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וישב

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The "Child of Old Age"

By Yochanan Cramer

As פרשת וישב opens, יוסף, a 17-year-old shepherd, reports back to his father of his brothers' wrongdoings. The next פסוק is an interesting one. וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִכְּלִ-בְּנֵי בְנֵי-זָקָנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים, and ישראל liked יוסף more out of all of his children because יוסף was a "child of his old age", so he made יוסף a striped coat. One could ask many questions about this פסוק, such as "Why is יעקב suddenly referred to as ישראל?" but what is really interesting is the term בְּנֵי-זָקָנִים הוּא לוֹ. How can we translate this? One is that יעקב especially loves יוסף as יוסף is "a child of his old age". Or it could be יעקב especially loves יוסף since יוסף is like a "child of old age, to him (יעקב)". One explanation takes into account what יוסף is to יעקב age-wise, while the other explanation takes into account what יוסף is to יעקב trait-wise. Either way, it will change the meaning and provide more insight into why, in specific, יוסף was the favorite son of יעקב altogether.

One could simply say it means a "child of old age", meaning a child that יעקב had in old age. However, there is much more to uncover, for this is the first of two times that this phrase בְּנֵי-זָקָנִים appears in the entire תורה. In תורה רב's German commentary on the תורה, תורה רב clarifies, "There was a wonderful person in יוסף. Not יעקב, rather 'ישראל' saw in him the most excellent of his sons, בן זקונים הוא לו, he saw יוסף as ... the carrier of all his spiritual achievements." תורה רב believes that this phrasing is referring to יעקב considering יוסף as if he shares the soul of יעקב and is carrying out יעקב's spiritual achievements while יעקב still lives. אבן עזרא has a similar opinion, yet takes the phrasing a little bit more literally and says "יוסף was born to יעקב when יעקב was ninety-one years old. בנימין, his brother, is also referred to in the תורה as a 'ילד זקנים', 'a child of his old age' (בראשית מד:כ). After יוסף and בנימין, no other children were born to יעקב". And therefore, these two, specifically, are referred to as the children of his old age. But how can this be? Aren't all the sons of יעקב born in his old age? רמב"ן adds, "יוסף and זבולון were not more than a year or two older than יוסף". רמב"ן continues, and says "that it was the custom of the older fathers to take one of their younger sons to be with them to attend them.", i.e. to be their caregiver. אבן עזרא may be correct that בנימין was also born in יעקב's later years, and that the phrase "בן זקונים" can also be attributed to בנימין, however, יוסף was יעקב's number one caregiver by tradition.

רמב"ן gives another interpretation and says that בן זקונים refers to יוסף's own characteristics. A few lines down from the previous quote רמב"ן brings אונקלוס, תרגום אונקלוס, which translates בן זקונים to mean "he was a wise son". The רמב"ן says that אונקלוס had intended to say that in his father's eyes, יוסף was a knowledgeable and wise son, and his understanding was like that of an older learned man. יעקב passed on to him wisdoms and secrets of the תורה, and יעקב found his son to be intelligent and profound beyond his years. With these insights, we can understand why יוסף was יעקב's favorite son, and why יוסף is called בן זקונים. May we learn from the story of יעקב and יוסף, about fathers' hopes for their sons, about sons caring for their fathers, and about fathers being careful not to pick favorites, especially when they are blessed with many children during their lifetimes just like יעקב.

Trusting 'ה

By Ephraim Fischer

In this week's פרשה, we are told the story of יוסף. It is a story we are all acquainted with: יוסף was sold into slavery by his brothers, and then his master gets him sent into prison, and eventually, he rises up to become the second in command of Egypt. While in prison, יוסף asks the שר המשקים to remember him. He says, "כִּי אִם-זָכַרְתִּי אֶתְךָ כְּאִשְׁרִי יִטֵּב לְךָ וְעָשִׂיתִי-גָא", "עַמְדִי חֹסֵד וְהִזְכַּרְתִּי אֶל-פְּרֻעָה וְהוֹצֵאתִי מִן-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה do me the favor of bringing me up to Pharaoh to get me out of this house. A famous מדרש תנחומא on this states that after this plea, 'ה said about יוסף, "You have abandoned your trust in me and put all your trust in the שר המשקים, as you asked him twice to remember you. Because you asked him twice, you will have to spend another two years in prison". This is why in next week's פרשה, it says that יוסף was released at the end of two years, these are the two years of punishment in addition to the initial ten years he already spent there. One glaring question on this is: what did יוסף do wrong? We have a concept of השתדלות in Judaism, that you must put in effort for 'ה to help you, and this was exactly what יוסף was doing! All he was doing was putting in effort to get out! What was his sin?

יוסף answers this question in his book of מוסר called "מדרגת האדם". He says that the השתדלות of יוסף wasn't to make himself favorable in the eyes of 'ה. When he had initially asked the שר המשקים to remember him, he should have felt bad for asking, and wished he had just trusted in 'ה. Instead, he doubled down. Instead of feeling bad, he asked the שר המשקים a second time to remember him and try to get him out of prison. The first instance of asking was just יוסף putting in his own effort to try and get out of prison. The second instance showed that he didn't have faith that 'ה would get him out of prison. This is why he was given a greater punishment for asking twice.

This מדרש can also explain another redundancy later in our פרשה. Later on, when the שר המשקים gets out of prison, it is said about him that, "וְלֹא-זָכַר שְׂרֵה-הַמִּשְׁקִים אֶת-יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּח", that he didn't remember יוסף, and he forgot him. Why do we have to say that he both didn't remember יוסף and he forgot him? The two times he forgot יוסף correspond to the two times יוסף asked him to remember him. רש"י says that when the פסוק says he didn't remember יוסף, this means that he didn't remember him that day. When the Pasuk says that he forgot יוסף, it means that he forgot יוסף for a long time after this. The reason that he forgot יוסף is because יוסף put all of his trust into him instead of putting his trust into 'ה. Because of this, 'ה made יוסף forgotten until יוסף returned to 'ה.

One last insight on this is the fact that יוסף was released two years later, as the פסוק in next week's פרשה says that יוסף was released, "מִקֶּץ שְׁנָתַיִם יָמִים". According to the מדרש, this פסוק means that יוסף was released after two years because of his punishment. However, the word מקץ has many different roots, such as its usual meaning, end, or "some of" (מקצה), "some of his brothers" ("אחיו", "beginning" (רמיהו לד:טו), "מִקֶּץ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים", "In the beginning of seven years"), "disgusted" (בראשית כז:מו), "קִצְתִּי בְּחַיִּי מִפְּנֵי בָנוֹת חִת", "I am disgusted with my life because of the Chiti women"), or "wake up" (ישעיה כו:יט), "הִקְיִצּוּ וְרָנְנוּ שְׂכְנֵי עָפָר", "Wake up and be joyful, all who reside in the dirt"). רב אברהם דוב מאוריטש noticed this, as he wrote in his commentary, בת עין, that in the beginning, יוסף thought that the world ran purely on nature, so he put his trust into the שר המשקים. While he thought the world ran like this, he was in a spiritual sleep. After two years, he "woke up". He realized that 'ה controls our world, and he has to put his trust in 'ה. This is why it says "מִקֶּץ שְׁנָתַיִם יָמִים", because, "קֶץ מִשְׁנָתוֹ וּבָא לְבַחֲנֵת חַיִּים", we learn from the language of "קֶץ", here meaning awaken, that יוסף awakened from his sleep and came into reality. If we look back at what יוסף wrote, he later says that 'ה wanted יוסף to know that it wasn't the שר המשקים who let him out. 'ה wanted him to know that everything lies in His hands. With this insight from רב אברהם דוב, we see that 'ה only let יוסף out once יוסף realized that he would not be let out by the שר המשקים, but by 'ה. 'ה wanted יוסף to know that everything was from Him, so only once יוסף woke up from his spiritual sleep was he let out of prison. From here we learn that we should try our hardest to trust in 'ה, and believe in השגחה פרטית, that everything that has happened to us in this world is from 'ה.

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