

YAAKOV'S LIFE IN MITZRAYIM

Chapter 47

27) Then Yisrael settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; they had holdings in it; they were fruitful and they multiplied considerably.

כז) וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן וַיַּאֲחֲזוּ בָּהּ וַיִּפְרוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד.

28) Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and Yaakov's days, the years of his life, was one hundred and forty-seven years.

כח) וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה וַיְחִי יָמָיו יַעֲקֹב שְׁנֵי חֲמִישֵׁי שָׁבַע שָׁנִים וָאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה.

Consider the following questions:

1. In the Torah, *Parashas Vayigash* runs straight into *Parashas Vayechi* (from verse 47:27 to 47:28), as if it were one long paragraph. Why and how are the two *parashiyyos* connected?
2. Why is it important for verse 27 to tell us that Bnei Yisrael had holdings in Goshen and grew greatly in number?
3. Why does verse 28 tell us how many years of his life Yaakov spent in Egypt, but not how many years he spent elsewhere?
4. Ostensibly, the Torah's purpose is to teach us the span of Yaakov's life. If so, what is the relevance of telling us how long he lived in Egypt?
5. The clause, *וַיְחִי יָמָיו יַעֲקֹב שְׁנֵי חֲמִישֵׁי שָׁבַע שָׁנִים וָאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה*, lit., *The days of Yaakov, the years of his life, was one hundred and forty-seven years*, uses the plural nouns *יָמָיו* (*days of*) and *שְׁנֵי* (*years of*). We would therefore expect the verb that accompanies them to be in the plural form (*וַיְהִיו*, *were*). Why, then, does the verse use the singular form (*וַיְחִי*, *was*)?
6. The last verse of *Parashas Vayigash* tells us: "*Yisrael settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen.*" Yet *Parashas Vayechi* opens with the statement, "*Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt,*" without mentioning the land of Goshen. Why is that?

We have explained before that the word *יָמָיו* (*life*) is used to refer to years of tranquil stability, and that Yaakov had described the first 130 years of his life as mostly "sojourning" rather than "living." Verse 28 refers to the last 17 years of Yaakov's life, the ones that he spent in Egypt, as *the years of his life* (*יָמָיו*) because Yaakov spent those years in tranquil stability, surrounded by all his sons and their families. **[This answers Question 3.]**

But this raises another question: If the term *יָמָיו* includes only years of tranquil stability, why does the verse continue, "*[the years of his life] was one hundred and forty-seven years*" — as if **all** his 147 years were tranquil? This can be readily explained in light of human nature: If a person lives for a thousand years in peace and

contentment, and then his fortunes change and he has several years of misery, he would soon begin to describe his whole life as being an unhappy one. Conversely, if someone who has lived a life of suffering then experiences a turnaround, it would not be too long before he began considering all his years as one long period of contentment. The Torah thus stresses that when he settled in Goshen, the 17 years that Yaakov enjoyed there enabled him to consider all his 147 years as “*the years of his (tranquil) life.*” **[This answers Question 4.]** This psychological insight also explains why the verse refers to those years in the singular: *The years of his life was* (וַיְהִי) a single block of *one hundred and forty-seven years.* **[This answers Question 5.]**

Still, this begs the question: How could Yaakov have lived a tranquil life in the impure, perverse environment of Egypt, knowing that he and his family were living under the aegis and influence of the guardian angel of that morally deficient country?

The answer is that Yaakov and his family did not dwell in Egypt proper. They lived in the land of Goshen, which was a partially independent province in Egypt and was not under the spiritual protection of Egypt’s guardian angel. How so? Goshen belonged to Yaakov and his family, as his grandmother, Sarah, had received it from the ruling Pharaoh at the time when he had gifted it to her in his vain attempt to convince her to marry him.

Sarah’s acquisition of Goshen spiritually cleansed the land of the forces of impurity and imbued it with sanctity. The Torah thus tells us (verse 27), וַיֵּאָחֶזּוּ בָּהּ, they (all of Israel) *had holdings in it*, i.e., they had a sacred connection to Goshen, similar to their sacred connection to Eretz Yisrael. Proof that the Jews were not subject to the authority of Egypt’s angel is the fact that their population increased at a supernatural rate. As our Sages have stated (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:8), Jewish women gave birth to six babies at a time. **[This answers Question 2.]**

It was because Goshen had become a place in which Yaakov’s descendants could live in a sacred environment that Yaakov was able to live there serenely for 17 good years, unconcerned about the decadence of Egypt and the evil influence it could have on his family. Verse 27 thus serves as the explanation of how Yaakov was able to *live* (i.e., tranquilly) in the land of Egypt. To emphasize this connection, verse 28 (the first verse in *Vayechi*) immediately follows verse 27 (the last verse in *Vayigash*), with no break in between. **[This answers Question 1.]**

One might have thought that Yaakov needed the sacred environment of Goshen for himself as well, not only his children (lest he lose some measure of his holiness in Egypt’s contaminated atmosphere). But that is not so. The roots of his personal *kedushah* were so deep and so ingrained that the impurity of Egypt would not have affected him. To underscore this point, the Torah mentions Goshen only in verse 27 but not in verse 28. *Yisrael* (i.e., the Jewish nation) *settled in the land of Egypt*, i.e., *in the land of Goshen* (verse 27) – for only in Goshen would their purity remain intact. *Yaakov* himself, however, could *live* anywhere *in the land of Egypt* (verse 28), for he would not be adversely affected. **[This answers Question 6.]**

THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508 – 1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title “HaKodosh” (the Holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. He simultaneously focuses on both the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all using one or two concepts.

These sheets are drawn from the Alshich on the Torah published by Feldheim and are in memory of Yental Bas Yitzchok, Mrs Jean Silkin. They seek to expand the spectrum of readers who can appreciate the Alshich’s true greatness.