituate himself to say, '*gam zu letovah*' when things go wrong. This idea means that not only will the situation eventually lead to good rather, the challenge itself, now, is good. Whatever we experience is good and part of our process for growth. Rav Pam cautioned people to say that something may be 'bitter', not to use the word 'bad'. Thus, we have our directive. Let us adjust our focus on the blessings and goodness in our lives which will then be reflected on the face we show to the world. ■

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