

From: Phyllostac@aol.com  
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To: JoshHoff@aol.com

## To Life

### By Rabbi Joshua (actually known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

This week's parsha is dominated by the presence and spirit of Ya'akov. A central theme appears to be the message and blessings he delivered to his children before his death. Interestingly, however, the parsha begins with an account of Ya'akov's charge to his son Yosef to bury him in Chevron, and nears its end with an elaborate description of his death and funeral process. Thus, the parsha is essentially sandwiched in by a discussion of Ya'akov's death, and yet, curiously, is called parshas Vayechi - "and he lived." On a simple level, of course, this is because the parsha begins with that word. I believe, however, that there is a deeper message, as well.

Rashi at the beginning of the parsha notes that although usually at the end of a weekly parsha, there is, in the Torah scroll, either a gap of nine spaces before the next parsha starts, or empty space at the end of the last line, the two parshas, Vayigash and Vayechi, run into each other in the text, with only one space between them. This configuration is referred to as 'setumah'-closed up. Why, asks Rashi, based on the midrash, is this parsha closed up? Because once Ya'akov passed away the eyes and hearts of Yisroel were closed because of the suffering of the enslavement that the Egyptians began to impose upon them. Rabbi Ephraim of Luntshits, in his Torah commentary 'Keli Yakar', points out that as a result of the lack of multiple spaces between the two parshas the last verse of Vayigash is read together with the first verse of Vayechi, as one continuity. At the end of Vayigash we read "And Yisroel settled in the land of Egypt in the area of Goshen and they took holdings in it, and they were fruitful and multiplied greatly." Yisroel, then, was successful in its new environment, and was becoming comfortable in it. Slowly, the influence of Ya'akov was waning. This is denoted by the following verse which appears without the usual gap of spaces in the text. Ya'akov, although in reality still alive, was beginning his process of death, in that his influence upon his family was fading due to their success in Egypt. Ya'akov's burden in this parsha, then, was to assure that his spirit and influence, particularly his signature trait of "emes" - truth- which can be defined as the reconciliation of opposing forces - would remain alive, even after his physical death.

The kabbalists tell us that Ya'akov represented a blend of the character traits of Avraham and Yitzchak. Avraham represented the trait of chesed, or kindness, while Yitzchak represented the trait of gevurah, defined as strength, or perseverance. Unchecked chesed or gevurah by themselves can be destructive, and so, there needed to be a blending of the two, and this was accomplished through Ya'akov, who represented tiferes, or beauty. In the book of Tehillim we find that the trait of emes is ascribed to Ya'akov, because the reconciliation of opposing forces brings about the true and proper application of each force in the world. Ya'akov, then, was the one who was able to bring opposites together. As we saw in our message on parshas Vayishlach, he even tried to bring about a reconciliation with his brother Eisav, attempting to accentuate and bring out the positive aspects of his character.

Ya'akov's arrival in Egypt came on the heels of a reconciliation between Yosef and his brothers, as we find described in parshas Vayigash. The spirit of Ya'akov, then, of reconciling opposing forces, was activated when he first came to the country. However, as the family became entrenched there, each one tending to his own possessions, there was a danger that this spirit would fade, and old conflicts could be revived. Sensing this trend, Ya'akov, before his death, called his sons together and charged all of them with their respective tasks within the family that was destined to become a nation. When Ya'akov originally left home for Charan, he had a dream, as described in the midrash, of twelve stones coalescing into one stone. The message of that dream was that he was to establish a nation of twelve tribes, each with its own task, but all working together. At the end of the section of Ya'akov's blessings, the Torah tells us "and he blessed them; each according to his blessing he

blessed them" (Bereishis, 49, 28). Rashi points out that the words 'he blessed them' indicate that even though Ya'akov gave particular, individual blessings to his various sons, in the end he included all of his sons in all of the blessings. The meaning behind this is that all of the sons were to work together, using their various talents. Although each one had a different strength and blessing, which might tend to conflict at times, Ya'akov blessed them that they should find a way to reconcile whatever clashes existed and find a way to work together.

The collective blessing that Ya'akov gave his children marked, for him, a closure of the conflict that had previously existed within the family, and the groundwork for the development of the future nation. He feared, however, that the effect of this blessing would not endure after his death. Perhaps for this reason he arranged to be buried in Chevron by the entire family. Rashi points out that the order of the brothers as they carried Ya'akov's coffin corresponded to the order they would follow while travelling in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. The joint effort expended in burying their father would help concretize the spirit of reconciliation and mutual cooperation that he sought to engender through his blessings. The word Chevron, in fact, comes from the word chibur, or connection. Ya'akov, by having his children bury him in Chevron, was trying to bring them together.

After the brothers return from the burial of their father, the Torah tells us "Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead and they said, "Perhaps Yosef will bear hatred for us and will repay us all the evil that we did to him" (Bereishis, 50,15). They then sent a messenger to Yosef telling him that their father had left instructions before his death for Yosef to forgive them for what they had done to him, and not to hate them for it. They then themselves went to Yosef and openly discussed the incident that had led to his descent into Egypt, seeking a final reconciliation with him. Rashi, based on a Talmudic passage, writes that Ya'akov actually did not give such a command, but that it was permissible for the brothers to state what they said for the sake of peace. Ramban, however, writes that following the simple sense of the verses, we can take what the brother's said at face value. Even though we do not find this command by Ya'akov recorded in the Torah, we can assume that it is true, and the Torah related it through the message of the brothers. In either case, it appears that the dramatic experience of Ya'akov's burial, in which they all participated, impressed upon the brothers his influence on their lives and his desire for them to work together as a unit. When they returned to Egypt, they felt his departure very deeply, and realized that it was now up to them to bring about the final reconciliation that he had worked so hard to achieve.

The parsha ends with a commitment by the brothers to have Yosef's remains brought out of Egypt, as well. Yosef's final internment in Shechem is recorded at the end of the book of Yehoshua, which again was a time of unity for the Jewish people. The spirit of Ya'akov, the spirit of reconciliation of opposing forces within the nation, thus permeates our parsha from beginning to end. Our rabbis tell us that Ya'akov our forefather did not die. Even though he was buried and eulogized, they explain, still, as his seed lives on, so does he. Following what we have said, we can suggest that the meaning of this teaching is that to the extent to which the spirit of reconciliation, of cooperation among varying, different forces, within the Jewish nation exists, so too, does Ya'akov continue to exist. In this sense, our parsha, although dealing from beginning to end with Ya'akov's death, can properly be called "and Ya'akov lived."

Note-Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) to JoshHoff @ AOL.com.

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