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## **Parshat Vayechi: The Father that Never Died**

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The results of the recent survey of the Jewish community, conducted by the Pew Research Center, are disheartening. Assimilation is rapidly on the rise; a dark sense of extinction looms. One in five Jews, 22 percent, describe themselves as having no religion; 58 percent are intermarried, as compared to 50 years ago, when just 17 percent of Jews married non-Jewish spouses. Will the American Jewish community survive this seemingly steady march toward doom?

It is this quintessential question of survival that troubles our sages in this week's Torah portion. In Vayechi, "and [Yaakov] lived," we learn not only about the death of Jacob, but the death of Joseph, as well. The Torah describes Joseph's death definitively: "Joseph died at the age of 110 years" [Genesis 50:26]. In contrast, the Torah describes Jacob's passing somewhat ambiguously: "When Jacob finished imparting his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into himself, and breathing his last, he was gathered to his people" [Gen. 49:33, JPS translation]. This unusual language inspires a shocking interpretation recorded in the Talmud [Ta'anit 5b]: "Rabbi Yitzchak stated, so said Rabbi Yochanan, 'Jacob, our father, did not die.'"

On the most human level, some would interpret Rabbi Yitzchak as expressing a deep rooted but natural psychological response to death: denial. Denial is a coping mechanism that protects us from the pain associated with loss, and can in some cases create a distortion of reality. Jacob's sons, Bnei Yaakov, are watching their beloved father, their rock, take his last breath. Imagining this scene, Rabbi Yitzchak placed words into the mouths of Jacob's children, of Asher and Gad, Judah and Benjamin: "Jacob our father did not die," his sons say, because, they could not conceive of a world where their father would no longer exist to guide, teach, and lead them.

But Jacob is not only the progenitor of Bnei Yaakov, the father to twelve sons. He is Bnei Yisrael as well, father to the Jewish nation. And so, in Rabbi Yitzchak's statement "Jacob, our father, did not die," I hear an echo not of denial, but of hope, from the Rabbis living in the Amoraic period. As they looked out the windows of their batei midrash, their study halls in the Babylonian diaspora, they asked whether the Jewish nation will be able to survive without the soul of our Patriarch Jacob at its epicenter. Their statement "Jacob our father did not die" was offered as prayer. Jacob's body was indeed embalmed and buried, as the verses in Genesis go on to recount. But the Rabbis knew that the soul of Jacob would only survive if the Jewish people remain alive.

In the wake of the disconcerting results of the Pew study, I too am looking out the window of my beit midrash, observing and internalizing various reactions and responses. In a way, we are like Jacob's children surrounding him on his deathbed. We stand on the precipice of imminent danger to the

demographic future of Jewish community. Some have already written eulogies in print and in the blogosphere. A requiem for certain neighborhoods or age groups is being recited. Assimilation and annihilation is imminent.

When we read of Jacob's everlasting life, are we in denial? We glance at the numbers that show significant assimilation, and say, with a bit of incipient shock, that it is impossible to imagine a world without a vibrant and traditional Jewish community. It is impossible to think of America without its Jewish community centers, synagogues and schools. Or, do we declare and pray, with fervent and passionate hope that our father Jacob did not die. Yes, the Jewish community has its flaws. We have a lot of work to do. We must reconsider what it means to be a community that builds bridges to work together, rather than denigrating one another. Our leaders must reimagine how to engage more Jews, young and old, affiliated and unaffiliated and navigate a community where denominational allegiance is fluid. Leaders must listen to the varied and diverse needs of their constituents, and respond.

The truth is, we will survive, but only if our reaction to the Pew study is hope and prayer, not denial. Hope and prayer focus our attention and vault us to creative action. Hope and prayer force us to consider dynamic solutions and make bold decisions. In contrast, denial is self-delusion — a pathological attempt to maintain the status quo. Here, denial will ensure continued atrophy and a decent into demographic oblivion.

The children of Israel have survived religious intolerance, mass destruction, and assimilation in the past. History proves that we will continue to flourish. The richness of our dynamic and evolving tradition will gird us with the strength to live in perpetuity, with the spirit of Jacob, our father, carrying us. Jacob did not die, and neither will we.



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