

## **VAYEHI 1.1 - THE SPIRITUAL SIGN**

R. Hayyim Vital explains that the soul of man is not clothed directly by the body. Rather there exists an interface which clothes the soul. It is known as a Selem. 1 Based on the Zohar, 2 R. Hayyim explains that thirty days prior to the passing of an individual, certain aspects of one's Selem, namely the Sel which relates to the surrounding lights 3 departs from his head in the secret of the verse "Until the day blows past and the Selalim have fled". 4 The Zohar cites verses from Iyov and Tehillim to advance the teaching that one's days are solely dependent on the ability to retain his Selem - It is apparent that when a person's "day", or his lifetime on earth approaches its end, this is signaled by his Sel leaving him first. 5

## **YAAQOV REQUESTS THE CONCRETE SIGN OF PHYSICAL SICKNESS TO NOTIFY ONE THAT HIS DEATH IS APPROACHING**

A narrative in the Talmud informs us that Yaaqov was the first to request and be granted that man be given a concrete sign that his death was approaching. 6 It is apparent from this source that this sign take the form of a weakening of the body or a sickness that would precede death. The proof verse is one cited from our Parasha, "And he told Yoseph, Behold! Your father is ill." 7 Why should sickness or the weakening of the body alone serve exclusively as the sign that one's time to pass from this world is at hand? Couldn't Hashem have provided Yaaqov with the more concrete spiritual sign of his near demise? In fact, in an earlier verse, prior to the one relating to Yaaqov's sickness, it had already been communicated to him that his demise was at hand. The verse reads "The days of Yaaqov had been gathered together in advance of the death of Israel". 8 Similar expressions are used prior to the onset of death of Moshe - "The days are gathering in advance of your death." 9 As well as by David "The days of David gathered prior to his death." 10 According to R. Hayyim Ben Attar the verse from our Parasha indicates that a spiritual sign had been given to Yaaqov that his death was at hand even prior to the onset of his illness. 11 This is the meaning of the verse "Our days on earth are as a Sel or shadow". 12 A similar thought is found in Tehillim "Man is like a breath; his days like that of a passing Sel or shadow." 13 Namely Yaaqov had been granted the ability to see that his Sel had been removed from himself which served as a concrete spiritual sign his death was imminent.

## **YISHAQ APPARENTLY HAD NOT BEEN GIVEN ANY OF THESE TWO SIGNS THAT HIS DEATH WAS IMMINENT**

It is quite possible that Yaaqov requested at least the concrete physical sign of sickness prior to death in response to the apparent false alarm that occurred with his father Yishaq at the age of 123. What was almost 57 years before his demise, Yishaq says to Esav "I am old and I have no idea when I will die." 14 Evidently his having no idea of the day he was destined to die is what prompted him to dispense the blessing at that time. As Yishaq was one of the righteous of the world, wouldn't Hashem grant him this ability to know his day of death? The answer lies in what the Torah states "His eyes had weakened to a state where he had been unable to see." 15 To see what? The Midrashim suggest a number of reasons for Yishaq's blindness. 16 I would like to suggest he was also blinded from witnessing certain phenomenon that occur to one prior to his death. This spiritual blindness prompted him to pre-empt a sudden death and dispense "the blessing" at that time to his son. What should have been reserved as a blessing from Yishaq adjacent to his demise; evidently was possibly given prematurely.

## **A PREFERENCE TO TRANSFER BLESSINGS ADJACENT TO ONE'S DEPARTURE FROM THE WORLD**

Yishaq appears to admit that the time to dispense the blessing would ideally occur close to death. He pre-empts his blessing with the fact that he is not privy to any concrete physical or spiritual signs that his death is approaching. Hence, rather than delay and miss an opportunity to bless his son altogether he decides not to take any chances and wait. This also appears to have been the method used by Avraham to dispense blessings to his children adjacent to his death. 17 We see a definite preference by Yaaqov in our Parasha and later Moshe in Sefer Devarim to only transfer blessings adjacent to their departing from this world. Anything earlier would be considered premature and can result in negative consequences. The additional potency of the blessings at this time might be associated with the Sel that leaves the confines of the righteous one's body to advance a more potent blessing. This is hinted at by Yishaq who says "In order for my soul to bless you before I die". 18 Evidently during the time that is adjacent to one's death, the soul in the form of the Sel is freed from the confines of the body to advance a more potent blessing. R. Hayyim Ben Attar writes that as death approaches there is a gathering of the aspects of the soul, in the secret of the verse from Tehillim - when all the parts of the spirit- soul are gathered together - your bodies expire. 19 The Malbim explains that adjacent to one's death the spirit is given a burst of energy as is evidenced by Eliyahu's conditional guarantee to Elisha for a double dose of his own

spirituality prior to the formers heavenly ascent. The removal of his physicality propelled him to increase his own spirituality allowing him to dispense double of what he previously attained in this world. 20 The Bati Legani reasons that holiness is increased at that time as a result of the evil husk losing hold of his attachment to the Selem. 21

### **IF YAAQOV WAS ENDOWED WITH THE ABILITY TO SEE THIS SPIRITUAL SIGN, WHY REQUEST THE PHYSICAL SIGN OF SICKNESS?**

The Ohr HaHayyim writes that though the Zohar records that R. Shimon Bar Yohai observed the phenomena of the loss of the Sel from his colleague R. Yisshaq; this knowledge is often withheld from ordinary people. 22 Though many are aware of this as they become more in tune with spiritual matters, it is not a universal gift. In addition, we even see this ability might even had eluded Yisshaq; albeit for reasons other than his spiritual propensity. R. Moshe Alshikh based on the same section of the Zohar in Vayehi adds that often even the righteous are only dimly aware of this phenomenon. 23

### **THE KINGS OF ISRAEL AND DESCENDANTS WERE ENDOWED WITH VISION TO PERCEIVE THE SPIRITUAL SIGNS**

An interpretation of the biblical account of the twelve spies in Sefer Bemidbar bears out this concept. The spies, each one representing a tribe of Yisrael, return from their mission with a report indicating the might and strength of the inhabitants of Kenaan. However, it was only Yehoshua, a descendant of Yoseph, and Calev a descendant of Yehuda, who were able to see that which eluded their colleagues; the Selem that nourished the physical bodies of the land's inhabitants had darkened. 24 Yehoshua and Calev knew that the ensuing result would be the imminent death of the inhabitant's physical bodies! As it says "Their Selem has departed from them." 25 This is what King David was referring to when he wrote "Man exists by virtue of his Selem." 26 This phenomenon apparently alluded the other spies causing them to err in assessing the feasibility of entering the land.

### **ON THE NIGHT OF HOSHANA RABBAH - ALL ARE GRANTED THIS VISION**

According to the meditations of R. HaAri; it is during the first half of the night of Hoshana Rabbah that we prepare a seal or Hotem for Hashem's Malkhut or Kingdom we established during the preceding Holidays. 27 At Halakhic midnight there is the life or death judgement related to this seal. After Hasot one is granted a technique to see if the spiritual sign of life remains attached to himself or if one's death is approaching. At that time he can see his etheric Sel via the light of the moon. 28 If one has, Has VeShalom been sealed for death - the Sel would appear removed from his head. 29 Ramban writes "It is a well known fact that there will be no Sel over the head of a person who is destined to die that year on the night of the seal. 30 However if it is decreed that one is to die later in the year, his Sel will return temporarily to allow him to live for the ensuing months. Thirty days prior to his death it will once again begin to diminish. 31

### **OPPORTUNITY TO BRING BACK ONE'S SELEM AFTER IT DEPARTS**

In Sefer Reqanti - a story is related whereby a certain man went out on the night of Hoshana Rabbah as was the custom to look via the light of the moon and found the Sel missing from his head. He thereby began to fervently pray and committed himself to Teshuva. He later went out and noticed that the Sel had indeed returned to it's place. 32

### **CONCLUSION**

Yaaqov evidently did not personally need the physical sign of sickness as he was endowed with the spiritual sensitivity to know his death was approaching via the removal of his Selem. He prayed for this as not all of his descendants are granted this ability. From the incident of the Meragelim - the spies; it appears as if at least the righteous of the families of the kings of Yoseph and Yehuda inherit this visual acumen. This might not be true for members of the other tribes. However, all of Israel are granted this opportunity during the night of Hoshana Rabbah - the night we establish and seal the kingdom of Hashem. Even if most of us do not make use of this technique, 31 we are all at least aware of this fact of judgement regarding the Sel - and as the noted penitent we do spend that night and next morning pouring out our prayers beseeching Hashem that our Sel not depart before it's time.

**Shabbat Shalom**

**Victor Bibi**

