

Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

January 11, 2020 *** Tevet 14, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Portions

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Vayechi in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3228/jewish/Vayechi-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Jacob lives the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Before his passing, he asks Joseph to take an oath that he will bury him in the Holy Land. He blesses Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of his own sons as progenitors of tribes within the nation of Israel.

The patriarch desires to reveal the end of days to his children, but is prevented from doing so. Jacob blesses his sons, assigning to each his role as a tribe: Judah will produce leaders, legislators and kings; priests will come from Levi, scholars from Issachar, seafarers from Zebulun, schoolteachers from Simeon, soldiers from Gad, judges from Dan, olive-growers from Asher, and so on. Reuben is rebuked for "confusing his father's marriage bed"; Simeon and Levi, for the massacre of Shechem and the plot against Joseph. Naphtali is granted the swiftness of a deer, Benjamin the ferociousness of a wolf, and Joseph is blessed with beauty and fertility.

A large funeral procession consisting of Jacob's descendants, Pharaoh's ministers, the leading citizens of Egypt and the Egyptian cavalry accompanies Jacob on his final journey to the Holy Land, where he is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron.

Joseph, too, dies in Egypt, at the age of 110. He, too, instructs that his bones be taken out of Egypt and buried in the Holy Land, but this would come to pass only with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt many years later. Before his passing, Joseph conveys to the Children of Israel the testament from which they will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come: "G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/611890/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In this week's haftarah, King David delivers his deathbed message to his son and successor, Solomon, echoing this week's Torah reading that discusses at length Jacob's parting words and instructions to his sons.

King David encourages Solomon to be strong and to remain steadfast in his belief in G-d. This will ensure his success in all his endeavors as well as the continuation of the Davidic Dynasty. David then goes on to give his son some tactical instructions pertaining to various people who deserved punishment or reward for their actions during his reign.

The haftarah concludes with David's death and his burial in the City of David. King Solomon takes his father's place and his sovereignty is firmly established.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Family, Faith and Freedom (Vayechi 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/vayechi-5780/>

If you want to understand what a book is about, look carefully at how it ends. Genesis ends with three deeply significant scenes.

First, Jacob blesses his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasheh. This is the blessing that Jewish parents use on Friday night to bless their sons. My predecessor Lord Jakobovits used to ask, why this blessing of all the blessings in the Torah? He gave a beautiful reply. He said, all the others are from fathers to sons – and between fathers and sons there can be tension. Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim and Manasheh is the only instance in the Torah of a grandparent blessing a grandchild. And between grandparents and grandchildren there is no tension, only pure love.

Second, Jacob blesses his twelve sons. There is discernible tension here. His blessings to his eldest three sons, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, read more like curses than blessings. Yet the fact is that he is blessing all twelve together in the same room at the same time. We have not seen this before. There is no record of Abraham blessing either Ishmael or Isaac. Isaac blesses Esau and Jacob separately. The mere fact that Jacob is able to gather his sons together is unprecedented, and important. In the next chapter – the first of Exodus – the Israelites are, for the first time, described as a people. It is hard to see how they could live together as a people if they could not live together as a family.

Third, after the death of Jacob, the brothers asked Joseph to forgive them, which he does. He had also done so earlier. Evidently, the brothers harbour the suspicion that he was merely biding his time until their father died, as Esau at one point resolved to do. Sons do not take revenge within the family while the father is alive – that seems to have been the principle in those days. Joseph speaks directly to their fears and puts them at rest. “You intended to harm me but God intended it for good,” he says.

The Torah is telling us an unexpected message here: the family is prior to all else, to the land, the nation, politics, economics, the pursuit of power and the accumulation of wealth. From an external point of view, the impressive story is that Joseph reached the heights of power in Egypt, the Egyptians themselves mourned the death of his father Jacob and accompanied the family on their way to bury him, so that the Canaanites, seeing the entourage said, “The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning” (Gen. 50:11). But that is externality. When we turn the page and begin the book of Exodus, we discover that the position of the Israelites in Egypt was very vulnerable indeed, and all the power Joseph had centralised in the hands of Pharaoh would eventually be used against them.

Genesis is not about power. It is about families. Because that is where life together begins.

The Torah does not imply that there is anything easy about making and sustaining a family. The patriarchs and matriarchs – Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel especially – know the agony of infertility. They know what it is to wait in hope and wait again.

Sibling rivalry is a repeated theme of the book. The Psalm tells us “how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together.” It might have added, “and how rare.” Almost at the beginning of the human story, Cain kills Abel. There are tensions between Sarah and Hagar that lead to Hagar and Ishmael being sent away. There is rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers, in both cases coming close to murder.

Yet there is no diminution of the significance of the family. To the contrary, it is the main vehicle of blessing. Children figure as central to God’s blessing no less than the gift of the land. It is as if the Torah were telling us, with great honesty, that yes, families are challenging. The relationship between husband and wife, and between parent and child, is rarely straightforward. But we have to work at it. There is no guarantee that we will always get it right. It is by no means clear that the parents in Genesis always got it right. But this is our most human institution.

The family is where love brings new life into the world. That in itself makes it the most spiritual of all institutions. It is also where we have our most important and lasting moral education. To quote Harvard political scientist, the late James Q. Wilson, the family is “an arena in which conflicts occur and must be managed.” People within the family “love and

quarrel, share and sulk, please and disappoint.” Families, he says, “are the world in which we shape and manage our emotions.”[1]

The Torah guides us through areas that have been identified in the 20th century as the most important arenas of conflict. Freud saw the Oedipus complex – the desire to create space for yourself by removing your father – as one of the primary drivers of human emotion. Rene Girard saw sibling rivalry as a, perhaps the, source of human violence.[2] I have argued that the story of the Binding of Isaac is directed precisely at the Oedipus complex. God does not want Abraham to kill Isaac. He wants him to relinquish ownership of Isaac. He wants to abolish one of the most widespread beliefs of the ancient world, known in Roman law as the principle of *Patria potestas*, that parents own their children. Once this has gone, and children become legal personalities in their own right, then much of the force of the Oedipus complex is removed. Children have space to be themselves.

I have argued also that the story of Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel is directed against the source of sibling rivalry, namely mimetic desire, the desire to have what your brother has because he has it. Jacob becomes Israel when he ceases wanting to be Esau and instead stands tall as himself.

So Genesis is not a hymn to the virtue of families. It is a candid, honest, fully worked-through account of what it is to confront some of the main problems within families, even the best.

Genesis ends on these three important resolutions: first, that grandparents are part of the family and their blessing is important. Second, Jacob shows it is possible to bless all your children, even if you have a fractured relationship with some of them. Third, Joseph shows it is possible to forgive your siblings even if they have done you great harm. One of my most vivid memories from my early days as a student was listening to the BBC Reith Lectures in 1967. The Reith lectures are the BBC’s most prestigious broadcast series: the first to deliver them was Bertrand Russell in 1948. In 1967 the lecturer was the Cambridge Professor of Anthropology, Edmund Leach. I had the privilege of delivering these lectures in 1990.

Leach called his lectures *A Runaway World?*, and in his third lecture he delivered a sentence that made me sit up and take notice. “Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents.”[3] It was an important sign that the family was about to be dethroned, in favour of sexual liberation and self-expression. Rarely has so important an institution been abandoned so thoroughly and so lightly.

In the decades that followed, in many parts of society, cohabitation replaced marriage. Fewer people were getting married, they were getting married later, and more were getting divorced. At one point, 50% of marriages in America and Britain were ending in divorce. And 50% of children were being born outside marriage. The current figure for Britain is 42%.

The consequences have been widespread and devastating. To take one example, the birth rate in Europe today is far below replacement rate. A fertility rate of 2.1 (the average number of children born per woman of the population) is necessary for a stable population. No country in Europe has that rate. In Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece, it is down to 1.3. The overall average is 1.6. Europe is maintaining its population only by immigration on an unprecedented scale. This is the death of Europe as we knew it. Meanwhile in the United States, a significant part of the population is living in neighbourhoods with few intact families, disadvantaged children, damaged neighbourhoods, poor schools, few social facilities, and a desperate shortage of hope. This, for sections of America, is the end of the American dream.[4]

People who look to the state, politics and power, to deliver the good, the beautiful and the true – the Hellenistic tradition – tend to regard the family and all it presupposes in terms of fidelity and responsibility as a distraction. But for people who understand not just the

importance of politics but also its limitations and dangers, relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, grandparent and grandchildren, and siblings, are the most important basis of freedom. That is an insight that runs all the way through Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, summed up in his statement that "as long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone." [5]

James Q. Wilson put it beautifully: "We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former's affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter's tests, judgements, and demands." [6]

That, surprisingly, is what Genesis is about. Not about the creation of the world, which occupies only one chapter, but about how to handle family conflict. As soon as Abraham's descendants can create strong families, they can move from Genesis to Exodus and their birth as a nation.

I believe that family is the birthplace of freedom. Caring for one another, we learn to care for the common good. [1] James Q. Wilson, The Moral Sense, Free Press, 1993, 162. [2] Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. [3] Edmund Leach, A Runaway World?, Oxford University Press, 1967. [4] This is the thesis of two important books: Charles Murray, Coming Apart, Crown Forum, 2012, and Robert Putnam, Our Kids, Simon & Schuster, 2015. See also Yuval Levin, The Fractured Republic, Basic Books, 2016. [5] Democracy in America, 340. [6] The Moral Sense, 163.

What's in a Name by David Helfand

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NCTrr2Bi5gT8TzvqpZ52z5VDeUuV_cT01ryJVyK5Cmk/edit

In the 2015 Broadway masterpiece, Hamilton, Aaron Burr exclaims, "Get your education, don't forget from whence you came. And the world's gonna know your name, what's your name, man!" A name says a lot about a person. Our names connect us to a loved one's memory, they may be inspired by our own journey, and they may even change over time. In Parashat Vayechi, we bid farewell to Yaakov our Patriarch. In the opening verses, Yaakov is called by two different names:

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁבַע עָשָׂר שָׁנָה וַיְהִי יְמֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנֵי חֲמֵי־עֶשְׂרִים וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמָאתַיִם וְשָׁנָה: וַיִּקְרָבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו לְבָנָו לְיֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שִׂים־נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאַמֶּת אֶל־נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרַיִם:

"Yaakov lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt, so the span of Yaakov's life came to one hundred and forty-seven years. And when the time approached for Yisrael to die, he summoned his son Yosef and said to him, "Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt." (Genesis 47:28-29)

Notably, Yaakov is the Biblical character whose new name, Yisrael, does not cancel all use of his birth name. And while it's not uncommon for the Torah to use one name in one story and the other in a different one, it is odd for the Torah to do so in consecutive verses. And of all places for the Torah to do so, why does it do so here, in a passage about Yaakov nearing the end of his life?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888, Germany) understands names as reflecting different emotional states of our ancestors throughout their lives. While the name Yaakov connects with the stooped, downcast man, the name Yisrael connotes hope and reinvigoration.

Put differently, Yaakov's birth name, Yaakov, hearkens back to how Yaakov entered the world. Derived from the word עקב meaning the heel of the foot, this name highlights Yaakov's struggle against his brother Esav, which began in utero. The early wrestling would lead to outright trickery and deception as Yaakov trades stew for Esau's birthright and eventually steals the firstborn blessing. Though a simple tent dweller, Yaakov's life begins with him clutching at the heel of his brother while perpetually wandering the land on foot from Canaan to Egypt.

Yisrael, the name given to Yaakov by God, is related to the word שרר which means to prevail or have dominion over. This new name reflects both his growth and overcoming of adversity and his newfound material and spiritual elevation - all byproducts of a life of

wrestling. This new name represents Yaakov's transition from the physical struggle of his youth to the spiritual quest of his adulthood. Moreover, as Rav Hirsch teaches, Yaakov's new name is not just his name, but the name of an entire nation - B'nei Yisrael. It is a name that also signifies the nation's journey from physical struggle to spiritual accomplishment.

While we may not all have two names, we all contain dualities within us - our physical self and our spiritual self, our "better" self and our "worse" self. Like our ancestors, it is not uncommon to have to learn how to grapple with and grow from these dualities. The usage of both Yaakov and Yisrael, even at the end of his life, reminds us that even as we are shaped by our individual and shared experiences, by our physical struggles and our moral and spiritual awakenings, we carry it all with us - both who we were and who we have become.

But when looking at what lives on after us, the legacy that we leave, the emphasis is not on where we started, but on where we finish - not on our struggles, but on our accomplishments. May we merit to remember, bring honor to, and exemplify the name, Yisrael. (*David Helfand is a Conservative Yeshiva Student and Rabbinical Student at AJU's Ziegler School of Rabbinics in LA, Ca.*)

[David the Godfather? By Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NCTrr2Bi5gT8TvzqpZ52z5VDeUuV_cT01ryJVyK5Cmk/edit)

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This week's haftarah opens benignly enough with David's command to his son and successor as king, Shlomo, to keep faith and maintain loyalty to God and the Torah. What follows seems to read like the end of "The Godfather", as David charges his son to "even the score" with a number of his enemies and former allies who during the course of his career as king had betrayed him. Yoav ben Zeruah, David's nephew and one of his military leaders, is first on the list: "And what's more, you yourself know what Yoav ben Zeruah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, Avner ben Ner and Amasa ben Yeter – he killed them, and shed the blood of war in peace... you must act in your wisdom, and do not let his gray go down in peace to Sheol." (2:5) This disquieting order can only be understood when we see what Yoav was responsible for in the past and the threat he represented to Shlomo's reign.

What Yoav did to the two commanders is spelled out clearly. Avner, who had been closely associated with David's predecessor, Sha'ul, was on his way to make peace with David, when Yoav met him on the road, and, feigning a gesture of peace, killed him. (2 Samuel 3:22-27) In a similar manner, he killed Amasa, who had taken Yoav's place as David's chief military attendant. Meeting Amasa on the road, he greeted him in peace, only to murder him in an act of trickery. The cruelty of the manner of this murder was extraordinary (See 2 Samuel 20:8-9) These incidents, while not betrayals of David's trust, established Yoav's capacity for duplicity and cold-bloodedness, and his disregard for the rules of war.

What really captured David's ire were the two occasions when Yoav was disloyal. When David's son, Avshalom, rebelled against his father, David sent Yoav to quell the rebellion with the clear understanding that Avshalom was to remain unharmed. Yoav's soldiers, upon finding Avshalom stuck in a thicket, follow David's orders. Yoav, however, stabs Avshalom with 3 darts and has his men finish the job. (2 Samuel 18:14-15) And of course, Yoav then allied himself with another of David's sons, Adoniyah, who sought to usurp the monarch from David. (1 Kings 1)

If that weren't enough, one midrash also pins on Yoav responsibility for making known David's part in the death of Uriah the Hittite, husband of Bathsheba! (See Tanhuma Buber Masei 9)

It should be easy to see both why David harbored great animosity toward this one-time ally, and why he saw Yoav as a threat to Shlomo's rule as king. All of this serves to remind us that the world of statecraft is, unfortunately, a world shaped by both morality and realpolitik. Mastering this volatile combination is not easy and requires great wisdom.

This is what David tried to teach his son Shlomo before departing the world.

Difficult Blessings and the Love Within by Jacob Blumenthal

<http://www.jtsa.edu/difficult-blessings-and-the-love-within>

At the age of 90, my mother's mind was still "sharp as a tack" (she loved those kinds of somewhat anachronistic expressions), even as her body was failing. With the growing realization that the solution to each physical ailment aggravated her other challenges, Bernice, z"l, agreed it was time to engage hospice care. "I want two things," she said. "I don't want to be in pain. And I want to see everyone I love before I die."

She made a list of whom she wanted to see: her children and their spouses; her grandchildren; nieces and nephews and cousins; friends from long ago, and those of more recent vintage. Pilgrimages to her bedside began from near and far, and those who couldn't come in person gained an audience by video conference or by phone.

In the ensuing days and weeks, she held court for hours at a time. Rather than exhaust her, each encounter seemed to renew her strength. She told each person how much she loved them. And she also shared her perspective on their lives—recounting each person's strengths, forgiving moments of failure, and often being quite direct in her "advice" (i.e. critique) for life going forward.

Watching or hearing reports about her final interactions with each of the people she cherished gave me a new appreciation for the deathbed scene that unfolds in this week's parashah. It's a portion I'm familiar with since it was also my bar mitzvah portion, ironically focusing on the death of my namesake, our ancestor, Jacob, as he "blesses" each of his 12 sons.

Some of Jacob's poetic phrases do indeed seem like blessings:

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah;
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (Gen. 49:10)

"Dan shall govern his people;
As one of the tribes of Israel" (v. 16);

"Asher's bread shall be rich;
And he shall yield royal dainties" (v. 20);

"The blessings of your father,
Surpass the blessings of my ancestors;
To the utmost bounds of the eternal hills,
May they rest on the head of Joseph." (v. 26)

But for some of the other sons, his words seem decidedly less of "blessing character":

"Simeon and Levi are a pair;
Their weapons are tools of lawlessness" (v. 5);

"Issachar is a strong-boned ass,
Crouching among the sheepfolds . . .
He bent his shoulder to the burden,
And became a toiling serf (v. 14)."

Ouch!

I am always struck by Jacob's differentiated appraisal of each of his children. There is still some bias as the children of his favored wife, Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin unsurprisingly receive positive accolades. But there is also honesty—Simeon and Levi are indeed violent in their treatment of the princes and people of Shekhem (34:25-29), and in the Torah's earlier account Reuben disrespected his father in ways Jacob is clearly still not quite ready to forgive (49:4 and see 35:22).

But as a deathbed message for his children, what moves Jacob to go beyond simple statements of love, and include such challenging appraisals of character in these final moments? With his poetry, Jacob draws a line between the character traits of each of his sons, and the fate of the tribes which would emanate from them in future generations. Many commentaries wonder if Jacob is expressing a fatalistic sense that later success or failure is dependent upon the character of an earlier generation. Or is he offering critique

in the hope that his words might allow for his sons to change, and even alter the character of the future tribes of Israel?

Often in the Torah there is a relationship between the stories in Genesis and the laws of later books. If his goal was to build self-awareness among his children and change their behavior, I think about the statement in Leviticus: “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. [You shall surely] reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him.” (19:17) In putting these phrases together, the Torah implies that reproof should be motivated by love and caring, and not by hatred. The Rabbis teach that this is extraordinarily hard to accomplish, leading many of the Sages to claim that in their generation there was no one able to accept reproof nor give it effectively (Sifra Kedoshim 4:9).

Can we see Jacob’s “blessings” as based on this kind of love? The truth is, my mother didn’t wait until her deathbed to offer advice (and critique) freely. I can’t say I always appreciated my mother’s direct appraisals, and I always wondered at how her friends valued her frank “guidance,” even when it seemed hard to hear, and even came back for more. But I came to understand that we all did so because we knew it came from a place of deep love and respect. Perhaps the Rabbis’ indictment of their generation’s inability to offer critique was not so much about their own character, but in the lack of loving relationship among colleagues.

Finally, we might come to understand Jacob’s varied “blessings” less as “praise versus critique” and more as simply an appreciation of the diverse characteristics of family. Later in her life, my mother began to give *divrei Torah* at her synagogue. In a *devar Torah* on *Vayehi* (composed when she was well past the age of 80 and including a terrific story about renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman), she compared the diverse characterization of the sons to the soloist and the various musicians in an orchestra as they play a concerto. Speaking of those with many gifts, and others with deficits, she concluded that as he lay dying, Jacob, “Bade his children and the nation to come to make music with everything they have and, when that is not possible, with whatever they have left. And it must be a united and collaborative and integrated music of life and passion and soul. This is what we must continue to do.”

Indeed, as just one example, the Torah later subsumes the violence and passion of the Levites into holy service in the Tabernacle and later the Temple in Jerusalem. The Torah insists that even our more challenging qualities can be redirected to holiness and service. Perhaps Jacob’s words to his children were less about each individual, and more about appreciating the diversity of their traits, and the need to still bring them together as one family, creating harmony rather than dissonance.

Over the course of a few weeks in the tender care of hospice, my mother’s desire to speak to each of her dear ones was fulfilled, and she passed peacefully. For myself, I continue to take her words of both praise and critique to heart. And as I move through a year of saying *kaddish* for my mother, I’m coming to learn that blessings, and the act of blessing, come in many and sometimes unexpected forms. (*Jacob Blumenthal is Chief Executive, The Rabbinical Assembly; JTS alumnus (RS’99)*)

Vayechi by Rabbi David Markus

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

This last Torah portion of the Book of Genesis (*Vayehi*) concludes the drama of Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. The dramatic saga – their troubled family dynamics, power and power inversions, regret, guilt, fear, their very lives – it all finally reaches a settled tableau. Jacob is buried, hatchets are buried (maybe), and Joseph’s body is embalmed. With them, Torah’s first era of Jewish ancestry ends.

Of course, their deaths are Torah’s fertilizer for the future. Reflecting God’s promise to Abraham long before (Gen. 15:13), by design all of this week’s endings are mere prelude. The next chapter soon will open by recounting those generations (Ex. 1:1-6), and a new king of Egypt will rise to life who knows not Joseph (Ex. 1:8). Centuries of bondage will commingle death and life until only supernatural deaths – the Tenth Plague

and the drowning of Egypt's hosts in the Sea – will bring new life to liberated Israelites who would become Jews.

We learn that death can yield new life. Death and life inter-are. As the 1998 Semisonic hit put it, “Closing time: Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.” This spiritual truth leaps from the name of this week's portion so seemingly focused on death and ending: Vayehi – “[Jacob] lived” (Gen. 47:28). As Rashi noted, this set-up is key to what follows.

Look carefully at what comes next (Gen. 47:29): ויקרבו ימי-ישראל למות / Vayikrevu y'mei-Yisrael lamut. While often translated as “When the time came for Israel to die,” a more precise translation would be “When Israel's days approached to die” – not the man but his days, his sense of time, his sense of his time.

The difference is key. This ending portion of the Book of Genesis (“Book of Beginning”) begins not with Israel's death but with his awareness that his days were numbered. It was only “some time later” that he became fatally sick (Gen. 48:1) and said that his actual death was approaching (Gen. 48:21). His awareness of mortality came well before.

Awareness of mortality is part of life's journey and a catalyst for life's potency. Spiritually, mortality awareness is not a consolation prize but a goal, a good in itself, a way to live fully: “Teach us to number our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). Understood this way, all of Vayehi charts this spiritually fertile phase of Jacob's life – starting with his awareness that his days were numbered. Torah's order of what unfolded next may look familiar to anyone who experiences a loved one's aging or expected death.

Immediately after Jacob spoke his mortality awareness, Jacob gave burial instructions (Gen. 47:29-31). Some time later, Jacob took ill, summoning Joseph and his sons to the sickbed (Gen. 48:1-2). Only then did Jacob speak a life review – his sense of his life's meaning (Gen. 48:3-4). Jacob invoked angels and blessing (Gen. 48:16). He gave his sons an ethical will – his download of values (Gen. 49:1-28). He gave final instructions (Gen. 49:29-32), then died (Gen. 49:33). Joseph wailed in the first suffering of aninut, the first stage of mourning (Gen. 50:1). Joseph summoned himself to make arrangements (Gen. 50:2-6). Jacob's sons buried him and honored a seven-day shiva of aveilut, “mourning,” (Gen. 50:7-14). Joseph's brothers felt guilt and fear in the shadow of Jacob's death (Gen. 50:15). The brothers appealed to Joseph in their father's name (Gen. 50:15-18). Joseph resolved to care for them and their descendants (Gen. 50:19-22).

Such was Jacob's journey, and the journey of his sons, and the journey we all must take. We don't need spiritual life to teach that death is guaranteed: nobody gets out alive. Rather, we need spiritual life – and Jacob's final life stages of Vayehi – to teach that the richest and most meaningful lives come by making death awareness an integral part of life, ideally long before any presenting circumstance forces our focus.

We learn that the avoidant impulse to distance our sense of mortality ultimately robs us of the chance to live most fully. It was Jacob's awareness of his mortality, and then openly speaking it with Joseph, that catalyzed emotional intimacy between them (Gen. 48:29). It was Jacob's transparency to mortality that catalyzed the spiritual blessings of his life review and ethical will. It was Jacob numbering his days that brought a heart of wisdom. Vayehi teaches: Don't be afraid to speak mortality and even live like you're dying. Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. It is only by allowing ourselves to become ever more present to our dying that we can most fully live. (*Rabbi David Evan*

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Yahrtzeits

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her grandmother Sadye Hammer Vernon on Wed. Jan 15