

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayehi

January 2, 2021; 18 Tevet 5781

Torah: Genesis 47:28-50:26; Triennial 49:1-26

Haftorah: I Kings 2:1-12

Did Jacob Really Die?

Ilana Kurshan

Parshat Vayehi describes a powerful deathbed scene in which Jacob summons his sons and grandsons and blesses them before he dies. After he breathes his last breath, he is embalmed and mourned and then taken by Joseph and by a host of Egyptian dignitaries to be buried in Canaan. There seems no question about the fact that Jacob dies in this week's parsha – and yet at least one Talmudic rabbi is not so sure.

The Talmud in tractate Taanit (5b) recounts an intriguing exchange about Jacob's death that unfolds between two third-century rabbis who were once sharing a meal together. The first, Rav Nahman the Babylonian, is hosting Rabbi Yitzhak, a visitor from the land of Israel. Just when they are sitting down to eat, Rav Nahman demands of his guest, "Master, say something!" Rabbi Yitzchak does not miss the opportunity to quote a teaching from his own teacher, Rabbi Yohanan, who was the leading sage in the land of Israel. Rabbi Yohanan

was regarded as a formidable figure by the Babylonian sages of his time, who wished to prove that their own Torah scholarship surpassed—or at least rivalled—the Torah that was coming out of the land of Israel. And so Rabbi Yitzchak showcases the brilliance of his teacher while at the same time one-upping his Babylonian interlocutor, Rav Nahman. He responds: "Thus said Rabbi Yohanan: One may not speak during a meal, lest the esophagus precede the trachea and one's life thereby become endangered." Rabbi Yitzchak thus accedes to his host's request while at the same time dismissing it as inappropriate and unenlightened; if only Rav Nahman had studied with Rabbi Yohanan, he seems to be implying, he would know that it is dangerous to talk while eating.

Presumably Rav Nahman is chastened by Rabbi Yitzchak's dismissal. The Talmud does not report on any further dialogue between them until they are finished eating, at which point Rabbi Yitzchak volunteers another teaching from the great Rabbi Yohanan. He tells his host, "Thus said Rabbi Yohanan: Jacob our patriarch did not die." This is a rather surprising statement, and certainly Rav Nahman is taken aback. He asks, "And was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him and the embalmers embalmed him and the buriers buried him?" As Rav Nahman argues, our parsha states explicitly that Jacob was embalmed for forty days, mourned for seventy days, and then taken for burial in the land of Israel in an elaborate funeral procession – how then could he not have died?

But Rabbi Yitzchak is adamant: Jacob did not die, at least not in the sense that he means. He tells Rav

Nahman that he is offering a midrash on a verse from Jeremiah (30:10): "Therefore do not fear, Jacob, my servant, says the Lord, neither be dismayed, Israel, for I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity." As Rabbi Yitzchak explains to Rav Nahman, this verse juxtaposes Jacob with his seed to highlight their commonality: Just as Jacob's descendants are brought back from the seeming death of exile in the book of Jeremiah, so the progenitor Jacob never truly dies.

Although Rabbi Yitzchak does not say so explicitly, he is in fact offering a highly literal reading of the biblical text. A close comparison of the deaths of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, reveals that at least in one sense, Jacob did not die. Abraham is said to have "breathed his last, and died . . . and was gathered to his kin" (Gen 25:8); Isaac is described similarly to have "breathed his last, and died, and was gathered to his kin" (Gen 35:29). By contrast, Jacob's death, as described in this week's parsha, includes only two of these phrases: "He breathed his last, and was gathered to his kin" (Gen 49:33)—but the Torah never says *vayamot* – that he died. According to Rabbi Yitzchak's reading, Jacob may have died on a spiritual level—his breath expired, his spirit was gathered to his kin—but he never physically died.

Paradoxically, though, Rabbi Yitzchak is also making the opposite point – Jacob remains alive not on a physical level (he was after all embalmed and buried), but on a spiritual level – his spirit remains alive as long as his children endure. So long as the children of Israel are alive, Jacob—whose name was changed to Israel—is

sustained. Rav Nahman, the literalist, might beg to differ, but Rabbi Yitzchak is offering a midrash, as he himself admits. Indeed, perhaps it is a good thing that Rabbi Yitzchak did not share this teaching while they were still eating, because Rav Nahman might have choked on his food in his shock. And then one of Jacob's descendants would have died, in keeping with Rabbi Yohanan's warning.

Rabbi Yitzchak's midrash suggests that there are people who make such an impact on the world that they never truly die – their legacy endures long after they have physically departed from the earth. John Donne captures this notion beautifully in the opening stanzas of "A Valediction—Forbidding Mourning":

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No.

It is almost impossible to tell when a righteous person has died, because their spirit expires so gently as to be almost undetectable. Some of their sad friends say their breath has gone, but others insist that no, they are still alive. And the others are not entirely wrong, as we have seen. Jacob is still alive so long as we, the Jewish people, continue to live in accordance with the divine covenant and perpetuate his legacy.

Why Is Yoseph Receiving More?!

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bereshit 48:1-6

*1*And it happened... that someone said to Joseph: 'Behold, your father is sick.' And he took with him his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim. ...And Israel strengthened himself and sat upon the bed. *3*And Yaakov said to Joseph: 'El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, *4*and said to me: Behold, I will make you fruitful...and will give this land to your seed ... for an everlasting possession. *5*And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you to Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Menashe, like Reuben and Simeon, they shall be to me. *6*And those begot after them shall be yours...

- Why do you think that Yoseph brought Menashe and Ephraim with him?
- What is the significance of vs.3-4 for what comes after?
- Yoseph (who brought them along) thinks of Menashe as first, but Yaakov speaks first of Ephraim. Try to explain the discrepancy.
- Why do you think that Yaakov wants to consider Ephraim and Menashe, Yoseph's children, as his own? (In effect giving Yoseph a double share.)
- Why do you think that Yaakov waited until now to address this issue?
- Considering the stories of the book of Bereshit, how do you feel about Yoseph receiving more?

Commentary: Rashbam Bereshit 48:5

Now your two sons: *In other words, since God granted me the land of Canaan, I have the power to give you the right of the firstborn to inherit twice the amount of any tribe. Accordingly, your two sons will receive shares like Reuben and Simeon.*

- What question(s) is Rashbam trying to solve in his comment?

Commentary: Shadal (Luzzato) Bereshit 48:5

As Reuben and Simeon, they shall be to me – *He did not say that Yoseph will be the firstborn like Reuben, and later Yaakov himself said (49:3) "Reuben, you are my firstborn".... So it seem to me that until Yaakov "double [inheritance to the firstborn]" was not practiced. Rather, because of his love of Yoseph did he give him double... And Ohev Ger Z"L (the son of the author) adds as it says "like Reuben and Simeon they shall be to me" it is understood that Reuben did not receive double... or it should have said "as Simeon and Levi" and not "as Reuben and Simeon".*

- What assumption did commentators like Rashbam make, that is being questioned by Shadal?
- What argument is brought in the name of Ohev Ger (based on the use of Reuben) against the assumption that the issue is a double portion for the firstborn?

The Power of Suggestion

Bex Rosenblatt

We know Solomon for his wisdom. Just two weeks ago, we read about his great wisdom in the haftarah for Miketz, in which he threatened to cut a baby in half in order to reveal who the baby's real mother was. Throughout his reign, his wisdom will be a defining feature, from building the Temple to winning the admiration of Queen Sheba. While it seems that Solomon's wisdom is a gift from God, given to Solomon in a dream in 1 Kings 3, in this week's haftarah, we return to even early associations of Solomon with wisdom. King David will set Solomon on a path that leads inevitably towards the wisdom he will receive from God.

Our haftarah, 1 Kings 2:1-12, starts as King David is dying. With his last words, he issues a series of commands to Solomon, his son and successor. He begins with the loaded words, "I am going the way of all the earth, therefore, be strong and be a man." According to Malbim, Solomon was only twelve years old at the time. David looks at his son and tells him to grow up. And yet, when we get to the story of God's gifting wisdom to Solomon just one chapter later, we find Solomon rejecting this charge. Solomon begins his request to God with the words, "You have made [me,] your servant, king after David my father. And I am a small child." Solomon is unable by himself to fulfill David's very first command to him. Rather than

becoming a man, Solomon emphasizes his youth and lack of understanding, asking God to help him.

David then commands Solomon to keep God's laws, referencing God's promise to him that his line would remain ruling in Jerusalem so long as they walked before God with truth in their hearts. And indeed, in the next chapter, Solomon tries to do so. We read in 1 Kings 3:3, "And Solomon loved God, walking in the statutes of David, his father. But he sacrificed and burnt incense in the high places." Solomon does his best to do as his dad commanded him here, although he is not able to be completely successful.

The parallels between 1 Kings 2 and 1 Kings 3 are particularly interesting in David's final commands to Solomon. David tells Solomon to ensure the deaths of two of his enemies. In telling him of each command to kill, David references Solomon's wisdom. He says of the first one, "do it according to your wisdom," and of the second one, "for you are a wise man." Solomon then comes up with ingenious ways to dispose of these two men without bringing danger or guilt upon himself. And yet it is not until the next chapter, after he has already done this, that God will formally give him a wise heart.

Solomon the boy is told by his dying father that he is wise. Solomon acts out this wisdom through his actions. But Solomon still desires external validation, he still turns to God and asks wisely for wisdom. May we be wise enough to appreciate what others see in us.