

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָהַב אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִכָּל-בָּנָיו כִּי-בֶן-זָקֵנִים הוּא לוֹ... (בר' לז,ג)

“And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his sons since he was a child of his old age...”

Rashi gives 3 explanations as to what בן זקונים actually means. One of them follows Onkelos' translation – בר חכים הוא ליה – “son of scholarship”, which Rashi explains means that Yaakov taught Yosef the Torah he had learnt from Yeshivas Shem and Ever.

The Meforshim explain that this was one of the reasons that the brothers disliked Yosef – as they assumed that they were being sidelined and Yaakov was handing his spiritual legacy to Yosef, just as Avrohom and Yitzchak handed over their legacy to one of their children, rather than to all.

The question is - we can assume Yaakov would have given all of his sons a Torah education. So, what was special about the Torah he learnt in Shem and Ever? And why did Yaakov pass this Torah down only to Yosef, rather than to all of the brothers?

R. Yaakov Kaminetzky (brought in the Sefer Yalkut Lekach Tov) explains that there was a big difference between the education given in Yeshivos of Avrohom and Yitzchok to that given in Yeshivos of Shem and Ever. This is because Avrohom and Yitzchok – although they lived in a generation of idolaters – were able to set up Yeshivos wherever they settled, where they could learn and also teach Torah to whoever was interested.

Shem and Ever, however, both lived through generations where there was no-one who was interested in learning Torah. Shem lived through the time of the Flood and Ever through the time of the Tower of Bavel. This meant they needed to build themselves up spiritually so they wouldn't get negatively influenced by their surroundings, rather than building a Yeshiva to educate the public. During the 14 years that Yaakov spent in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, he learnt this skill – which enabled him to prepare himself for a new challenge – surviving spiritually whilst living in the house of Lavan. This is not something he had learnt in his Torah education from his father or grandfather.

This special skill was something which Yaakov foresaw was very necessary for Yosef, as he would need to survive alone in the spiritual desert of Egypt – where there would be no-one for whom he could set up a Yeshiva. The other brothers would not need this skill, as Yaakov sent Yehuda down in advance to set up a Yeshiva in Goshen and then they all went down to Egypt en-masse.

The Sefer Yalkut Lekach Tov explains that nowadays – our Torah institutions teach both the Torah of the Avos and the Torah of Shem and Ever, as we need to both build up our spiritual knowledge and build our defences for negative outside influences.