

Parshat Vayechi
Lasting Legacy
Rabbanit Yael Keller
Class of 2022

How do you want to be remembered when you leave this world? What steps do you take to ensure your legacy survives? In this week’s parsha Yaakov Avinu prepares to die. The gemara in Bava Metziah (87a) teaches that Yaakov is the first person to get sick prior to death. Pirkei D’Rebi Eliezer explains that, strangely enough, Yaakov *wanted* to be sick. Before this moment, one would sneeze and her life would leave her through her nose.¹ Yaakov didn’t want his death to be so sudden. Yaakov wanted time to mark this transition, to set his affairs in order, and to leave a lasting legacy with his children. It is only through this intention that he was able to leave ideas and love that would extend beyond his physical lifespan.

The parsha opens by telling us that Yaakov was 147 years old and had spent the last 17 years living in Egypt, reunited with all of his children. He sensed the end of his life was near and gathered his children together, blessed them, and said goodbye. The next verse informs us:

When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and he expired and was gathered to his people.

וַיִּכְלֵ יַעֲקֹב לְצִוּוֹת אֶת-בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר
 רַגְלָיו אֶל-הַמֶּטֶה וַיָּגַע וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֶל-עַמְיָו:

Rashi offers a radical interpretation, contrary to the plain meaning of the text, that Yaakov didn’t actually die. Rashi notes the text uses the word וַיָּגַע, he expired, but not that he died, וַיָּמָת, which indicates Yaakov did not die. When the Torah tells us that Avraham, Yishmael and Yitzhak die the words וַיָּגַע and וַיָּמָת are linked together. Here the word וַיָּמָת, he died, is notably absent. Despite the strong textual pattern that might suggest something different is happening to Yaakov, this is still a striking interpretation. In the following verses we see Yosef falls on his father’s face weeping and makes arrangements to embalm his father. Then Yosef and his brothers take Yaakov’s body back to Canaan for burial. How could Rashi believe that Yaakov is not dead if he is to be mourned, embalmed and buried?

This radical idea of Yaakov’s immortality predates Rashi. In Masechet Taanit, 5b, the Gemara relates a story; Rabbi Yitzhak and Rav Nachman had just finished enjoying a meal together when Rabbi Yitzhak tells Rav Nachman that “יעקב אבינו לא מת” - Yaakov Avinu did not die. And Rav Nachman reacts the way you might expect, based on our reaction to Rashi - he wonders why they embalmed and buried a man who was not dead. Rabbi Yitzhak defends himself by quoting a verse from Jeremiah 30:10:

But you, Have no fear, My servant **Jacob** — declares the LORD— Be not dismayed, O Israel! I will deliver you from far away, Your **seed** from their land of captivity...

וְאַתָּה אֲלֵ-תִירָא עַבְדִּי יַעֲקֹב נֹאמֵ-יְהוָה
 וְאַל-תַּחַת יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי הִנְנִי מוֹשִׁיעַךְ מִרְחֹק
 וְאֶת-זֶרְעֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ שְׁבִיִּים...

¹ This is the origin of the custom to say “God bless you” when a person sneezes - it is an attempt to ward away impending death.

He notes that in this pasuk, Yaakov is being juxtaposed with his זרע, his offspring. Rabbi Yitzhak continues, just as Yaakov's offspring are alive when redeemed, so too Yaakov will be alive as well. Today, we are still known as "Bnei Yisrael" the children of Israel/Yaakov. We continue, as a community, to keep Yaakov alive, if not in body, at least in memory.²

How does this work? How do you live on, once you have left the world? How do you separate the acts of וַיָּגוּעַ, expiring - physical death - and מִיתָה - complete death?

Yaakov is the first to consciously and intentionally prepare for and implement his deathbed. When Avraham dies there is notably no goodbye, no final bracha for his children. It seems Yitzhak tries to leave a last bracha for his eldest son on his deathbed. He calls Esav to him and explains "הִנְהֵגָא זְקֵנְתִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי" - I am old and don't know when I will die. And then Yitzhak gives Yaakov, masquerading as Esav a bracha. This is perhaps his attempt at preparing for physical death and trying to leave a legacy behind. However, this is not actually Yitzhak's deathbed; he goes on to live twenty more years after the fated bracha swap.

Today, with the advent of medicine and science, we are often able to better predict our own death and even when one dies suddenly, we have more tools with which to make our intentions known and to create our legacies. We have the opportunity to prepare our wills, taking care that our assets will go where we intend. In this digital age, we are able to preserve our life stories, accumulated wisdom, messages for future generations in ways that have never been done before. If we follow in Yaakov Avinu's footsteps and work to create intentional legacy, we can leave memories and lessons that will last into future generations. May we all be merited to live long and beautiful lives, followed by lasting legacies.



Before becoming a student at Maharat, Yael Keller was the Director of Operations at Maharat. She earned a Masters in Public Policy from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management and a Masters in Jewish Professional Leadership at the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University. Upon graduation, she was the Director of Programming at Uri L'Tzedek, the Orthodox Social Justice movement. In graduate school she was an intern at the Joint Distribution Committee in Israel, where she worked on the grant writing team, advocating for Jews at risk throughout the world and a site educator at Impact Boston, where she facilitated a teen experience focused on social action, community service and advocacy. Before graduate school, Yael spent three years in Washington, DC, working at the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington and Hillel's Schusterman International Center.

She also spent a semester in Israel studying at the Pardes Institute of Judaic Studies before attending the Hornstein Program. Yael earned her B.A. in Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. She was active in her campus Hillel, serving as a student leader and board member.

² Both Tosafot and Rashi, commenting on this passage, interpret Rabbi Yitzhak literally, saying that Yaakov Avinu lived forever. It is an interesting choice, given that it makes so much more sense to read Rabbi Yitzhak metaphorically.