

Shabbat Vayechi Sha'lom



Painting by JMW Turner, 1835-1840

by Phyllis Chesler

So swiftly have we moved from the dawn of Creation—down into bondage in Egypt. Twelve chapters, twelve tribes, twelve months of the year. The Torah is too fast for a mere mortal such as myself. Is Bereshit really over? How can that be? Rainbows still appear in the sky, oceans and lakes remain, Nature forever enchants and delights us.

Overwhelmed by other matters, exhausted too, Rabbi Benjamin Skydell came to my rescue! I just attended his excellent class on the parsha. I learned things that I had never known. This parsha is “stumah,” closed, covered, within the Torah scroll. It is not clear that a new parsha exists. Ya’akov also closes his eyes, which means he can no longer see the future or bless Egypt with natural wonders such as the Nile overflowing – which it did, perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, when Ya’akov first arrived.

Therefore, the Egyptians mourned for Ya’akov for 70 days. And

then...What led to our long foretold bondage in Egypt? It was Yosef's distancing himself from his brothers, whom he no longer invited to dinner. This rendered us vulnerable, especially since we lived apart, lived differently, and had grown numerous. This also caused Yosef's brothers to fear that Yosef still bore a grudge against them (50:15). After all, Yosef still remained their father's favorite and the hero-savior of the last four parshiot. They were still outside the forever closed circle of Ya'akov's love.

I keenly feel the absence of all the emahot, and of all our earliest ancestors. I know that their stories, qualities, will continue to reverberate throughout the Torah but still, they all are no longer the focus, or the lesson to be learned.

And I wonder: Is Yosef's enslavement and subsequent, but brief rise, a predictor of Jewish history to come?

A very sweet Shabbat Shalom.