

This week's parashah, Vayigash, contains the grand reveal: Yosef admits who he is to his brothers. He generously assures them that their cruel treatment of him was channeled by Hashem for a higher purpose, assuring them in chapter 45, verse 7: "God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance." He then receives Pharaoh's blessing to invite his whole family to Egypt, to a territorial allotment in Goshen, and sends his brothers home to tell their father, Yaakov the good news and to bring Yaakov with them back to Egypt.

Yaakov is overjoyed when he hears the news, and he responds by setting out immediately for Egypt.

The relief and joy at reunion in this parashah is undeniable. But given that the Torah is an account of complicated human beings, there are hints of trepidation throughout the narrative, as well.

When Yosef sends his brothers to get their father, Mina pointed out in Torah study yesterday that in verse 24, he instructs his brothers, *al tirg'zu baderech*. Some translate these words as, "Do not be quarrelsome along the way," and one of the possible commentaries Rashi offers is, "Don't spend time arguing with each other about who was at fault for selling Yosef." But the text is also translated as, "Do not be anxious/do not be agitated" along the way."

Which by itself wouldn't mean a whole lot – there are many reasons that 11 brothers laden with gifts, journeying through a foreign land in a time of famine might be anxious. As Chizkuni writes, "Yosef reassured them. . . his status in the region was such that no one would dare to attack them."

But we see a similar reassurance, again without an explicit expression of fear, at the beginning of the next Chapter, when Yaakov sets out to meet Yosef in Egypt.

Gen 46:1-4:

Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Yaakov! Yaakov!” He answered, “Hineni/Here I am.”

And Hashem said, “I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation.

I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Yosef’s hand shall close your eyes.”

As Chizkuni writes: “No one in the Bible had ever been told by G-d not to be afraid, unless he had already been afraid. Yaakov’s reasoning for being fearful was his knowledge that being strangers in a foreign land and being slaves which had been decreed already in the lifetime of his grandfather Avraham would most likely commence now that he was moving to Egypt.”

Perhaps Yosef’s words when he first revealed himself to his brother also reflect that cosmic understanding. As Nechama Leibowitz writes: “Two clauses of purpose, setting forth the aims of divine Providence occur here, one after the other. First the minimum purpose of saving a life from starvation, “to ensure your survival,” followed by the second, but greater and more sublime aim, alluding to the future, historic destiny of the people: “to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance.”

And perhaps, that, too, is what Yosef hints at when he instructs his brothers not to be agitated on their way to their father.

The family is making a momentous transition, which will lead to joy and prosperity in the near term, oppression and slavery in the longer term, redemption and return to the promised land in the even *longer* term. The “extraordinary deliverance” Yosef mentions is not just the deliverance from

famine now, but perhaps the deliverance from slavery in 400 years. And we cannot have a miraculous deliverance- whether from famine or from slavery- without experiencing first famine or slavery.

And perhaps Yaakov feels a psycho-spiritual fear as well. The Midrash Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer on Genesis chapter 39, opens “Yaakov heard concerning Yosef that he was living, and he reflected in his heart, saying: Can I forsake the land of my fathers, the land of my birth, the land of the sojournings of my fathers, the land where the Shekhinah of the Holy One, blessed be, is in its midst, and shall I go to an unclean land in their midst, for there is no fear of Heaven therein? The Holy One, blessed be, said to him: Yaakov, do not fear; "I will go down with thee into Egypt, and I will also surely bring thee up again"

Yaakov is moving geographically, from a place of hardship and famine to a place where he is promised abundance. He is moving from mourning to joyful reunion with the son whom he had thought lost. But exile, of whatever sort, is frightening. It is frightening to leave home, to leave everything you know, even if you are going to somewhere that is promised to be better. Any of us who have heard stories of our immigrant ancestors know that to be true.

And how much more complex the feelings for Yaakov, reuniting with a beloved son who will be like a stranger to him. Moving out of the land promised to his father and grandfather, into a place where he is a stranger, a place where *he knows* his descendants will be subjugated and enslaved.

In *hasidut*, the Hasidic tradition, there is a term for this exile that is the prerequisite of redemption: *yerida l'tzorech aliya* – literally, descent for the sake of ascent. We can think about this both on a personal and collective level. The sages write about how the Egyptian exile was the experience that forged the family of Israel into a nation. The Exile was necessary to release, in Hasidic terms, the sparks of holiness available even in the experience of slavery in Egypt.

None of this would make that experience *easy*, mind you. All these hints are contained in these words from Hashem – the last speech Hashem will make to Yaakov, or indeed to anyone in Torah for 400 years, until speaking to Moshe at the burning bush. As a last offering before silence: “Fear not. I will be with you when you go down, and I will be with you when you come up.”

For the most part, we today do not carry prophecies of where our descendants will wind up persecuted, or what redemption looks like. Nor do we have the explicit vision Yaakov received: the assurance that he was making the right choice and that Hashem would be with him through it all. And yet, even knowing what he knows, if you remove the layers of prophecy and divine revelation from the story, Yaakov chooses to go down to Egypt, to see his son and remain fed in famine – the very pragmatic, medium-term, human-sighted choice.

Our complex hearts must hold these complex truths – we make the choices about how to respond to our reality with the best information and the best foresight we have, and it is *always* incomplete. In this parashah the family is both saved from famine and sentenced to exile. In that exile are the seeds of the redemption to come, as well as the later exiles and redemptions. No ultimate happy ending.

But perhaps we can take some hope in the assurance: “I will be with you – in the highs and the lows.”

And, as Yosef instructs - we should try not to quarrel along the journey!