

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayechi (Genesis 47:28 - 50:26; I Kings 2:1-12) January 6, 2023

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Our parashah is the final chapter of *Sefer Bereshit* (Book of Genesis), the stories of our beginnings and of our patriarchs and matriarchs. Now, on his deathbed, Jakob obtains Joseph's promise to bury him in the family cave at Machpelah, a wish that is mirrored at the end of the parashah by Joseph's own request that the Israelites carry his bones out of Egypt when they leave. Egypt will always be merely a place of refuge and transition, never a permanent home. Jakob is now ready to bless his sons, but before blessing his own sons, he makes an extraordinary pronouncement: "And now, [as for] your two sons who were born to you in the Land of Egypt, until I came to you, to the land of Egypt, they are mine. Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuben and Simeon. But your children, if you beget [any] after them, shall be yours; by their brothers' names they shall be called in their inheritance." (48:5-6) Jakob then tells Joseph about Rachel's death and burial on the road between Padan and Ephrath – a strange diversion. Does he feel he owes Joseph an explanation as to why he did not bury her at Machpelah? Rashi explains: "... and I know that you hold it against me; but you should know that I buried her there by divine command, so that she would be of assistance to her children. When Nebuzaradan (a high official of King Nebuchadnezzar II) exiles them [the Israelites] and they pass by there, Rachel will emerge from her grave and weep and beg mercy for them, as it is said, 'A voice is heard on high ... Rachel is weeping for her children. (Jeremiah 31:14)' ..." The next verse is even stranger: "Then Israel saw Joseph's sons, and he said, 'Who are these?'" (48:8) Geriatric dementia? Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi teaches: "Had they not sat and studied the law with him every day? ... Did he actually not recognize them? The fact is, that he foresaw that Jeroboam the son of Nebat and Ahab the son of Omri would descend from Ephraim, and that they would become idolaters. For this reason the Holy Spirit departed from him. When Joseph realized this, he prostrated himself before the Holy One of Blessing and pleaded for mercy. ... Thereupon the Holy One of Blessing restored the Holy Spirit to Jakob, and he blessed them. We know this from Hosea 11:3 'And I restored the Holy Spirit to Jakob for the sake of Ephraim.'" Midrash Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and other midrashic traditions have another explanation: Jakob wanted to make sure that Manasseh and Ephraim were born into a legitimate marriage; Joseph produced his *ketubah* (marriage contract) and Jakob realized that Asenath, their mother, was his granddaughter, Dinah's daughter by Shechem. Dinah's brothers had wanted to kill the infant, who was born of rape, but according to one midrash, Jakob hung a gold plate around her neck containing information about her and HaShem had the angel Michael take her to the house of Potiphar, who adopted her. In another midrash, Dinah left Asenath on Egypt's border wall; Potiphar passed by, learned through the gold plate that she was "the daughter of great ones;" so he adopted her for his barren wife, and they raised her as their daughter. Other midrashim relate that each of Jakob's sons was born with a female twin who was to be his future wife, except for Joseph, because HaShem would need to provide a suitable wife for him in Egypt. The overarching message of these midrashim is that although our ancestors' sojourn in Egypt will be long and tragic, HaShem is bound by our eternal covenant to redeem them and bring them into the Promised Land. But it will not be an easy path, and in order for it to succeed, they must develop an identity strong enough to resist being drawn into the more attractive traditions of the people they will encounter. This may help us understand the strange blessing Jakob gives the two boys (which is quoted in the bedtime *shema*): "May the angel who redeemed me from all harm bless the youths, and may they be called by my name and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaak, and may they multiply abundantly like fish in the midst of the land." (48:16) Like fish? Why not like some land animal, for instance rabbits? Referencing Judges 12: 5-6, Midrash Tanchuma teaches that Ephraim's descendants would be caught like fishes when they denied their identity: "... and it was that when any of the lowest of Ephraim said, 'Let me go over,' and the men of Gilead said to him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' And he said, 'no' And they said to him, 'Say Shibboleth,' and he said 'Sibboleth,' and he was not able to pronounce it properly ..." Talmud Tractate Berakhot 61b explains it with Rabbi Akiva's use of the parable about the fishes' reply to the fox's invitation to avoid the ensnaring nets by fleeing to dry land. "'If we are afraid in the water, our natural habitat which gives us life, then in a habitat that causes death, all the more so.' The moral is, so too, we Jews, now that we sit and engage in Torah study, about which is written *for that is your life, the length of your days* (Deut. 30:20), we fear the empire (Rome's prohibition of Torah study, which Akiva defied) to this extent; if we sit idle from its study, as its abandonment is the habitat that causes our death, all the more so will we fear the empire." We Jews have prevailed when confronted with the choice to convert or die, often preserving our true identity behind closed doors while masquerading as faithful converts. But as the story of Chanukah has just reminded us, we have always been surrounded by people whose values are different from ours, and the temptation to fit in can be overpowering. Negotiating the fraught area between the poles of total assimilation and total isolation is both difficult and highly individual. Because of our tremendous diversity, there is no universal answer. It is up to us to learn from the wisdom of our people, and swim to the best of our ability in our own rich waters.

Shabbat shalom!