



A VORT FROM THE ROSH YESHIVA

מורינו הרה"ג ר' אברהם גורביץ שליט"א

פרשת ויגש

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל יַעֲקֹב כִּמָּה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל פַּרְעֹה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מַגֻּרֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה, מְעַט יָרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי, וְלֹא הִשִּׁיגוּ אֶת יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבֹתֵי בְיָמֵי מַגֻּרֵיהֶם. (בראשית מז, ח-ט)

Pharaoh said to Yakov, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" Yakov answered Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourns have been a hundred and thirty years. Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the life spans of my forefathers in the days of their sojourns." (Bereishis 47:8-9)

This week's *Sidrah* describes how Yosef, after revealing his identity to his brothers, invited them and their families to join him in Mitzryaim. The Torah lists all seventy descendants of Yakov Avinu who came to Mitzrayim, and then it recounts the details of Pharaoh's initial meeting with Yakov and his family.

When Pharaoh met Yakov for the first time, he inquired about Yakov's age and, in return, received a lengthy explanation. The Meforshim note the apparent inappropriateness of a king asking a visitor about his age.¹

The Ramban explains that Pharaoh was struck by the appearance of Yakov, who seemed older than anyone he had ever seen in his entire kingdom, which is why he asked the question. This also clarifies Yakov's response that he had not lived nearly as long as Avrohom or Yitzchok but had aged prematurely. At 130 years old, he was considered young compared to the ages his ancestors had reached; however, due to a life filled with troubles and travails, he had aged ahead of time.

The Rosh Yeshiva *shlita* provides an alternative interpretation to explain Yakov's unusual response. He points out that Yakov uses two terms in his reply, and it is important to understand the distinction between them. Yakov first stated that יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מַגֻּרֵי were 130 years. He then described how יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי were few and bad. He then again referenced the יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי that his ancestors had attained. What do these terms mean? What message was Yakov trying to convey to Pharaoh? Furthermore, what lesson can we draw from this dialogue?

The distinction between these two descriptions of life can be illustrated with a simple parable. Imagine one person travelling alone through a dark tunnel with no lights to guide him. In contrast, another person is enjoying a leisurely stroll with a close friend through a beautiful botanical garden on a bright summer day, accompanied by the sound of chirping birds.

¹ It is interesting to note that when Pharaoh posed his question, he referred to both *days* and *years*. The Meforshim explain that this choice of words reflects his wisdom, as he understood that time is a precious resource, not just something to be measured in years. Pharaoh recognised that every single day in the life of a great man is important and productive – and Yakov was clearly a very great person.

A simple analogy illustrates this concept: the way we value precious materials compared to coal. Since gold is valuable, every gram is carefully weighed due to its significance, while coal doesn't warrant such meticulous measurement. In the same way, time is our most precious commodity and deserves to be counted in days because each day holds immense value. As stated in the *possuk*, לִמְנוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע וְנִבְא לִבֵּב חֻכְמָה, *To count our days, so teach us, then we shall acquire a heart of wisdom* (Tehillim 90:12).

If someone were to ask which of these individuals is alive, the straightforward answer would be that both are. Clinically speaking, both are alive in the same manner; both have functioning hearts pumping blood, and lungs breathing air. However, on a deeper level, their experiences of life are incomparable. The life of the unfortunate person alone in the dark tunnel is severely compromised when compared to the joyful existence of the other individual in the garden.

Yakov was speaking to Pharaoh, saying: “If you want to know the *יְמֵי שְׁנֵי מְגֹרֵי* – the days of my heart and lungs functioning – these amount to 130 years. However, the true days of my life, *יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיִּי* – the days when life was lived to its fullest – were few and filled with hardship.” In his modest assessment of life, Yakov expressed that it was not comparable to the *יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיִּי* of his ancestors and the achievements they had made. He understood that the ultimate quality of life is not measured in clinical terms but rather by the level of closeness to Hashem that one attains. Due to his humility, he was articulating his dissatisfaction with the spiritual heights he reached during his life compared to those of his forefathers.

This concept is found multiple times in Chazal. For instance, the Gemara (*Nedarim* 64b) mentions that certain individuals are considered to be “dead.” Among those listed are the blind person, the *metzora*, and the pauper. The Rosh Yeshiva explains that this comparison can be understood when we look at the quality of existence experienced by these individuals. Those who cannot fulfil the yearnings of their souls live in such deficiency that their existence cannot truly be regarded as life. The contrast between someone who can see and appreciate their beautiful surroundings and the unfortunate blind man is immense - it's comparable to the difference between life and death. Similarly, the impoverished individual, who lacks even the basic necessities for survival, is akin to a dead person when viewed alongside someone whose needs are met and who can live with dignity. The *metzora*, forced into isolation, also experiences a severely compromised existence.

The Midrash (*Tanchuma Vzot Haberachah*) further highlights this concept, stating that *רְשָׁעִים בְּחַיֵּיהֶם* *קָרוּיִים מֵתִים*, *the wicked, even when alive, are considered dead*. Those who are consumed by earthly desires and live in ignorance of Hashem’s *hashgachah* lead fundamentally lacking lives. Even though they are physically alive, they are viewed as “dead.” To truly be considered “alive,” one must be aware of Hashem and maintain a constant connection with Him through *tefillah*, *berachos* and *bitachon*. As a result, an individual who fails to recognise their higher purpose and significance in life finds themselves in a state of profound inadequacy.

We can learn a fundamental lesson from Yakov Avinu’s response to Pharaoh: true life is not merely about existing; it is about genuinely living. What constitutes a quality life? It is living in alignment with the ideals of the Torah. Anything less results in a life that is deficient and lacking. May we strive to embrace a true and meaningful existence by recognising our elevated purpose in life. Through learning Torah, performing *mitzvos*, and connecting with Hashem, we can ensure that we are truly “living” life to its fullest.

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