

Parshat Vayechi
Death, Closure, and Hope
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Our parsha opens: “And the time approached for Israel to die”. Most of the parsha results directly from Yaakov recognizing his approaching death and his preparations for it. The ability to prepare for death is not obvious. Indeed, the sages teach “Until Jacob, there was no illness. Jacob came and prayed for mercy, and illness was brought to the world” (Bava Metzia 87a). Yaakov asked Hashem that he not die suddenly but rather to be able to prepare for his death. According to the sages, Yaakov wanted to reach his death consciously and well-prepared. He realized what death means and just how impactful it could be for those around him, and so he wished to help them as well to be prepared for this fateful moment.

Ramban writes that Yaakov “felt in himself the exhaustion and increasing weakness, and though he was not ill he knew he would not live long”. We can learn a lot from Yaakov’s approach. Sometimes there are signs foreshadowing the future, but the force and magnitude of the foretold event may lead us to ignore or suppress the knowledge of its coming. Yaakov, however, begins preparations immediately upon learning of his coming death. He calls for Yosef, making him swear to bury him in the land of Israel. Yaakov’s ability to recognize his coming death and turn to his son Yosef, allows Yosef to be prepared as well in the moment of truth. When told his father is ill, Yosef appears immediately at his father’s side. It is this very presence of Yosef that enables Yaakov to gather his remaining strength and sit upon the bed despite his illness. We learn here about the power of family or close friends. The family’s recognition of the approaching death is extremely important. Yosef’s arrival allows Yaakov to conclude any outstanding issues and finish preparing himself and his family.

Prior to his death Yaakov deals with his burial, the blessing of his own sons and the blessing of Yosef’s sons. With regard to each issue, he provides closure for both himself and his family and constitutes the future relationship between the tribes within the nation of Israel. All three levels are present in his request to be buried in the land of Israel.

Funeral and burial both take place following one’s death. These events mark the end of one’s life, what they went through and their actions. The center of Yaakov’s life was in the land of Israel and he wanted his final resting place to be where he knew wars, tragedies, and divine revelations. There is often a certain consolation for a person in knowing just how these events will take place. This may also be why people put such care into choosing a burial plot and why couples may want to be buried alongside one another. A person wants to know how their life is going to end. Even though Yaakov was about to die in Egypt, he sought the consolation of knowing he will be returned to the place he loved so much.

In asking to be buried in the land of Israel, Yaakov also thinks of his family. We must remember that while Yaakov and Yosef were reunited, the family as a whole arrived in Egypt following the selling of Yosef. The Torah does not say much about those

seventeen years in which the family lived together in Egypt, but we can only assume a family that has fallen apart following the selling of one of the brothers, will never be the same again. Yaakov's choice to be buried in the land of Israel requires his sons to leave Egypt and embarked on a journey together. This is a journey that allows for staying within the shared pain and mourning. Yaakov knows that in his death he may leave his sons with a chasm between them and provides them with an opportunity to heal.

The promise of burial in the land of Israel is not just a closure for Yaakov and his sons but serves a greater purpose as well. Parshas Vayechi serves as a bridge between Chumash Bereshit, telling the stories of the patriarchs, and Chumash Shemot, telling of the people of Israel becoming a nation. It is not just Yaakov's life that has reached its end, but the entire first phase in the development of the nation of Israel ends with him. Yaakov is completely aware of his status as the final patriarch and its implications. The preparations for his death are more than personal and familial closure – they are the conclusion of a chapter in a nation's life and the establishment of structures that will further use the nation of Israel in the future. Yaakov's actions need to be seen in this context as well. The words "His sons carried him" (Bereshit 50:13), Rashi interprets: "In the order of the banners they were arranged here". Yaakov determined the very order in which his sons were to carry his coffin, guiding them to walk as they would later travel through the desert. Yaakov knew that his sons and family are about to face years of bondage, after which they will eventually leave together as a nation towards the promised land. Now, he already assigns them a task that will allow them a glimpse into that future – a joint travel through the desert from Egypt to the land of their fathers. Yaakov's burial in the land of Israel is a milestone in the redemption from Egypt. The bondage has not yet begun, but Yaakov's burial journey is a reminder for the nation in forming that the land of Israel – not Egypt – is where their roots truly lie. It is where their fathers are buried, and it is towards there that they will one day set out. Thus, Yaakov creates a certain reminder for his sons and marks the way to freedom, the way home.

Yaakov teaches us how to face death. He does not fear death for he meets it well-prepared. He leaves behind instructions allowing him to rest in peace, knowing he provided a better future for his family. He rallies his entire family into being part of the process and enables them to be prepared in the face of the inevitable. In doing so Yaakov also enables the existence of the nation of Israel and makes sure that despite the coming enslavement there will be unity, hope and purpose. In his actions he lights the way for us as well, reminding us of the power of partnership and the power of hope.



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