

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye
Toldot Yaakov Yosef
Parshas Vayechi

"And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years, etc., and the days of Israel approached to die, and he called his son Joseph, etc." (Genesis 47:28-29). Many questions arise: Why is this story included in the Torah of God, which is perfect? Furthermore, how does this portion relate to every person and every time? Why are there two titles, Jacob and then Israel? Moreover, when life is mentioned, Jacob is named, while for death, Israel is mentioned—this seems counterintuitive since, as it is said, "there is no authority on the day of death" (Ecclesiastes 8:8), and the name Israel implies rulership and authority.

It seems to me that I heard from my teacher an explanation of the verse, **"And Judah approached him and said, 'Please, my lord, etc.'"** (Genesis 44:18). It is taught in *Berachot* (32a): "A person should always arrange the praise of the Omnipresent and then pray," etc. And in *Avodah Zarah* (7b), there are those who hold the opposite view, etc. The explanation is that one master said one thing and another said another, but they do not disagree. The Ramban wrote that "the power of the act resides within the act," and the creation of the entire world is like the spider whose garment comes from itself. In every kind of suffering, there is a spark of holiness from the Blessed One, but it is covered in many garments. This is the concept of the seven maidens appropriate to be given to Esther from the house of the king (Esther 2:9).

[NOTE: This teaching explores the balance between praise and prayer, drawing from the Talmudic discussion in Berachot and Avodah Zarah about whether one should first praise God and then pray, or vice versa. While the approaches seem contradictory, they ultimately aim at the same goal—connecting to God.]

The Ramban's idea that "the power of the act resides within the act" ties into this. Just as the world emerges entirely from God (like a spider weaving its web from within itself), even in suffering, a divine spark is present, though concealed in "garments" or layers of obscurity. These garments represent challenges and tests, akin to the "seven maidens" given to Esther, symbolizing hidden layers of divine presence.

The explanation suggests that when we recognize God's presence in all circumstances—especially in suffering—we can either start with praise to uncover the hidden divine spark or begin with prayer as an act of faith that God is present even in concealment. Both paths aim to connect us to the divine and transcend the limitations of hardship. END NOTE]

When one pays attention to understand that even here, the Blessed One is with him, the garment is removed and revealed, and the suffering is nullified, etc. This is what is

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meant by "arrange His praise"—this is His praise, that "the whole earth is full of His glory" and "in all their distress, He is distressed." When one realizes this, there is no distress, and then he may pray, because the suffering is nullified once one knows how to arrange His praise in this manner. [This is the secret of "You prepare their heart; You incline Your ear" (Psalms 10:17), which I also heard from my teacher; see elsewhere for more on this.]

*[NOTE: The verse **"You prepare their heart; You incline Your ear"** (Psalms 10:17) highlights a profound spiritual dynamic: when a person aligns their heart and thoughts to recognize God's presence, it naturally draws God's attentive response. The "preparing of the heart" refers to one's inner work—focusing on God's omnipresence and sovereignty—while "You incline Your ear" reflects God's reciprocal closeness and willingness to hear and respond. This idea underscores the transformative power of mindful prayer and intentional connection with the Divine. END NOTE]*

Another master holds that one should pray first, and this is because of his belief that the Blessed One is there as well, and afterward, he can arrange His praise. May the wise understand this.

With this, we can understand, **"And Judah approached him"**—a term of thanksgiving and praise to the Blessed One, **"and said, 'Please, my lord,'"** because all suffering is within this Name. And when one approaches Him with thanksgiving and praise, as explained above, the suffering is nullified. These are the words of the wise, and they bring grace.

*[NOTE: The phrase **"Please, my lord"** signifies that all suffering is encompassed within the divine Name, indicating that even hardship is part of God's presence. By acknowledging this, one can uncover the hidden spark of holiness within the suffering, leading to its resolution or transformation.*

Suffering is seen as a concealment of divine light, wrapped in layers or "garments." By recognizing that even hardship is part of God's presence, one shifts their perspective, connecting to the hidden divine spark within the experience. This awareness removes the "garments," revealing God's closeness and reducing the perceived suffering, as it transforms into a pathway for spiritual growth and connection. END NOTE]

With this, we can understand, **"And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt"**—meaning, as in the verse, **"From the narrow straits I called upon God"** (Psalms 118:5). That is, he paid attention to understanding that the Life of life, Who is called Jacob, dwells in every lowly and humble place, as in **"I dwell with the contrite and lowly of spirit"** (Isaiah 57:15). And this is "in the land of Egypt," in all forms of suffering and constriction. The title of "seventeen years" corresponds to the holy Name **Ahavah** (אהבה), whose

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numerical value is 17, a Name associated with kindness and severity. The goodness that reaches a person comes from kindness, and suffering stems from severity. Thus, His Name resides there, and this is the meaning of **"And he lived"**—the suffering was nullified when he set his mind to understand this. Reflect on this deeply.

*[NOTE: The verse **"And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt"** symbolizes finding life and divine presence even in suffering and constriction ("Egypt"). By recognizing that God dwells even in humble and challenging places, as in **"I dwell with the contrite and lowly of spirit"** (Isaiah 57:15), Jacob experienced true vitality. The "seventeen years" symbolize the divine Name **Ahavah** (אה"ה), representing both kindness (goodness) and severity (suffering). Understanding that God is present in both aspects transforms suffering into spiritual growth, nullifying its pain. END NOTE]*

It is also possible to explain further, beginning with the verse from Isaiah (1:5): **"Why should you be stricken anymore? You will continue to rebel, etc."** I heard a parable from the Maggid, Rabbi Mendel, about a fool who entrusted a deposit to another person. Each time he added more to the deposit, he thought his balance was being reduced. Finally, he asked, "How much more must I give you so that I have nothing left with you?"

The lesson of the parable is clear: the entire purpose of the Torah and mitzvot is only to enable one to merit clinging to the Divine, as it is written, **"And to Him you shall cling"** (Deuteronomy 10:20). This is explained by the commentator on the Rambam in the second chapter of *Yesodei HaTorah* (Halacha 1), who writes: "When one contemplates them, his soul will desire to cling to Him, and all the mitzvot were given only to bring us to this level," as it says (Deuteronomy 30:19), **"Choose life, so that you may live, to love the Lord, etc."** See there.

Over the years, hearts have diminished in their ability to understand and perceive this matter, focusing instead on making the Torah a crown for self-aggrandizement and personal pride. Even those who repent often do so to display their own righteousness. When a person learns a single law, he becomes a little proud; when he learns more, his pride grows further; and if he learns works of *Halacha* or *Kabbalah*, his arrogance increases further. Such a person distances himself from God, as it is written in the Talmud (*Sotah* 5a): "The arrogant cannot dwell in the world together with Me."

The Torah scholars who "wear out their feet" traveling from city to city, as it says in Parashat *Vezot Haberacha* (Deuteronomy 33:3), **"They are struck at Your feet, etc."**—this too can be understood in light of the verse from Isaiah. **"Why should you be stricken?"**—the more they wear out their feet going to yeshivot to learn, **"You will**

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continue to rebel"—they distance themselves further from God. This is also hinted at in the verse (Genesis 3:15): **"He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."**

With this, we can understand the verse, **"And Jacob lived"**—when he behaves with humility ("ekev"—heel, indicating lowliness), he clings to the Life of life, as it says, **"I dwell with the contrite and humble of spirit"** (Isaiah 57:15). But when he prides himself on the title *Israel* ("I am the head"), thinking himself a leader, a Torah scholar, or a Kabbalist, then **"the days of Israel approached to die."**

I also heard a parable about a king who wished to live forever. He was given a remedy: to distance himself from arrogance and cling to humility, and he would live. Reflect on this.