

THE ULTIMATE CHESED AND MISASKIM

BY DAVID GURWITZ, JD, MBA, CPA

Time flies. We are now ending *sefer Bereishis*, which describes the development of our forefathers and their lives and character traits, which are signs to us. *Maaseh avos siman labonim*.

Parshas Vayechi forces us to ask: What is life? The Hebrew word *chaim* is in the plural. In fact, it is impossible to say the word life in Hebrew in the singular form. Why?

One answer is that life is written in the plural form to teach us that life can only be truly experienced when it is shared with others. A person who lives in a vacuum is not truly alive.

The *gematria* of *Vayechi* is 34. Our sages teach us that, from this *posuk*, we learn that Yaakov had seventeen peaceful years at the end of his life, and we learned earlier in the Torah that he also had seventeen peaceful years at the beginning of his life (up until fleeing from his brother). We find the number of peaceful years Yaakov had in his lifetime.

In addition, Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch zt"l points out that the fact that the *parsha* has no physical break from the previous *parsha* indicates that the troubled years of his life - with the unrelenting tests he endured - led to Yaakov meriting to be worthy of acquiring the name Yisroel, so these last seventeen years form the happy rewarding conclusion.

Another answer is that we have two lives, in this world and in the World to Come. Therefore, another question is raised: What is the Jewish view of death and how do, or should, we deal with it?

Rav Hirsch explains and distinguishes between Jewish and Egyptian practices and beliefs of the life of the body and the soul in discussing the embalming of Yaakov after his passing:

"Embalming shows a marked contrast in the idea that it expresses to Jewish ideas. Such contrasts, when they occur, are to be specially stressed, opposing that tendency which, denying the Divine source of the Torah, like to make out that the whole genius of Moshe came from having been matured in the schools of the priestly teachings of the Egyptians. What a diametric contrast is shown here.

"To the Egyptians, the body was embalmed so that its individuality would persist. However, the soul did not remain in its personal individuality, but wandered from body to body - even to animal bodies - in manifold metamorphosis. To the Jew, the soul persists, the body wanders. Once the soul has gone home to the circle where it belongs, the body has nothing more to do with the individual. Rather, it is a mitzvah, as soon as possible, to bring the body in as close contact as possible to the dissolving earth. It becomes earth again and can then go through all the possible changes and vicis-



situdes of earthly matter.

“The Egyptians believed in the wandering of the soul and tried to protect the body from all possible wandering or change. The Jew believes in an eternal existence of the soul and hands the body over to material earthly change. Possibly, it was, therefore, that just in Egypt, Yaakov stressed strongly, ‘I am to be gathered to my people, bury me with my fathers, etc.’ Perhaps it was just the lack of belief in Egypt of the permanent individuality of the soul, as well as the embalming of corpses, that resulted in the colossal building of pyramids designed for dwellings for the dead. As one believed the soul to be wandering, one wanted to at least keep the body.

“Embalming was, accordingly, not Jewish, and Yosef here may only have made a concession to the Egyptians’ customs as they would have considered an omission as showing a great lack of piety. In true Jewish burials, one cannot see whether he left a good name behind him or he was as good as dead while he was alive. In Jewish circles, mourning only begins after the prescribed duties of tending the body have all been completed. With embalming, mourning can begin before burial, as it did here, and it is to be noticed that Yaakov was mourned for also by the Egyptians.”

There is another way to see *chaim*, which, with its four letters, is *begematria* 72, *chesed*. The *Ramchal* writes in *Mesillas Yeshorim* that Hashem created the world only because of His *chesed*, to give to us. He gives us life, in this world and the next.

I recently played a concert for the benefit of Misaskim. The *shoresh*, or root, of the word *misaskim* is *aisek*, complete absorption in activity.

Hashem sent me another of His endless gifts: The *gematria* of the word *misaskim* is ten times *chesed*, or 720. Furthermore, the letters of the word *misaskim* can also be rearranged to form the words “*asek maasim*,” complete absorption in the work of treating the *meisim*, the deceased. What does such “*aisek*” involve?

Here is what I learned in preparing for the concert and from its director, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Golding: The Misaskim organization, known primarily for its unique assistance to bereaved families during the week of *shivah*, provides many more important related services. I did not know or appreciate the extent of most of them, and I suspect that I am not alone in that regard.

As articulated by Misaskim, the six major service categories are as follows:

1. Mourners’ needs: essential *shivah* furniture, *aveilim* listings, *Sefer Torah* and *seforim gemach*.

2. Care for the deceased: prevention of autopsies/cremation, emergency funeral equipment, burials for the indigent.

3. Emergency disaster/recovery: expediting funerals, emergency transports, ritual cleansing at accident scenes.

4. Burial arrangements: *meis mitzvah*, miscarriage/stillborn interment, funeral coordination.

5. Assistance to orphans and widows: age-appropriate gifts, holiday trips, crisis management.

6. Community awareness: safety awareness, educating law enforcement, working with medical examiners.

I would like to conclude with a small glimpse of the depth of what Misaskim does:

An unfortunate incident last week, at the fire that took four *neshamos*, brings to fore the behind-the-scenes work of Misaskim. They were on the scene before 3 a.m. that fateful morning, coordinating alongside the many, many city agencies involved.

A fire like this immediately takes on the status of a “crime scene,” until criminality is ruled out. Thus, multiple agencies on the scene must be educated in matters pertaining to *kavod hameis* and how to minimize any unnecessary *zilzul* (disgrace). Some of these agencies on the scene included the New York Fire Marshall, the NYPD Arson and Explosion Squad, the NYPD Detectives Force, and the New York Medical Examiner.

The sensitivity shown by all members of the New York Fire Department, from the commissioner on down, was exemplary. At Misaskim’s request, FDNY members formed a human wall and shielded the view of the removal of the *niftarim* from the hordes of press photographers, enabling the bodies to be transported, with dignity, to the Medical Examiner’s office by Hatzolah of Flatbush ambulances, rather than in the standard

On route to the ME’s office, Misaskim requested, and obtained, extra personnel to assist the ME in expediting identification and subsequent release for the *levayah* with record-breaking speed. Once the proper certificates were obtained, Misaskim vehicles, with the *niftarim* inside, were able to get to the *levayah* in time, and then ended the long and unfortunate day by expediting the final leg of their journey with the Port Authority Police, transporting the *niftarim* to the airport for *kevurah* in Eretz Yisroel.



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