

## Va'Yechi – 5783

It occurs to me as I am beginning to write this week's Davar Torah that most of you are probably not aware of how much choreography is involved in order to fulfill the mitzvah of reading and hearing the Torah read in public. Like everything else in Judaism, the dos and don'ts list are quite long. For starters, the Torah is supposed to be read three times a week plus on the Shabbat during the day. That's why we have minyan on Thursdays. It is one of the prescribed days for reading. Also, there are technically supposed to be three people on the bimah around the dais during the reading. One does the actual reading, the second has to call up the aliyot (that's the Gabbai Rishon's job) and the third has to follow scrupulously in the chumash or some such text to make sure no error is made in the reading of the text and in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, that same person used a highly stylized series of hand signals indicating the notes to be used during the singing because, if you have never noticed, all there is in the actual scroll text are the letters without notations of any kind.

During one of the days of the High Holydays this past fall, we lost some time in the conduct of the service because I had inadvertently made a mistake in where the Torah should be rolled to in order to begin immediately with the appropriate reading. Rabbi Harvey made sure he made a comment about the etiquette involved according to the Halacha because the sages, always mindful of the necessity to keep services moving and engaging the audience in a positive way, knew you couldn't keep the crowd waiting while the correct location was found.

The early sages were very good at providing some clues for the observant and knowledgeable reader by inserting spaces and varying the

ways in which the sentences were written down. For instance, at the end of this week's full parsha, there is a large gap to indicate the end of the Book of Bereshit and the beginning of the Shemot. The song Moses sang after the crossing of the Red Sea appears in the Siddur, we use daily in exactly the same way in the parsha from which it comes, Beshallach. There are all sorts of signposts like that if you know what to look for. So, in order to not keep everyone waiting on Thursdays as I hunt for the right place to begin, I have tried to roll ahead after we are finished on Shabbat to the beginning of the next parsha.

You would have thought I would remember the trouble I had last Shabbat to find the beginning of this week's parsha. But this past Thursday, I was completely lost in the text. Naturally, being the obsessive / compulsive that I am, I had to figure out after the services where I went farblonegette. It took a while, but I found the right spot, which was right in the middle of the text, i.e., no space before, like the beginning of a paragraph and no space in the middle of the column. We began this morning right in the middle of the column, seemingly implying the continuity of the text from last Shabbat, like holding one's breath and then starting again. This led me to reflect on the fact that last Shabbat, I thought about pointing out we read through three columns without any spaces or breaks then as well.

Naturally, the sages devoted much thought and reflection on the hidden meaning of these passages relayed through the way the text appears rather than just what it says. If you aren't sure of what I am implying think about what they say about a woman power dressing or how a host or hostess goes out of his or her way to set a table in a very specific way to impress the guests and set a mood. Last week, I sort of concluded that the whole episode of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers and his emotional reaction to what

he did was emphasized by the way there were no breaks in the page. Like a child rushing through a narrative without stopping until he or she got the whole story out. But what of today? Last week we ended the story with the fact that Joseph had arranged for his brothers to live in Goshen and there they thrived. And we pick up immediately with And Jacob lived there for 17 years. And what do I think is being brought to our attention with this seeming run-on story begun in the middle?

In my mind and I have to admit I have this week read other divrei Torah and a couple of them agree with me somewhat that we are forced to reflect on the fact that once previously in Bereshit, in Genesis, a parsha begins with the same thought. In Chaya Sarah we begin with, and Sarah lived. Both parshiot focus on the end of life of a patriarch or matriarch. In both the story focusses on the burial of that person. To remind you, Abraham buys the cave in Machpelah and buries Sarah there. Jacob asks his family to take his body back to Canaan and bury him in that same location. In Chayei Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael reunite seemingly harmoniously and without any rancour and accompany Abraham's body to lie with Sarah. But that is not what happens in today's Va'Yechi.

Joseph is the focus of all the instructions and the arrangements and at first his brothers fear that with their father gone and out of the way, they will have to finally deal with the ramifications of their previous treatment of their brother, the favorite. Joseph has to reassure them that he means them no harm, and all will be well and that seems to be the end of it. But we are left with some business unfinished. We know and the scribes who wrote the Torah down, under the leadership of Ezra the scribe in Babylonian times, that sooner rather than later, the jealousies and competitions for favor among and between the brothers, the tribes, would lead to further trouble down the

road and splits between the tribes that took generations to solve and work out. While the text was being true to the facts of the story, the sages are trying to remind us that while there was peace there, it is not that easy to forgive and forget what was done to Joseph and we need to remember that forgiveness takes a supreme act of lovingkindness. Just saying sorry or trying to show remorse does not mean that it is sufficient. Family unity is something that takes effort continuously and purposefully. Even for us in this modern age. Shabbat Shalom.