

VA'ANI

Parshas Vayechi

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

You ask any adult who received his early Chumosh education in a European chaidar “What is VA’ANI?” He’ll nostalgically begin with the special melody for “Va’ani”. The story of Rachel, taught to children with a captivating melody, is vividly remembered all life.

In the Bercher Beth Hamedrash there appeared once a week a Yid seemingly a Russian immigrant, collecting tzedakah. If there was TIKUN to refresh following Shachris, he would be invited to join. One day, as someone tried to teach him to recite the BRACHA, repeating after him with difficulty, somewhat embarrassed, he began in a perfect Yiddish: “Teiere Yiddin, do not think that I forgot it all, I didn’t. Yes, I remember the VA’ANI / “and I”. (“And I” as recorded in Rashi Parshas Vayechi, in the context of Yaakov requesting of Joseph, [now in power as viceroy of Egypt] when my death will come, do not inter my body in Egypt, but rather carry my remains to the Cave of Machpaila in Chevron.) “VA’ANI”, he began in melancholy melody, “and I, where was I when your mother, my beloved Rachel passed away? Why didn’t I bring her body to that sainted burial place? (You have a legitimate complaint, my dear son, as I burden you with this heavy task, to absent yourself from your citizens for that long journey to Chevron.)

So I must apologetically tell you that this place of your mother’s burial on the road to Beth Lechem on the outskirts of Eretz Yisroel, was in response to a prophetic command. And it was chosen for a very special profound reason: When the time would come, when the Israelites will become chas v’sholom unworthy of the blessed land of Eretz Yisroel, and would be driven out into galus, they will pass Rachel’s grave. She would descend from her Heavenly abode and cry for her children: ‘Ribono Shel Olam, I sacrificed for the Holy Land,[being the second wife of Yaakov while my sister Leah was

alive. In the Holy Land it was forbidden even before given on Sinai. I knew of the danger to my life, yet I consented to the divine will to go immigrate to the land]. Now my children are driven out', she continued to cry, רחל מבכה על בניה מאנה להנחם, she cannot be consoled. Until... until she hears the prophetic Heavenly voice, the voice of eventual hope of return, the promise of **ושבו בנים לגבולם**." At this point, the Russian Jew, still in tears, but the melody changed singing the popular **ושבו בנים**.

The people, still in Talis and Tefilin, remained dumbfounded. The Russian Jew continued (with his new friends): this "Vaani" is all I remember. But it brought me back to shul and to Kashrus. The money I collect is to pay tuition for my seven year old grandson who studies in the Yeshiva. I teach him the VA'ANI, he teaches me the BROCHOS. By the time he knows the VA'ANI, I will daven from a regular Siddur instead of a Russian Siddur.

The centrality of "VA'ANI" and the divine promise to Rachel in the life of our people can be corroborated by the fact that it is selected for the Haftorah for Rosh Hashana (second day).

How marvelously healing are those prophecies of Jeremiah on Rosh Hashana. How balsamic for the parched soul, rejuvenating the spirit, feeling as the young child in the chaidar, "ילד שעשועים, delightful child," (Jeremiah 31:19) "there is hope for you ultimately **ושבו בנים**, your children shall return to their border" (ibid 31:16).

It is remarkable that the conclusion of Chumosh Beraishis, about this oath giving the Holy Land to Abraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, including the comforting words to Rachel, in VA'ANI, so vehemently connects to Beraishis. Rashi in the very first passage in Beraishis states, the Torah begins with Hashem creating the world in order to make it clear that the Land of Israel was meant, already at creation, to be given to the children of Israel.

