

tricks his father into giving him Esau's blessing. In Haran, he turns the tables on Lavan, who had tricked him into working double the years to marry Rachel, by employing an elaborate scheme with striped and spotted sheep and goats. And before confronting Esau again, he is a ball of anxious hyperactivity - dividing his camp in two, sending Esau all kinds of gifts, and praying to God for protection.

But Jacob comes to learn that things are beyond his control. His daughter is raped, his sons exact revenge against his will, his beloved wife dies in childbirth, his eldest son sleeps with his concubine, and his beloved son is killed by a goat (or so he thinks). It looks like his life will end in failure, as famine eventually forces his family to leave the promised land.

But we see in our parsha that Jacob learns that things can turn out OK even without his being in control. He says to Joseph: 'I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well.' (Genesis 48:11) And recognizing that it was really God, and not his own manipulations that paved his way, he prays that 'The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm— Bless the lads.' (48:16).

Joseph's challenge is the opposite: pride and overconfidence. He is born believing that he is destined for greatness, walking around in his ornate tunic, delivering bad reports about his brothers, and proclaiming, with no embarrassment, his premonition that his brothers and parents would someday bow to him.

It takes suffering for him to learn humility. When he hears of the cupbearer and baker's dreams, he tells them that he has the ability to interpret them, blurring the distinction between his innate abilities and a gift from God. He says to them "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please." (Genesis 40:8). But after more time in prison he has learned his lesson. When Pharaoh asks him to interpret his dreams he says: "I cannot do it...but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." (Genesis 41:16) He comes to understand that the gifts he has received are not a source of personal pride; they are a blessing to be shared humbly with others.

The final evidence of his growth comes in this parasha when his brothers, afraid that it is only Jacob being alive that has saved them from Joseph's vengeance, come to ask Joseph for forgiveness. Joseph replies, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people."

In the Torah's presentations of Jacob and Joseph, neither starts out as a paragon of virtue. They had lives full of challenges, but ultimately learned the right lessons from them and died at peace with themselves, their families, and God. May we all merit the same.



## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Vayehi

December 30, 2017 | 12 Tevet 5778

Annual | Genesis 47:28-50:26 (Etz Hayim p. 293-311; Hertz p. 180-191)  
Triennial | Genesis 49:1-49:26 (Etz Hayim p. 298-205; Hertz p. 183-187)  
Haftarah | 1 Kings 2:1-12 (Etz Hayim p. 312-314; Hertz p. 191-192)

## Dvar Torah

*Gabriela Schwartz, Conservative Yeshiva Student*

It seems ironic that Vayehi, the last parasha of the book of Genesis, means 'and he lived' when the most significant events in the parasha are the deaths of Jacob and Joseph! Perhaps Vayehi is inviting us to compare the totality of their lives, and consider the evolution of their characters.

Jacob is the preferred child of his mother, but scrapped and struggled to get his father's favor, birthright, and blessing. As Rachel's first child, Joseph occupies a favored position from birth. But despite his being the 11th son, he receives the customary firstborn double portion as Jacob blesses both Ephraim and Manasseh, promising each a portion of the Land of Israel alongside Joseph's brothers. Both are hated by resentful brothers, and both wind up outside the Land of Israel because of it. Separated from home and family, Jacob in Haran and Joseph in Egypt, they experience deception and servitude. But sustained by dreams that gave them insight into God's plan for them, they emerge triumphant.

But despite these similarities, Jacob and Joseph wrestle with very different demons. Jacob's greatest challenge is his lack of faith and ability to calmly accept fate. Instead, he was always striving to control the situation, cover his bases, and flip the script to make sure things turn out his way.

Even in the womb, he is working to get ahead. Esau is born first, but Jacob comes out grasping his heel! He buys the birthright with a bowl of pottage and

# Dvar Haftarah

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

David's parting advice to his son, Solomon, is filled with two types of advice, some noble and some painfully realpolitik. His noble advice summons Solomon to be loyal to the Torah and God's ways: "Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in His ways and following His laws, His commandments, His rules, and His admonitions as recorded in the teachings of Moses, in order that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you turn." (2:3)

What exactly were David's expectations of Solomon? On this count, the medieval commentators have different ideas. Rabbi David Kimche (13th century Provence) suggests that David intended for Solomon to abide by the commandments. Rabbi Yosef Kara (12th century France) asserts that David wanted Solomon to follow laws of kings found in the book of Deuteronomy which constitutionally limited the excesses of the king.

Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (13th century France), who was both a commentator and a philosopher, offered a more nuanced picture: "He (Solomon) should observe in his heart that which God commanded him to observe. And [this will be accomplished] through studying the Torah, and this learning will be through contemplating the purpose of 'walking in the ways of God blessed be He which are recounted in the Torah and through observing the laws, commandments, statutes and testimonies written in the Torah of Moses, for through studying it you will discern and know all that is fitting and appropriate to do in all that will happen to you... for if you never learn it you will not know to do it.'" (Adapted translation)

Rabbi Levi ben Gershon proposes a very interesting argument concerning the purpose of education. Education is intended to give a person the tools necessary to confront the situations in life that one will inevitably face. Consequently, a Jewish king without a "good Jewish education" will not know how to act like a good Jewish king. This same line of thinking goes for all of us. If we do not give ourselves the tools to face life, whether these be the technical skills necessary to manage in life or the tools to assess and access what it means to lead a worthwhile life, we will have left ourselves abandoned.

Modern Jews have become very good at guaranteeing themselves the former kind of education and less good at the latter. If we leave ourselves without the skills to manage and think as Jews, we have denied ourselves access to a meaningful life as Jews. Rabbi Levi realized how important this was for a king; it is equally important for each of us.

# Table Talk

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We have reached the end of Bereshit, the first book of the Torah. Now the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs come to a close with the stories of the end of the lives of Ya'akov (Jacob) and Joseph.

- 1) The parasha opens with Yaakov living in Egypt. As he approaches death, the name used is 'Israel' (47:28-29). Why do you think this name is used at the end of his life?
- 2) Yaakov/Israel does not want to be buried in Egypt. He asks Joseph to take an oath that he will fulfill Yaakov's wish to be buried in his forefathers' burial place (47:29-31). What physical act represents this oath? Why might this be appropriate for this request?
- 3) Yaakov tells Joseph that his 2 sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, will be counted as Yaakov's own sons (48:3-6). What are the practical implications of this status? What will happen to Joseph's other children?
- 4) Before his death Yaakov blesses Joseph's sons. As part of the blessing he says 'Israel will bless by you, saying: May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.' (48:20) When, and whom, do we bless 'may God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh'?
- 5) On his deathbed Yaakov gives his children glimpses of their future (49:3-27). His descriptions include several animals. What might be the reason for that? How many animals can you find in Yaakov's words? For extra challenge: Some types of animals have several names. What might that tell you about that animal in the lives of people who lived in biblical times and lands?

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