

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

forty years and a hundred years), whereas the lifespans of the other forefathers are described with the bigger numbers first (e.g. one-hundred and seventy-five years for Avraham). According to the Tur, Yaakov was different from Avraham and Yitzhak (Isaac) in that Yaakov became holy only after he performed many small good deeds; whereas Avraham and Yitzhak were infused with a large-scale aura of holiness that in turn then enabled them to perform those smaller good deeds. Avraham and Yitzhak knew from the very beginning that God had a destiny in mind for them; whereas Yaakov, whose life was marked by mistakes and misperceptions (Was he sleeping with Leah or Rachel? Was Yosef alive or dead?) had to figure everything out for himself.

Yaakov did not have a grand vision of his own destiny; thus, when God appears to him in his ladder dream at Beit El, he responds by making a bargain with God. He can never be sure that he will succeed – with his brother Esav, with his uncle Lavan, or with Pharaoh in Egypt. And so when he wishes to reveal the fates of his sons, he finds himself at a loss for words. The only way for Yaakov to know the future is by living it; but the day of his death has drawn near.

We are all, I think, more like Yaakov than like Abraham or Isaac. Like Yaakov, we do not know the path our lives will take. We may know what lies around the next corner, but we have no idea whether the doors down the corridor will be open or closed, or whether the windows will let in light. We move about in worlds unrealized, trusting in the divinity that shapes our ends. Perhaps it is for this reason that although Avraham is the father of our great nation, and although Yitzhak may furnish us with the ability to laugh at what seems so dearly desired, ultimately it is rough-hewn Yaakov who is the spiritual forebear of b'nei Yisrael.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayehi

December 22, 2018 | 14 Tevet 5779

Annual | Genesis 47:28-50:26 (Etz Hayim p. 293-311; Hertz p. 180-191)

Triennial | Genesis 49:27-50:26 (Etz Hayim p. 305-311; Hertz p. 187-191)

Haftarah | 1 Kings 2:1-12 (Etz Hayim p. 312-314; Hertz p. 191-192)

D'var Torah: We Are Yaakov

Ilana Kurshan, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this week's parsha, Yaakov (Jacob) summons his twelve sons to bless them as he lies on his deathbed. He says to them, "Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in the days to come" (49:1). Yet rather than predict their destinies, Yaakov instead proceeds to describe each of his sons and to catalogue their actions: Reuven, who is "unstable as water," slept with his father's concubine; Shimon and Levi, whose "weapons are tools of lawlessness," took revenge on the city of Shechem, etc. Why does Yaakov proclaim that he will foretell the future, but then describe the past instead?

Rashi, drawing on Bereshit Rabbah, offers one possible answer to this question: "Yaakov wanted to reveal the end [of days], but the presence of God departed from him, and he began speaking of other matters." According to Rashi, Yaakov fully intended to prophecy, but found that God was no longer "with his mouth." So instead Yaakov resorted to a more run-of-the-mill descriptive litany.

But why would God's presence suddenly depart from Yaakov? After all, this is the man who has wrestled with God and man and earned the honorary title "Yisrael"; and this is the man who is described as "perfect" when he arrives at Shechem. Surely there is no reason for the Shechina to depart from such a great man, especially not in the crowning moments of his short and difficult life!

The Tur (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, 1269-1343, Cologne & Toledo) may provide an answer in his comment on the opening verse of this parashah. He asks why Yaakov's lifespan is described with the smaller numbers first (i.e. seven years and

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D'var Haftarah: The Challenge of Power

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

David's message to his son Shlomo, the future king, is filled with contradictions. On the one hand, he charges Shlomo to live and rule nobly: "I am going on the way of all the earth. And you must be strong, and be a man. And keep what the Lord your God enjoins, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commands, and His dictates and His admonitions, as it is written in the Teachings of Moshe, so that you may prosper in everything you do and in everything in which you turn." (verses 2-3 – R. Alter translation) But what follows is a charge to violently settle past scores: "**And what's more** (*v'gam*), you yourself know what Yoav son of Zeruah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Yisrael...he killed them and shed the blood of war in peace... and you must act in wisdom and do not let his grey head go down in peace to Sheol..." (See verses 5-10) How does one make sense of this? Does the first part represent the righteous heights to which we aspire, and the second part the vengeful depths to which we often fall? Or is David saying: be righteous, but only within the limits of realpolitik?

To answer this question, a number of commentators have focused on the seemingly insignificant word "*v'gam*", translated above as "and what's more". Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence) understood these words to mean that David thought that punishing Yoav for his treason had divine imprimatur: "these *also* are the ways of God, to do away with wicked people." Rabbi Yitzhak Abrabanel, the 14th century Spanish statesman and sage, however, vehemently disagreed. He asserted that David was merely warning Shlomo to be wary of Yoav and people like him. According to Abrabanel, David thought that it might become necessary for Shlomo to execute Yoav and other traitors, but he was not charging him explicitly to do so.

A more "modern" commentator, Rabbi Leibush Malbim (19th century Lithuania) offers a very different interpretation based on translating "*v'gam*" as "but also". He builds a whole theory of governance based on David's two contrasting commands: "After 'David' commanded him not to turn from the law of Moses, and not to depend on his own wisdom and discernment, he said that in any case there will be decisions where he is given the authority to act according to his wisdom and not according to the laws of the Torah, and these are called the 'laws of the king' that are different from Torah law. [For instance], the king can kill someone without warning and can kill many in one day when the times require it [in contradiction to the laws of the Torah] ..." This political theory, founded upon earlier thinkers like Rabbeinu Nissim, suggested that the leader is sometimes required to step outside the normal rules of society (the Torah) in order to maintain the public good.

This idea that there are times when the good, the lawful, and the necessary do not line up is also reflected in the rabbinic principle of "*Hora'at Shaah*" - the

temporary suspension of Torah law when necessary to save the Jewish polity, which is based on Tehillim 119:126: "*Et la'asot la'Shem* - It is time for the LORD to work; they have made void Thy law." The contemporary expression is a president or prime minister's ability to declare an emergency and assume "Emergency Powers" that do not require the approval of other branches of government.

It may be desirable to have an executive authority that can act swiftly and decisively to do what must be done, but the potential for abuse is terrifying. History is filled with examples of temporary states of emergency that became permanent police states. This is ultimately the challenge of power, and it only goes to stress the importance of choosing leaders with wisdom and character.

Parashat Vayehi Self-Study

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 Yaakov and Yosef.

- 1) When Yaakov feels that his life is coming to a close he calls for his son Yosef and asks him 'if I find grace in your eyes put your hand under my thigh...do not bury me in Egypt' (47:28-31). Yosef agrees, and Yaakov asks him to take an oath. Who else asked for this physical gesture? (check 24:1-3) Why do you think that Yaakov approach Yosef in a beseeching manner, not a commanding one (despite demanding an oath)?
- 2) On his death bed Yaakov tells Yosef that his 2 older sons (he might have had more) will be considered equal to the other sons of Yaakov. Then he tell him that Rachel died in the land of Canaan, on the way, and he buried her along the road (48:5-7). Why do you think that Yaakov mentions Rachel's death now, and why does he share this information with Yosef (who might have known it)?
- 3) After telling his sons glimpses of what might be the future, Yaakov instructs them to bury him in the cave where Avraham and Sarah, and Yitzhak and Rivka where buried, and where he buried Leah (49:29-32). Compare this to what happened previously with Yosef. Why do you think that Yaakov does not demand an oath from his gathered sons? Why does he tell the story of the burial place in length to these sons? Whose burial did he emphasize each time? Why?
- 4) When it is time to go to Canaan to bury Yaakov, we are told that 'the whole household of Yosef, and his brothers and his father's household' went (50:8). What might the wording tell us about the situation within the family?
- 5) After the burial the brothers fear that Yosef will pay them back for all the bad that they caused him (50:15). They had been in Egypt for 17 years at this point (and apparently Yosef had not done a thing to take revenge). Why do you think that they still held this fear?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org