



Partners In Torah
San Diego-Los Angeles
Study Guide
Take home Dvar Torah

Vayigash

תשפ"ד

December 19, 2023

By: Rabbi Avi Cohen

Our learning tonight will be dedicated to our brothers and sisters in Israel

Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah

has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

After Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, they hurried home to tell their father Yaakov that Yosef was still alive and that he was the ruler of Egypt, second in command only to Pharaoh. Yaakov's response was to immediately go down to Egypt to see Yosef while he still could, which would complete the process of having the Jewish nation in Egypt to commence the exile that Avraham Avinu had foretold many years earlier.

Yet Yaakov's moving his family to Egypt to be with Yosef presented a formidable challenge: What would keep his small family of 70 souls, the kernel of the nascent Jewish nation, "Jewish" and assure that they would not assimilate into Egyptian culture and disappear? Yaakov had raised a holy generation of people, the שבטי ייה - *the 12 holy tribes*, and their children, as to whom the overwhelming Egyptian culture and way of life were completely antithetical. Egypt was morally depraved with a most liberal and permissive society. What strategy would be strong enough to combat the depraved Egyptian society's negative influence in which they would be immersed? Yes, they would live in Goshen, a private sector, but what would keep them from wanting to meld into the surrounding Egyptian society?

Yaakov had but one option. He would have to fight it with the strongest weapon in the world, the one capable of neutralizing Egyptian immorality: the Torah. Therefore, before going down, Yaakov sent his son Yehudah to Goshen (in Egypt) to start a yeshiva for Torah study. The Torah tells us (Genesis 46:28):

כח) וְאֶת יְהוּדָה שָׁלַח לְפָנָיו אֶל יוֹסֵף לְהוֹרֹת לְפָנָיו גְּשֵׁנָה וַיָּבֵאוּ אֶרְצָה גֹשֶׁן

28) He sent Yehuda ahead of him to Joseph to prepare ahead of him in Goshen, and they arrived in the region of Goshen.

What was the nature of this preparation? The Midrash Tanchuma (Vayigash 11) fills in the details:

יא) וְאֵת יְהוּדָה שָׁלַח לְפָנָיו לְהִתְקִין לוֹ בֵּית תַּלְמוּד שִׁיהָ מוֹרָה שֶׁמֶ הוֹרָאָה שִׁיהָ מְלַמֵּד אֶת הַשְּׁבֵטִים

He sent Yehuda to establish a place of Torah study to teach the tribes.

Yehuda was sent to create a בית התלמוד – *a house of Torah study, a/k/a - a yeshiva*. Only a yeshiva where Torah is taught and learned would guarantee that his children and grandchildren would remain “Jewish” and resist the overwhelming influence of the very antithetical world around them.

The precedent for this strategy, and its success, was well established. When Shem, Noach’s son, came off the ark in the year 1656 from Creation, he faced the same challenge. How would he maintain his level of holiness and connection to Hashem through all the challenges of idol worship that would confront him? To this end, he established a yeshiva for Torah study that lasted 531 years. Avraham Avinu and Yitzchak Avinu studied in the yeshiva when both Shem and Eber, Shem’s grandson, were alive. Shem passed away in the year 2158, and in the year 2168, when Yaakov was 60 years old and on the run from his brother Esav, he spent 14 years hidden in the yeshiva.

The yeshiva served as a fortress, protecting and insulating all within from the different forms of idol worship that were popular in the day. One of the greatest challenges to them was the Tower of Babel, which sought to enlist every person on the planet to rebel against Hashem. It seems like they were going to succeed because Hashem had to personally intervene to thwart their plans. The Midrash further informs us that the only one to openly oppose them was Avraham Avinu, which truly bothered them; but because they saw in the stars that Avraham could have no children, they concluded that he posed no threat to their plan, since he had no future generations.

Where were Shem and Eber during this cataclysmic world event? Where they always were, safe and secure in their yeshiva, protected from

the raging rebellion against Hashem staged by the entire world around them.

The Midrash tells us:

אוצר המדרשים - מדרש הלל הנקרא ספר המעשים עמוד 127

חמשה צדיקים עמדו בעולם נח שם ועבר אשור ואברהם נח לא הקפיד לעבוד אלא עמד ונטע כרם שם ועבר הטמינו עצמם ועסקו בתורה אשור אמר האיך אני רואה דרכן של רשעים הללו עמד והלך לו שנאמר מן הארץ ההיא יצא אשור אברהם אמר על זה עומד עולם איני מניח אלהי שבשמים

*There were five righteous people in the world (when the Tower of Bavel was built): Noach, Shem, Eber, Ashur, and Avraham. Noach paid no attention to them, and he planted a vineyard. **Shem and Eber hid themselves and studied Torah.** Ashur said, "How can I live among these evil people?" and he moved away. Avraham said, "The world stands upon this, how can I abandon Hashem?" (And he openly opposed them)*

It is interesting to note that we do not find criticism in the commentaries against Shem and Eber for their insular behavior. Nowhere are they faulted for worrying only about themselves and not going out to spread the Torah that they learned. From Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov all having studied there, we see that although the yeshiva doors were open to anyone who wished to join, no one left the walls of the yeshiva to go out and try to teach Torah to the masses as did Avraham. What stands behind this policy of insulation, and why was Avraham Avinu different?

As the only true source of pure Torah, Shem and Eber had to take extreme precautions to protect their Torah from any outside influences. The only way to do this was not to expose themselves to any erroneous ideas that could possibly insidiously penetrate their minds and corrupt the pure Torah inside them. Hence, they stayed secluded and detached from the outside world within the four walls of their holy yeshiva. Avraham, on the other hand, could always use Shem and Eber as a touchstone through which

he could recalibrate himself should he get out of balance. If, however, the benchmark itself becomes distorted, there is no longer any immutable standard, and all is lost forever. It may be that Avraham studied daily in the yeshiva before “going on the road,” which fortified him for the daily challenges that he would face when he would confront the idol worshippers he sought to convert to belief in Hashem.

So, what did they learn in the yeshiva of Shem and Eber? We know that Avraham Avinu and the forefathers all kept the mitzvot of the Torah even before it was given to the Jewish people on Sinai, but the Midrash teaches us that they learned other interesting things also:

אוצר המדרשים - פסיקתא חדתא דרוש לחג הפסח עמוד 487

וכשברא הקב"ה עולמו ברא ספר יצירה וצפה בו וממנו ברא עולמו כיון שסיים מלאכתו הניחו בתורה והראה לו לאברהם ספר יצירה ולא הבין בו דבר יצאה בת קול ואמרה האתה רוצה לדמות דעתך עם דעתי כלום אינך יכול להבין בו יחידי לך אצל שם ועבר הלך אצל שם ועבר והביטו בו ג' שנים עד שידעו לצור עולם

When Hashem created His world, He also created the Book of Creation, which He looked into and from which He created His world. Once He finished His handiwork, He placed it in the Torah and showed it to Avraham Avinu, who couldn't understand a word of it. A heavenly voice came out and said, "You want to equate your mind to Mine? You can't do it alone; go to Shem and Eber." He went to them and studied it for three years until he knew how to make a world.

The version of the Book of Creation available today is attributed to Avraham Avinu, and much later, organized by Rabbi Akiva.

The Talmud (Tractate Yuma 28b) teaches us that from the time of Shem and Eber, the Jewish people always had yeshivas.

דאמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא : מימיהן של אבותינו לא פרשה **ישיבה** מהם. היו במצרים **ישיבה** עמהם, שנאמר : לך ואספת את זקני ישראל. היו במדבר **ישיבה** עמהם, שנאמר : אספה לי שבעים איש מזקני ישראל. אברהם אבינו זקן ויושב **בישיבה** היה,

שנאמר : ואברהם זקן בא בימים. יצחק אבינו זקן ויושב **בישיבה** היה, שנאמר : ויהי כי זקן יצחק. יעקב אבינו זקן ויושב **בישיבה** היה, שנאמר : ועיני ישראל כבדו מזקן

*Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said, **Starting with the forefathers the Jewish people always had a yeshiva for Torah study.** When the Jews were in Egypt, they had a yeshiva, as it says (Exodus 3:16) "Go and gather the wise men of the Jewish people." When they were in the desert, they had a yeshiva as it says (Numbers 11:16) "Gather for me seventy wise men from Israel." **Avraham Avinu** was a wise man who sat in a yeshiva as it says (Genesis 24:1) "And Avraham was elder, well on in years." **Yitzchak** was a wise man who sat in a yeshiva, as it says (Genesis 27:1) "And when Yitzchak was a wise elder." **Yaakov** was a wise man who sat in a yeshiva, as it says (Genesis 48:10) "And Yaakov's eyes were weak as Yaakov was זקן" wise in Torah.*

The reason for this is clear. Just as in the tumultuous times of Shem and Eber the only way to preserve the integrity of the Torah and keep it pure of the negative influences that threatened to distort it was to study it diligently and deeply from a master Sage in a holy yeshiva secluded and set aside from the outside world. This environment also groomed the Sages for the next generation to be knowledgeable in the pure Torah so that they can pass it on to the next generation of yeshiva students.

When we follow the transmission of the Torah from Sinai until today, we can see that yeshivas for Torah study were present in every generation and that they provided the proper environment for the Torah to flourish. The first few Mishnas (teachings) in Pirkei Avot trace the transmission of the Torah from Moshe through the end of the Mishnaic era, a period of almost 500 years. As we traverse from Mishna to Mishna and from generation to generation, we are introduced to the yeshiva leaders of their generation.

In the generation of the rabbis of the Talmud (the roughly 312-year period after the Mishnaic period) it was the same. There were yeshivas in the Babylonian cities of Sura, Pumbedisa, Naharda'a, and Machuza.

These yeshivas served the same function as the yeshiva in the time of Shem and Eber, providing a sterile area for the Torah to be learned, mastered, and disseminated, pure of any outside influences.

As it stated in the Midrash and going forward, yeshivas have never ceased from the Jewish nation and have provided the critical ingredient for its preservation since the time of Shem and Eber. In any country where Torah Jewry remained pure and vibrant, it was only due to a yeshiva in its midst that served as the beacon of Torah light to the community. Many communities that did not have access to a yeshiva ultimately withered and died.

The yeshiva's role for the Jewish people has shown its effectiveness in our world as well. The proliferation of Torah that we experience in the world today results from the educated students of the American and Israeli yeshivas. They have gone out into the world and have established homes based on the Torah's teachings as learned from their Rabbis when in the yeshiva. As the numbers grew, entire communities were built by these like-minded individuals who built shuls to pray in and schools to educate their children in the ways of the Torah.

While we know that Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were holy and learned in Torah, the Talmud is careful to teach us that they were, "זקן ויושב" **"The Elders who sat in a Yeshiva."** Why did they need a Yeshiva? What is the secret sauce that makes a yeshiva the anchor of the Jewish people?

A yeshiva comprises all the components necessary for Torah to grow and flourish. First, it is an oasis of holiness that preserves the hallowed values and lessons of the Torah, providing the breeding ground for future

scholars and educated working people who will conduct their lives according to the Torah.

At its head, sits the Elder Sage, called the “Rosh Yeshiva” “Head of the Yeshiva,” who serves as the mentor for all the other Rabbi teachers, and who oversees and directs the Torah learning of the students. The Rosh Yeshiva will give high level lectures that the students will review and analyze in an effort to plumb the depths of the Rosh Yeshiva’s understanding of the material. This broadens their horizons and inspires them to achieve greater understanding on their own as they seek to follow the example set forth by the Rosh Yeshiva. Although the Rosh Yeshiva is the greatest scholar in the institution, he will still interact in Torah study with the other Rabbis and students, discussing and clarifying topics in the Talmud, and Jewish law.

There are many facets to the Torah, as it was written to be understood in different ways. The Sages teach us that there are 70 basic facets to the Torah, but it is also written that there are 600,000 facets to the Torah. The number 600,000 is the core number of the Jewish nation who left Egypt and received the Torah on Mount Sinai. This means that each Jew has his own unique understanding of the Torah as it is reflected through the prism of his essence.

In a yeshiva, every student has a different perspective to add, and even the Rosh Yeshiva and the Rabbis are constantly learning from the different approaches to the Torah.

This concept is best expressed in a statement from Rabbi Chanina in the Talmud (Taanit 7a).

דאמר רבי חנינא : הרבה למדתי מרבותי, ומחבירי יותר מרבותי, ומתלמידי יותר מכולן.

Rabbi Chanina said: I learned a great deal from my teachers, and from my peers I learned even more than I learned from my teachers. But from my students I learned more than from all of them.

This is why it is important to have many yeshivot for our boys. Each Rosh Yeshiva builds his yeshiva based on his personality and strengths; hence, each yeshiva will have its own unique character. Having a broad spectrum of yeshivas allows students to find the yeshiva that fits their personality and style of learning. When in the yeshiva that suits his personality, he is the best situation for growth and can maximize his potential.

The Torah discussions are intellectually rigorous and intense, and the process trains the students to debate and make a point, as well as how to think logically and draw the proper conclusion from the words of the text.

The “chavruta” system, which pairs up two students who study together to dissect, analyze, and process the information, thrives on the differences in the students who see things differently and assists them to come up with the correct understanding of the material. When they reach an impasse, they go to their Rebbe for clarification. Very often, both opinions are correct and will be validated by one of the Torah giants of a previous generation.

This method of study can get very loud, and it is not unusual to hear yelling from time to time as one of the parties trying to make a point gets frustrated with his opponent, who just doesn't see the light – or has an opposing opinion.

The yeshiva also teaches the boys Torah philosophy, mussar – proper character traits, and Torah ethics.

The yeshiva also serves as a beacon of light to all who wish to avail themselves of Torah. Many members of a Jewish community with a yeshiva in its midst will attend the yeshiva after work and spend time studying Torah with a chavruta. Even those who cannot study in the yeshiva may use it as

their synagogue in which to pray. Having a strong connection to a yeshiva guarantees that they will remain on the beaten path of Torah instead of wandering off inadvertently.

The focus in a yeshiva is to understand the Torah, which is the word of Hashem. The Sages teach us that Hashem and the Torah are one. How is that? The Torah comprises all the wisdom and information that is in Hashem's mind, so to speak. Hashem, in the most brilliant and ingenious way, has condensed and hidden all that infinite information into the Torah. This infinite information is hidden in codes within codes, and layer upon layer, like an onion, *ad infinitum*.

Because it is so deep, mastery of the Torah requires many years of diligent study. Yeshiva students who seek to continue their pursuit of Torah will continue learning even after they marry and have children. These married men study in a Kollel - a group of married men who have elected to continue their Torah study after marriage. These special men and their special wives have opted for a holy Torah life instead of pursuing a career and earning a comfortable living. The Kollel pays a modest stipend to the scholars in support of their efforts, but it never quite covers the daily expenses for these families. They live a humble lifestyle and willingly exchange many of the comforts and luxuries in life for a life dedicated to Torah. The wife may work, or close family members often contribute funds to help make ends meet. It is a great mitzvah to help such families since those who support them receive a portion of the reward for the Torah studied. This indeed is what motivates a woman to marry such a man. She is his full partner in all of his Torah study and will receive equal reward in the world to come.

Our wonderful city of Detroit is privileged to have *seven* different Kollels. Each has chosen a different niche of Torah to study in depth, and

each contributes to the holiness of our city. These young men are the future teachers and leaders of the Jewish people.

One of the Torah's most remarkable qualities is that the Torah can be learned at any level. Unlike a reader or math book which is geared to the age of the learner, the Torah can be learned on any levels. For example, a child in the first grade of Yeshiva Beth Yehudah learns the first words of the Torah, "בראשית ברא אלקים - In the beginning Hashem created ..." and it makes perfect sense to him. A scholar will study the same three words and delve into 20 commentaries on those same three words. At the end of the Vilna Gaon's life, he did not use any books of Torah commentary. He instead studied directly from an actual sefer Torah- *Torah scroll*. His understanding of Torah was so advanced that there were no books suitable to his level, his having surpassed all of the current authors. So, as he studied the very same words as the first grader, he was at the same time contemplating explanations miles and miles deep. The Vilna Gaon once said that all 613 commandments are hinted to in the very first word of the Torah - *Bereshit*. So, when he read the first word of the Torah, he could review the list of 613 commandments.

The study of Torah also has a profound influence on those who study it. When a person studies the Torah and absorbs the holy, G-dly information within it, he becomes sanctified by the holy information within him. Over time, as he amasses more and more Torah, the Torah ideas and concepts replace his personal ideas and thoughts. Now, through the light of the Holy Torah, which he now embodies, he is able to see the world and world events through the perspective of the Torah and Hashem.

Torah study is the conduit through which we can know the will of Hashem directly; hence, it is the lifeblood of the Jewish people. Though we no longer have prophets, we can still know Hashem's will by listening to the

holy Sages who steep themselves in Torah day and night and who are privy to it through the Torah, where it resides.

This is why a yeshiva, including all those in it, is the repository for knowledge of Hashem's pure will. That is where all they are striving to understand and integrate into themselves is, Hashem's word in His holy Torah.

This was Yaakov's strategy in sending Yehuda to set up a yeshiva before going down to Egypt. A yeshiva would create the proper environment for the preservation of the Torah and the Jewish people.

My teacher, Rabbi Chaim Kraiswerth זצ"ל, was once speaking to a gathering of alumni from his yeshiva and he told them the following thought.

There is an argument in the Talmud (Zevachim 113b) whether the flood in Noah's time entered the Land of Israel.

בשלמא למ"ד לא ירד מבול לא"י היינו דקם רימא התם אלא למ"ד ירד רימא
היכא קם א"ר ינאי גוריות הכניסו בתיבה והאמר רבה בר בר חנה לדידי חזי לי אורזילא
דרימא בת יומא והוי כהר תבור והר תבור כמה הויא ארבעין פרסי משכא דצואריה
תלתא פרסי מרבעתא דרישא פרסא ופלגא רמא כבא וסכר ירדנא אמר רבי יוחנן ראשו
הכניסו לתיבה והאמר מר מרבעתא דרישא פרסא ופלגא אלא ראש חוטמו הכניסו
לתיבה והא אמר רבי יוחנן לא ירד מבול לא"י לדברי ריש לקיש קאמר והא קסגיא תיבה
אמר ריש לקיש קרניו קשרו בתיבה

The Talmud asks a question on the opinion that maintains the flood entered the Land of Israel. According to the opinion that the flood didn't enter the Land of Israel, we can understand how the re'em (a huge animal too large to fit into the ark) survived the flood; it was in Israel. But according to the opinion that the flood entered Israel, how did the re'em survive the flood? Where could it have gone to survive?

Rabbi Yanai said, "They brought baby re'ems into the ark."

“How could that be?” asks the Talmud. “Rabba bar bar Chana said that he once saw a one-day old re’em and it was as large as Mount Tibor.” (So even a baby couldn’t fit into the ark) ...

Rabbi Yochanan said, “They put only their heads into the ark.”

The Talmud asks, “That too was impossible because Rabba bar bar Chana said that the circumference of the baby re’em’s neck was a mile long. So even their heads couldn’t fit into the ark!”

Rabbi Yochanan said, “They didn’t put the whole head in, they put just their snouts in the ark.”

“But the snout would fall out as the ark bobbed up and down on the water?” asked the Talmud. “They tied the re’ems to the ark,” came the answer.

Said Rabbi Kraiwerth ל"צ in his imitable way:

A yeshiva is like an ark. Just as an ark provides a safe haven for its inhabitants and protects them from the life-threatening waters around them, so, too, a yeshiva provides protection to its inhabitants from the life-threatening waves of false ideas and ideologies in the world around them.

The optimal thing to do is get your whole self into a yeshiva as a student to study the Torah, just as the first option of the Talmud was to, “put the whole baby re’ems **into** the ark.”

If you can’t manage to fit your entire self into the ark, at least insert your head (the next option of the Talmud). What does it mean to get your head in? Go to a yeshiva to study Torah even for an hour a day, and engage your mind (your head) in the study of Torah in the yeshiva.

If you can't get your head in, at least get your snout in (the next option). What does it mean to get your snout in? At least pray in a yeshiva, and benefit yourself from the atmosphere of the yeshiva as it is manifest in the careful and deliberate way in which they pray.

One way or the other, tie yourself to a yeshiva (the last option) because a yeshiva is an ark in today's turbulent waters.

Yaakov our Forefather appreciated the importance of a yeshiva and therefore made it his first priority before going down to Egypt, a very dangerous society to him and his family. Nothing has changed. The Jewish nation today stands in the same battle field as our forefathers did in Egypt. The antidote is the same as it was then, yeshivas, holy fortresses that protect the holy Torah and keep it pure. They also produce the leaders and teachers for the Jewish people.

Without Torah education we are lost. If we don't know who we are, and why we do what we do contrary to the world around us, we will ultimately cave in to the immense public pressure that taunts us with "why not?"

An educated Jew understands the depth and meaning behind every law and custom and wouldn't give it up for any money in the world. His soul thrives on it.

This is our mission at Partners in Torah. To educate every Jew and give him to understand the richness and the relevance of the Torah to his Jewish life in the 21st century. The Yeshiva Beth Yehuda graciously supports Partners in Torah as part of their educational mission. This is another example of how the Yeshiva is strongly impacting Jewish destiny.