

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vayetzei

Learning from the Torah's Layout

— Concept: The Torah's Use of Space to Communicate Messages —

Part One: REMOVING SPACES – NO BREAKS IN PARSHAS VAYETZEI

The medium through which the Torah communicates is that of words. However, there are times when the Torah imparts an idea without adding any extra words, rather, simply by the way it arranges them.

The way the Torah breaks up section is into paragraphs, known as parshiyos (not to be confused with the term “parsha” as we commonly use it on referring to the weekly Torah portion). These come in two forms:

1. The new paragraph begins on a different line than the previous one. This is called *pesucha* (פתוחה) – an open paragraph.
2. The new paragraph begins at the end of the same line in which the previous one ended. This is called *sesuma* (סתומה) – a sealed paragraph.

Virtually every Torah portion contains paragraphs of this kind. Our parsha, however, is an exception, for there is not a single break in it from beginning to end! What are we to learn from this?

R' Gedalia Schorr¹ explains that our parsha which details Yaakov's forced journey from home and his sojourn with Lavan with all the difficulties that entailed, is the prototype parsha of exile. Exile is a time when Hashem's connection with us is not so open, nor is our understanding of events. As such, this blockage of the manifestation of the Divine presence among us is communicated by the Torah reading itself having no openings as it describes Yaakov's travails and ordeals in Lavan's house.

R' Chaim Shmuelevitz² expounds on this idea by referring to the Midrash³ which states that the purpose of the break provided by the paragraphs was to allow Moshe – and us – to pause and reflect on what had just been taught. It is symptomatic of the exile that one can never expect to be able to pause halfway to reflect and expect enlightenment. For while the exile is still in progress, events often do not make sense. Things we were convinced would take us forward throw us backward, strategies which were guaranteed to bring us success leave us in failure, and contemplating all this may lead only to bewilderment, confusion, and frustration. It is only when the exile has been seen through that one

1 *Ohr Gedalyahu*, Parshas Vayetzei. See also *Baal Haturim*, Bereishis 28:10.

2 *Sichos Mussar*, maamar 13.

3 *Toras Kohanim Parshas Vayikra* sec. 1, cited in Rashi *ibid.* 1:1 s.v. *vayedaber*.

can finally look back on the entire process and attain understanding of how things led to their ultimate outcome. This is the lesson that is communicated by the lack of breaks in our Parsha.⁴

THE BEGINNING OF PARSHAS VAYECHI

A similar observation of the above-mentioned phenomenon has already been made by Chazal themselves regarding the beginning of Parshas Vayechi.⁵ Although there are numerous breaks in the course of the parsha itself, nevertheless, it does not start with a new paragraph, but is rather a continuation of the previous paragraph. Commenting on this unusual situation, the Midrash states:

למה פרשה זו סתומה, לפי שכיון שנפטר יעקב אבינו נסתמו עיניהם ולבם של ישראל מצרת
השיעבוד שהתחילו לשעבדם

Why is this section blocked up? For once Yaakov died, the eyes and hearts of Israel were blocked up from the distress of the subjugation that [the Egyptians] began to subjugate them.

Here, too, a certain mood or attitude is communicated by the Torah, not by anything it says, but by the way in which it arranges the relevant verses. Through blocking the opening of the parsha, the Torah is reflecting the emotional blockage which was brought on by the onset of the oppression. Alternatively, it reflects the blocking out on the people's part and their refusal to recognize that things were changing, and that the climate for oppression was being set.⁶

PARSHAS BALAK

The final case of a parsha that has no breaks is Parshas Balak. There too, the Chafetz Chaim explains⁷ that although Bilaam was clearly possessed of great wisdom and, moreover, was the beneficiary of Divine revelations concerning the Jewish people, he never stopped to reflect on the path that he was taking to consider whether it might need adjusting – or replacing. Rather, having chosen a life of greed and depravity, he continued upon it without allowing anything that he experienced to give him pause for thought. This attitude then becomes reflected in the parsha which is presented in the way that reflects Bilaam's life, with no breaks.

Part Two: ADDING SPACES – BNEI GAD AND BNEI REUVEN

Having discussed a number of cases where the Torah does not provide space where we would have expected it, let us now consider the converse situation, where there is space in a place we would not have expected it.

In chapter 32 of Chumash Bamidbar, we are told of the tribes of Reuven and Gad who were blessed with an abundance of livestock, and who therefore approached Moshe with the idea of settling on the east side of the Jordan river where pasture was plentiful. In verses 4 and 5, they enumerate the territories that have already been conquered which are rich in pasture, and that they have much livestock. Then there is a paragraph break, after which verse 6 presents their request to stay on the east side of the river. This is a most unusual situation. Surely, all these verses are essentially one communication, with

4 The same idea could be applied to the other parsha in Chumash Bereishis that has no breaks – Miketz. Here too, Yosef is isolated from his family, alone in exile in Egypt. Likewise, the events of the parsha are a source of bafflement for the brothers, who cannot fathom why things are happening the way they are. This situation pertains until everything is revealed in Parshas Vayigash.

5 Bereishis Rabbah 96:1, cited in Rashi to Bereishis 47:28 s.v. *vayechi*.

6 R' Shimon Schwab, Maayan Beis Hasho'eva Parsha Vayechi.

7 Sefer Chafetz Chaim Al HaTorah, Parshas Balak (Maasai le'Melech sec. 2).

the first two serving as the introduction to the request in the third! Why, then, are they separated and placed in different paragraphs?

The Abarbanel⁸ explains that, the people of Gad and Reuven did not feel entirely comfortable requesting of Moshe that they stay on the east side. They were aware that all the tribes should, in principle, be crossing the Jordan to the Land of Canaan proper. Therefore, they decided that the best way for things to proceed would be just for them to put their situation before Moshe as if they were not sure what to do about it, and then *let him suggest* to them that perhaps they may wish to stay on the east side, an offer to which they would then agree. Moshe, for his part, was not prepared to suggest this to them, as he wanted to hear from them exactly what they had in mind and on what terms. This is what is indicated by the paragraph break after the first two verses, for that was all they initially said, hoping that Moshe would respond. What followed, however, was the Longest and Most Awkward Silence in the Entire Chumash, as Moshe indicated that any suggestion concerning the matter would have to come from them. For this reason, although verse 2 had already introduced their words with the word “וַיֹּאמְרוּ– they said,” verse 5 starts with a second “וַיֹּאמְרוּ”, as they found themselves having to initiate the conversation a second time, as indicated by the Torah through placing this verse in a new paragraph.

MEI MERIVA

One of the most unusual approaches to the episode with Moshe and the rock, known as *mei meriva*, as recorded in Bamidbar Chapter 20, is found in the Sefer ha'Ikarim or R' Yosef Albo.⁹ He explains that the sin occurred long before Moshe hit the rock, for it lay in the fact that when the people needed water, Moshe had the opportunity to take the initiative and call upon Hashem to bring forth water, thereby strengthening the people's faith in the power of a tzaddik who has bound himself completely to Hashem. Instead, however, Moshe and Aharon approached the Mishkan, awaiting instructions from Hashem, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to impart the above lesson. At that point, the only way to redeem the situation was to follow Hashem's instructions to the letter – i.e. to speak to the rock – which, for various reasons, they did not do.

Here, too it is interesting to note that verse 7, which describes Moshe and Aharon approaching the Mishkan, ends a paragraph, while Hashem's instructions appear in a new paragraph. Why would the flow of events be broken up in this way? This would appear to lend support to the Ikarim's approach, namely, that essentially, the sin *had already occurred* by that stage, with the ensuing instructions being aimed at undoing it; hence they appear in a new paragraph!

All this should encourage us to pay close attention not only to what the Torah says, but also to what it chooses to join, or to separate in between.

8 Commentary to Bamidbar loc. cit.

9 Maamar 4, chapter 22.