A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayechi (Genesis 47:28 - 50:26; Kings I 2:1-12) January 2, 2026

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Sefer Bereshit (Book of Genesis) ends with our parashah. Abraham and his family have followed HaShem's call to leave Chaldean Ur and go where HaShem will lead them. Now, famine has driven them for the second time to Egypt, where the family will remain for 4 centuries, as HaShem had told Abraham during the Covenant Between the Pieces (15:13). For us, Egypt is not just a location. It is a multifaceted, dichotomous moral and spiritual landscape where our identity is shaped, tested, and remembered. It is both a place of refuge and a place of peril. It is a place where HaShem's presence is hidden, but active, manifesting in dreams and events. It is a narrow and dangerous place that both calls and repels us. It is a testing ground that reveals our strengths and weaknesses. And ultimately, it is the womb from which Israel emerges, literally and symbolically. The ancient Semitic name for Egypt is *misrayim*, from the Akkadian *misru* – border/region. The plural form (*im*) may reflect the concept of the Egyptian name *t'Awy* (Two Lands – Upper and Lower Egypt). But because it sounds like *tzar*, the Hebrew root for words including narrow, cramped, distress, straits, *mitzrayim* came to imply trouble, affliction, and oppression, (like the Yiddish word *tzuris* – problems). This may be folk etymology, but it perfectly depicts our relationship to this land from the very outset. For Abraham and Jacob, Egypt is a place of refuge from famine; for Joseph, although he was taken there by force, it is a place of refuge from his brothers' violence. But it is also a place of moral testing: For Abraham, who lies about his relationship to Sarah, for Joseph in his encounter with Potipher's wife, for Joseph's brothers when they come to him to obtain food not knowing who he is, and for the Israelites not only during their enslavement but also on their long journey from slavery to freedom. In short, Egypt is our quintessential threshold place, where an individual, a family, or an entire people must choose between constriction and becoming. We have all been tempted to seek the comfort of the familiar, no matter how oppressive it is. Fear of the unknown can trigger nostalgia, a powerful drug that rewrites our memories and causes us to forget why we had to move on. It can also cause us to revert to old, destructive patterns. Jacob is about to die, and his fear of being eternally cut off from his family is palpable. At the beginning of our parashah he makes Joseph swear to carry his remains out of Egypt and bury them in the family cave at Machpelah. Then, he reiterates this to all his sons after blessing them, now stressing generational and covenantal continuity, 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 depart. Jacob's fear of being left in Egypt reactivates that nasty old family habit of favoritism. He adopts Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, makes each into a tribe, and gives Joseph Shechem – a twofold double portion that essentially elevates Joseph to the status of firstborn. Then, when he blesses each of his sons, Joseph's blessing is the longest and most effusive, with the richest imagery, the most explicit mention of divine favor, and the most expansive promise for the future. Jacob extolls Joseph's charms and their effect on the girls, he brings up his brothers' cruelty toward him, and he declares that Joseph's rise to power in Egypt was through "the agency of the Mighty One of Jacob (HaShem)" so that he could become the provider and the foundation of Israel. (49:24) Jacob has reverted to the toxic favoritism that in each generation has torn the family apart. His extravagant blessing must have reopened old wounds, because the brothers fear that Joseph will seek revenge once Jacob is dead. Haunted by memories of what they did to Joseph and ultimately to their father, they are so paralyzed with fear that they imagine the worst. And this causes them to revert to another old family pattern – bending the truth to avoid trouble. "And they sent a message to Joseph saying: Your father commanded us before his death saying, 'So shall you say to Joseph: Please forgive .... .'" (Gen. 50:15-16) Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi notices their little subterfuge: "As they were returning from the burial of their father, they saw their brother go to the pit into which they had hurled him, in order to bless it. He blessed the pit with the benediction ... any man is required to pronounce at the place where a miracle had been performed in his behalf. When they beheld this, they cried out: 'Now that our father is dead, Joseph will hate us and will fully requite us for all the evil which we did to him.' And they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father commanded ... So shall you say to Joseph: forgive.' We have searched the entire Scripture and are unable to find any place where Jacob uttered this remark. This statement is introduced to teach us the importance of peace. The Holy One, blessed be He, wrote these words in the Torah for the sake of peace alone." Weeping, Joseph assures them that it is not his to punish them, and that HaShem has intended the entire ordeal for good. He swears that HaShem will remember them, and that they must take his bones with them when they depart. We cannot find peace by romanticizing, altering or denying the past; we can only accept it, make peace with it, and learn from it. This was a hard lesson for the Israelites and it's still hard today. Choosing growth over comfort, trust over nostalgia, vulnerability over self-protection, and possibility over predictability releases us from our own *mitzrayim*, those narrow places that hold us back. As we read in our Haggadah, "In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as though he personally came out of Egypt." Life is full of great and small *mitzrayim*. May we always find the courage and strength to emerge and go forward.

Shabbat shalom!