

INSPIRE

VAYECHI - CHAZAK
18TH TEVES - 2ND JANUARY 2021

LIFE-LONG LIVING



A title usually reflects the theme of the subject matter. "Genesis" is about the beginning of the world, "Exodus" is about the Jews leaving Egypt. Whether it is a book, film or lecture series, the title should convey some idea of the content it describes. Which is why the title of this week's parshah (Torah reading) seems highly inappropriate. Vayechi means "And He Lived." The name derives from the parshah's opening line, "And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years..." The parshah, however, goes on to tell us not about Jacob's life, but rather about his death: his last will and testament to his children, his passing, his funeral, and his interment in Hebron in the Holy Land. Why would a parshah that concentrates on a person's last days on earth, his deathbed instructions and his burial be entitled "And He Lived?" The answer, say our sages, is that we are not discussing biological organisms, but Jews. And the test of true life for a Jew is whether he lived an authentic, consistent Jewish life – for life. Did he falter before the finish line, or was he faithful to his value system until the end? How do we know that Jacob did indeed live, in the fullest sense of the word? That his was a genuine, G-dly life? When we see that he remains true to those ideals until his dying day. Only then can we say with certainty that his life was truly alive; that his was a Vayechi life. The fact that Jacob died a righteous man validated his entire life-span, establishing it as a true life, alive and real from beginning to end. There are individuals who have their eight minutes of fame, who shine briefly and impress the world only to fade away and leave us disappointedly watching so much unfulfilled potential dissipate into thin air. Others are longer lasting, but don't quite go all the way. Like a certain man named Yochanon who – the Talmud tells us – served as high priest in the Holy Temple for 80 years and then went off the rails. Very scary stuff! No wonder Hillel, in Ethics of the Fathers, warns us not to trust ourselves morally until the day we die. Complacency is dangerous. There are no guarantees. One must constantly "live" – i.e., grow and attempt to improve oneself – lest one falter before the finish line. I will never forget my experience with a very fine man who was remarkably loyal to the company he worked for. For 45 years he was with the same group, totally and absolutely dedicated. Then he reached the age of compulsory retirement. Suddenly he took ill. The doctors had no real diagnosis. But he got sicker and sicker until he became incapacitated and eventually died. To this day, nobody knows what he died from. But those who knew him well understood that once he left the workplace to which he had devoted his entire adult life, he had nothing left to live for. Sadly, he had no other interests. His work was his life, and without his work there was no life left. It is psychologically sound to take up a hobby, learn to play golf or develop other interests outside of work. A Jew, though, should ideally start studying Torah. Go to classes, read a stimulating book. Studying and sharpening the mind is good for the brain. Recent medical research confirms that it can even delay the onset of Alzheimer's. Most importantly, a person must have something to live for. Find new areas of stimulation. Discover, dream, aspire higher. Life must be lived with purpose and vigor. That's why at the end of this week's parsha, which also concludes the Book of Genesis, the congregation and Torah reader will proclaim Chazak, chazak v'nischazek – "Be strong, be strong, and we will all be strengthened." Because the tendency when we finish a book is to take a breather before we pick up the next one. Such is human nature. But a book of the Torah is not just any book. Torah is not just history or biography. Torah is our source of life, and we dare not ever take a breather from life. "Chazak" energizes us to carry on immediately. And so we do. The very same afternoon we open the Book of Exodus and continue the learning cycle without interruption. Truth is consistent, from beginning to end. May our lives be blessed to be truly alive – with authenticity, faithfulness and eternal fulfillment. Amen.

UNFINISHED BOOK

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Different cultures tell different stories. The great novelists of the nineteenth century wrote fiction that is essentially ethical. Jane Austen and George Eliot explored the connection between character and happiness. There is a palpable continuity between their work and the book of Ruth. Dickens, more in the tradition of the prophets, wrote about society and its institutions, and the way in which they can fail to honor human dignity and justice.

By contrast, the fascination with stories like Star Wars or Lord of the Rings is conspicuously dualistic. The cosmos is a battlefield between the forces of good and evil. This is far closer to the apocalyptic literature of the Qumran sect and the Dead Sea scrolls than anything in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. In these ancient and modern conflict narratives the struggle is "out there" rather than "in here": in the cosmos rather than within the human soul. This is closer to myth than monotheism.

There is, however, a form of story that is very rare indeed, of which Tanakh is the supreme example. It is the story without an ending which looks forward to an open future rather than reaching closure. It defies narrative convention. Normally we expect a story to create a tension that is resolved on the final page. That is what gives art a sense of completion. We do not expect a sculpture to be incomplete, a poem to break off halfway, a novel to end in the middle. Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is the exception that proves the rule.

Yet that is what the Bible repeatedly does. Consider the Chumash, the five Mosaic books. The Jewish story begins with a repeated promise to Abraham that he will inherit the land of Canaan. Yet by the time we reach the end of Deuteronomy, the Israelites have still not crossed the Jordan. The Chumash ends with the poignant scene of Moses on Mount Nebo (in present-day Jordan) seeing the land – to which he has journeyed for forty years but is destined not to enter – from afar.

Nevi'im, the second part of Tanakh, ends with Malachi foreseeing the distant future, understood by tradition to mean the Messianic age: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers . . ."

Nevi'im, which includes the great historical as well as prophetic books, thus concludes neither in the present or the past, but by looking forward to a time not yet reached. Ketuvim, the third and final section, ends with King Cyrus of Persia granting permission to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to their land and rebuild the Temple.

None of these is an ending in the conventional sense. Each leaves us with a sense of a promise not yet fulfilled, a task not yet completed, a future seen from afar but not yet reached. And the paradigm case – the model on which all others are based – is the ending of Bereishit in this week's sedra.

Remember that the story of the people of the covenant begins with G d's call to Abraham to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to a land which I will show you". Yet no sooner does he arrive than he is forced by famine to go to Egypt. That is the fate repeated by Jacob and his children. Genesis ends not with life in Israel but with a death in Egypt:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But G d will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "G d will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place." So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Again, a hope not yet realized, a journey not yet ended, a destination just beyond the horizon.

Is there some connection between this narrative form and the theme with which the Joseph story ends, namely forgiveness?

It is to Hannah Arendt in her *The Human Condition* that we owe a profound insight into the connection between forgiveness and time.

Human action, she argues, is potentially tragic. We can never foresee the consequences of our acts, but once done, they cannot be undone. We know that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous the consequences of his deed, he can never undo it . . . All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom.

What transforms the human situation from tragedy to hope, she argues, is the possibility of forgiveness:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover . . . Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

Atonement and forgiveness are the supreme expressions of human freedom – the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation. Only those who can forgive can be free. Only a civilization based on forgiveness can construct a future that is not an endless repetition of the past. That, surely, is why Judaism is the only civilization whose golden age is in the future.

It was this revolutionary concept of time – based on human freedom – that Judaism contributed to the world. Many ancient cultures believed in cyclical time, in which all things return to their beginning. The Greeks developed a sense tragic time, in which the ship of dreams is destined to founder on the hard rocks of reality. Europe of the Enlightenment introduced the idea of linear time, with its close cousin, progress. Judaism believes in covenantal time, well described by Harold Fisch: "The covenant is a condition of our existence in time . . . We cooperate with its purposes never quite knowing where it will take us, for 'the readiness is all'." In a lovely phrase, he speaks of the Jewish imagination as shaped by "the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled".

Tragedy gives rise to pessimism. Cyclical time leads to acceptance. Linear time begets optimism. Covenantal time gives birth to hope.

These are not just different emotions. They are radically different ways of relating to life and the universe. They are expressed in the different kinds of story people tell. Jewish time always faces an open future. The last chapter is not yet written. The Messiah has not yet come. Until then, the story continues – and we, together with G d, are its co-authors.

PARSHA SUMMARY

Jacob lives the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Before his passing, he asks Joseph to take an oath that he will bury him in the Holy Land. He blesses Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of his own sons as progenitors of tribes within the nation of Israel. The patriarch desires to reveal the end of days to his children, but is prevented from doing so. Jacob blesses his sons, assigning to each his role as a tribe: Judah will produce leaders, legislators and kings; priests will come from Levi, scholars from Issachar, seafarers from Zebulun, schoolteachers from Simeon, soldiers from Gad, judges from Dan, olive-growers from Asher, and so on. Reuben is rebuked for "confusing his father's marriage bed"; Simeon and Levi, for the massacre of Shechem and the plot against Joseph. Naphtali is granted the swiftness of a deer, Benjamin the ferociousness of a wolf, and Joseph is blessed with beauty and fertility. A large funeral procession consisting of Jacob's descendants, Pharaoh's ministers, the leading citizens of Egypt and the Egyptian cavalry accompanies Jacob on his final journey to the Holy Land, where he is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron. Joseph, too, dies in Egypt, at the age of 110. He, too, instructs that his bones be taken out of Egypt and buried in the Holy Land, but this would come to pass only with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt many years later. Before his passing, Joseph conveys to the Children of Israel the testament from which they will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come: "G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

In this week's haftorah, King David delivers his deathbed message to his son and successor, Solomon, echoing this week's Torah reading that discusses at length Jacob's parting words and instructions to his sons. King David encourages Solomon to be strong and to remain steadfast in his belief in G-d. This will ensure his success in all his endeavors as well as the continuation of the Davidic Dynasty. David then goes on to give his son some tactical instructions pertaining to various people who deserved punishment or reward for their actions during his reign. The haftorah concludes with David's death and his burial in the City of David. King Solomon takes his father's place and his sovereignty is firmly established.

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Suzanne Shine father David Chaim (Shine) David Chaim Friday 01/01/2021 Tevet 17, 5781

Irving Glass father Glass Friday 01/01/2021 Tevet 17, 5781

Ricky Tobias mother Estelle Tobias Esther Bas Noocham Friday 01/01/2021 Tevet 17, 5781

Lewis Jacobs mother Betty Jacobs Rivka Rochel bas Shmuel Monday 04/01/2021 Tevet 20, 5781

Stanley Perry father George Plotzky Zuruch ben Gatzel Monday 04/01/2021 Tevet 20, 5781

Colin Wolfryd father Yosef Wolfryd Yosef ben Yaakov Monday 04/01/2021 Tevet 20, 5781

Leonard Lieberman father Harry Lieberman Zvi ben Moshe Melech Tuesday 05/01/2021 Tevet 21, 5781

Bettina Benjamin father Martin Rose Ber Meir ben Leib Tuesday 05/01/2021 Tevet 21, 5781

David Sanders mother Chana Leah Sanders Chana Leah bas Dovid Tuesday 05/01/2021 Tevet 21, 5781

Simone Viniker father Vic Blackman Avraham ben Judah Thursday 07/01/2021 Tevet 23, 5781

JEWISH HUMOUR

Cecil and Morris are walking to services. Cecil asks, "I wonder whether it would be all right to smoke while praying?" "Why don't you ask the rabbi?" says Morris. Cecil sees Rabbi Golden and asks, "Rabbi, is it permissible for me to smoke while I pray?" "No, you may not. That's utterly disrespectful to our tradition!" answers the rabbi. Cecil goes back to his friend and tells him what the good Rabbi told him. "I'm not surprised. You asked the wrong question. Let me try." Morris goes over to the rabbi and asks, "Rabbi, would it be ok if I prayed while I smoke?" "To which Rabbi Golden eagerly replies, "By all means, my good man. By all means."

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

Can you write down eight eights so that they add up to one thousand?

Answer for last week by Harvey Berg

Monopoly

STORY TIME

The Rav (rabbi) of Yanov was a great scholar. As a young man he had been the friend of Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, and their friendship had endured in spite of the young man's terrible obstinacy and inability to concede the correctness of anyone else's viewpoint. Once, the Rav of Yanov was traveling to his son's wedding together with a party of illustrious well-wishers. The Rav and his party stopped at a lovely site on the outskirts of a forest to say the afternoon prayers.

The Rav chose a secluded spot under the trees some distance away from the others, and he lingered over his devotions. The members of his traveling party waited patiently for him in the carriage, but when darkness descended, they began searching for him in the surrounding groves of trees. Their search proved unsuccessful and though they were a bit concerned, they assumed that he had accepted a ride from one of the many other carriages in the wedding party. Their anxiety was borne out when they arrived at the site of the wedding and the Rav was nowhere to be seen. There were all kinds of speculation, but there was nothing to do other than to proceed with the wedding without him. The sad group returned to Yanov without the Rav and in fact, without a clue of what might have happened to him. Meanwhile, the Rav was wandering around in the depths of the forest unable to find a way out. He had unwittingly lost his way in the forest. As hours became days the Rav became more despondent and disoriented. He lost track of time and set about preparing for Shabbat a day early. Finally, with G-d's help, the Rav found his way home and rejoined his jubilant family which had begun to fear the worst. When Thursday arrived the Rav busily set about preparing for Shabbat. When his family explained that it was Thursday and not Friday, he argued hotly that they were all mistaken. They tried patiently to explain that in the course of his wanderings he had somehow lost a day in his reckoning, but he just became more and more infuriated. His family invited many acquaintances to try to convince the Rav, but to no avail. What could they do, other than to allow him to celebrate the holy Shabbat on Friday. He celebrated with all the traditional foods and prayed the Shabbat prayers, and when Shabbat actually arrived he donned weekday garb and set about his usual weekday activities while his horrified family helplessly looked on. Many weeks passed while he persisted in his mistaken behavior in spite of the steady stream of visitors all endeavoring to convince him otherwise. One day word of his strange fixation reached his childhood friend, Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg. Reb Shmelke set off at once for Yanov, making sure that he would arrive on Thursday. The Rav was thrilled to see him, and hastened to invite him for Shabbat. Reb Shmelke accepted enthusiastically, eager to implement the plan he had devised. Reb Shmelke quietly gathered the Rav's family and outlined his plan to them. Needless to say they were anxious to do anything to bring the Rav back to reason, and so, in addition to the usual bountiful Shabbat fare, they also prepared some bottles of strong aged wine and set them on the table. The masquerade was carried out as the whole family and their many guests gathered to celebrate a festive Shabbat meal. After each delicious course Reb Shmelke poured a generous cup of old wine into the Rav's cup. Now, this was a heavy, red wine known to induce a deep slumber in the drinker, and Reb Shmelke didn't stint on the "L'chaims." Toward the end of the meal, the Rav fell into a deep sleep. Reb Shmelke sat back and relaxed with his pipe, telling his fellow diners that they could now return to their normal activities without worry, for the situation was under control. He took a soft cushion and placed it under the head of the sleeping man and settled down to guard the Rav throughout the night and into the following day. On the next night, which was truly the Shabbat, the same guests returned and sat down at the table to enjoy the real Shabbat repast. When it was time to say the Blessings After the Meal, Reb Shmelke gently roused the Rav, who sat up and remarked, "It seems as if I've been sleeping for a long time." He then joined in saying the prayers and everything continued in the usual manner through to the conclusion of the Shabbat. The family and townspeople were overcome with happiness at the result of Reb Shmelke's visit and thanked him profusely. For his part, Reb Shmelke made them promise that they would never reveal the true happenings of that Shabbat. The Rav never had an inkling of what had transpired. In fact, he was very proud that everyone else had come to the enlightened conclusion that his calculations had been correct. He was however, careful to credit his old friend Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg for helping lead his mistaken congregants and family to the right conclusion, saying, "Thanks to my friend from Nikolsburg, they were able to comprehend the truth. Isn't it amazing how impossibly stubborn some people can be!"

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

When our universe as we know it first emerged, the soil of the earth was imbued with a wondrous power—the power to generate life. Place a tiny seed in the ground and it converts the carbon of the air into a mighty redwood—a decomposing seed awakens the power of the infinite. Yet another miracle, even more wondrous: A quiet act of kindness buried in humility ignites an explosion of G-dly light. Infinite power is hidden in the humblest of places.