



5782 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vayigash / פרשת ויגש

Yosef: The Diaspora Jew Who Self-Defines as Zion

The Midrash¹ in this week's parsha compares Yosef to Zion. Each step of Yosef's journey – from his initial favored status to his seeming downfall to his rise as viceroy of Egypt – occurred to Zion as well. Zion enjoyed an initial favored status, was cast into exile only rise again in the future. The triumphant and fulfilled dreams of Yosef prefigure the fact that soon we will “be as dreamers” when God returns the captives of Zion. The Chida further cements this connection between Zion and Yosef by noting that they have the same numerical value – 156.²

What does this teach us about Zion? Perhaps part of the lesson is the perspective that we should adopt while in the middle of the journey. There are two seemingly competing aspects of Yosef's attitude while in Egypt. On the one hand, he is invested in his adopted country. Through hard work, ambition and divine assistance, Yosef creates a new life for himself in Egypt. Whatever position he finds himself in, be it the house of Potiphar, a jail or the palace – he soon rises to the top. After a long and tumultuous journey, he becomes one of the most powerful people in the international community and helps navigate it through a debilitating famine.

But, as much as he is invested in Egypt and the world, Yosef always pines for his true home – the Land of Israel. This connection between Yosef and the Land of Israel begins at birth, which is the moment that Yaakov decides to return from Aram Naharaim back to the Land of Israel. One hundred and ten years later, when Yosef is lying in his deathbed, his final request is that the Jewish people carry his bones back to the Land. Even in jail, he relates to the soon-to-be-released baker that “I was stolen from the Land of the Ivrim.” The Midrash comments on this verse that “Yosef affirmed his Land,” and he therefore merited to be buried in the Land of Israel. Zion is etched into Yosef's heart.³

¹ Midrash Tanchuma, Vayigash siman 10.

² Cited at <https://har-habait.org/articleBody/33166>

³ Devarim Rabbah, Va'etchanan 2:8.



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In this way, Yosef is the model for the Jewish people's relationship to Zion. On the one hand, when they are in the Diaspora they should practically follow Yosef's lead and be good and productive citizens to their adopted countries. They should invest themselves in bettering the world around them and can even rise to positions of leadership.

However, similar to Yosef, in their heart of hearts they should "affirm their Land" and remain deeply connected to Zion. No matter how invested or successful Jews become in the Diaspora, we should always remember that the most successful diaspora Jew – Yosef – has an identity that is intertwined with Zion.