

# PERSPECTIVES OF THE PAST



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAYIGASH**  
**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN**

How do we evaluate the past? How do we spend our time in the present? How often do we think about the future? In his book, “The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time That Will Change Your Life,” Dr. Philip Zimbardo outlines six subjective time perspectives that people experience as they relate to the past, present, and future. Dr. Zimbardo argues that when looking at the past, it is best to be high in a past-positive time perspective and low in a past-negative time perspective. When thinking about the past, there may be “facts” as to what happened in our lives, but we have a choice to provide the past narrative with a positive spin or a negative one. Past-negative perspectives are associated with depression and getting stuck ruminating in past experiences, while past-positive perspectives help ground us better in the present and focus on the future.

From one perspective, Yaakov’s life can be summed up as one traumatic event after another: starting with a death threat from Esav, followed by Lavan’s continual trickery, dealing with Dinah’s abduction, experiencing constant family strife, the death of his beloved Rachel, and culminating with the “death” of his cherished son, Yosef. When Pharaoh asks him his age, Yaakov responds with a past-negative perspective that his life has been short and bad (*Bereishit* 47:9).

While perhaps we can empathize with Yaakov’s response because of all the hardship he had experienced, the *midrash* (quoted by the *Daat Zekeinim*) critiques Yaakov’s perspective—instead of looking back and giving a subjective stamp of disapproval on his life, he should have shifted perspectives. Instead of focusing on the trauma, he should have realized that Hashem *saved* him from Esav and Lavan, and *returned* Dinah and Yosef. The *midrash* suggests that for each word mentioned in that interaction (33 in total), a year was taken off Yaakov’s life. While Yitzchak lived for one hundred and eighty years, Yaakov only lived for one hundred and forty-seven.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski contrasts this *midrash* with another one that critiques Yaakov. The *midrash* states that while Yaakov was mourning Yosef, he exclaimed that Hashem had turned away from him. The *midrash* criticizes Yaakov's complaint by projecting Hashem's response: "I am busy setting things into motion to make his son the viceroy, and he is complaining that I have turned away?" Yet, this midrash does not identify any punishment. Why is Yaakov punished for saying his life was short and bad, but not for stating that Hashem had turned away? Rabbi Twerski suggests that there is a fundamental difference between a response during suffering and a response after suffering. While ideally Yaakov should not have questioned Hashem even amidst suffering, he was not punished because the pain of suffering is so great that he was not held accountable in the moment. Yet, after the suffering was over, when he had already been saved from his enemies and his children had been returned, Yaakov is held accountable for not shifting his perspective. Yaakov was expected to look back at the past and not complain.

In contrast to Yaakov, Yosef's success seems to stem from his ability to have a past-positive time perspective and to be future-oriented. He names his first son Menashe precisely because Hashem allowed him to forget the traumas of his childhood. Yosef's ability to totally forgive his brothers required a firm belief in Hashem's providence over past events and a strong desire to move forward and not get stuck in what had already transpired. His success as Pharaoh's viceroy stems from an ability to predict the future economic climate of Egypt, and more importantly, to devise and execute a plan to successfully avert national disaster.

While we cannot fully evaluate Yaakov both because we should not judge how people react to traumatic events as well as because we cannot fully grasp the greatness of our forefathers, the *midrash* clearly wants us to learn a valuable lesson. To the extent that we can work hard on shifting our own perspectives toward the past from being past-negative to past-positive, we will be more able to appreciate the present and plan for a more successful future.

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