

## **D'VAR TORAH ON PARASHAT VAYEHI**

With *Parshat Vayehi*, the Book of Genesis reaches its grand finale. With Jacob and his extended family gathered in the land of Egypt, first, the illustrious Patriarch himself, Jacob, dies – “was gathered unto his people” (Gen. 49:33); then, subsequently the complex, distinguished life of Joseph comes to an end.

These concluding chapters of Genesis offer us a fascinating, relevant model for “conscious dying”. Living in a culture that is uncomfortable around death, we can learn a great deal from Jacob and Joseph to help us deal more openly with dying, death and grief in our lives, in our families and communities.

“*The time drew near for Israel to die*” (Gen. 47:29). With death immanent, Jacob speaks calmly and truthfully with his family. There is no equivocation, no denial of death. We see here a complete willingness to accept death realistically. This stands in contrast to stories we often hear where families deny death, and cannot speak honestly or openly with each other. Jacob’s exemplary model impacts his son Joseph. Later in the *parasha* we see Joseph encountering his own mortality with a similar openness saying to his brothers: “*Behold I am about to die.*” (Gen 50:24)

We are affected not only by how people die, but how those around us talk about death, how they grieve. The attitude towards death exemplified by Jacob and Joseph invites us to ask: Who are our models for dealing with death? What did we learn in our own families of origin? And what attitudes are we passing on to our children?

In addition to a calm acceptance of mortality, Jacob is an active participant in preparing for his death. He reflects upon his legacy, his sense of spiritual destiny: “*God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and will increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.'*” (Gen. 48:3-4). Then Jacob recalls moments of pain and loss: “*As I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)*” (Gen. 48:7).

Furthermore, as part of his process of conscious dying, Jacob blesses his children (Gen. 49), speaking his mind, sharing loving yet painfully honest feelings. This too stands in contrast to the kind of emotional denial frequently so pervasive in our culture. Here Jacob is doing what Swiss psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross refers to as “finishing business”, a necessary and healthy part of the process of dying.

Jacob also gives clear instructions for his burial: “*Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field*” (Gen. 49:29-30).

In making sure his estate is in order, Jacob teaches us, by example, how important it is to have conversations with family members about legal wills, advance directives, estate planning, purchase of cemetery plots, ethical wills, burial requests, etc. The process involved in preparing any of these can be challenging and emotionally laden. This *parasha* invites us to ask if we ourselves are comfortable speaking with loved ones about death? And, even more, are our congregations collectively prepared to deal with people's deathbed and burial needs?

Following Jacob's death, Joseph devotedly arranges his father's funeral, in accordance with the practices of Egyptian royalty. "*Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father Israel... taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.*" (Gen. 50:2-3).

With the allotted time of mourning complete, Joseph requests of Pharaoh permission to bury Jacob in Canaan. Accompanied by an extensive Egyptian retinue, Joseph, his brothers and kin, left Goshen and "*came to the threshing floor of Atad, beyond the Jordan, and there they ... made a mourning for his father seven days.*" (Gen. 50:10).

In the ways Joseph honors natural rhythms of grief, he teaches us something important about mourning and bereavement. Too often we meet families who want to run from the cemetery back into life allocating no time for mourning. One operating cultural belief is if grief is ignored, it might go away, one need not feel the pain of loss. Yet Judaism teaches us "to everything there is a season", one cannot hurry grief any more than one can deny it. Joseph's actions remind us to honor the organic nature of grief, reflected so clearly in Jewish traditions of Shiva, *shloshim* and Kaddish.

We are living in a time in which there are profound shifts taking place in dealing with dying and death. Yes, many of the old cultural habits of death denial persist, and quite strongly. But more than one-third of all of deaths in North America take place under care of a hospice program these days. Undoubtedly, Jewish tradition has much to offer towards a new approach to death care in our times.

In these final chapters of Genesis we are given a model for dealing with death with a quality of openness and integrity. And in affirming this model, for our families and our Jewish communities, we can affirm, as Judaism does, the inherent holiness of life.

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