

Short Comments on Parashat Vayehi  
Rabbi Eliot Malomet December 18, 2021 14 Tevet 5782

בראשית מ"ז:כ"ט ויקרבו ימי ישראל למות...  
Genesis 47:29 **Now when Israel's days drew near to death...**

How does Jacob know that he will soon die? Somehow, he knows. In his memoir, Elie Wiesel recounts the deaths of Profs. Saul Lieberman and Abraham Joshua Heschel:

Lieberman had acted strangely when I saw him last. At the end of our lesson, he had stood up and embraced me. He was to leave that afternoon for Jerusalem...I was in a hurry...He walked me to the door, but suddenly exclaimed, "Would you like to come back, Reb Eliezer?" We went back and re-immersed ourselves in study... (hours transpire and Wiesel must leave) ... I left with a heavy heart, for during the lesson I had noticed that his desk, always strewn with books, magazines, and papers, was entirely clear. This unprecedented fact brought another image to my mind. One morning, years before, Heschel had phoned me. He needed me urgently. I jumped in a cab and rushed to the Seminary. Heschel opened his door and, without saying a word, leaned his head on my shoulder and began to sob like a child. Rarely have I seen an adult cry like that. Still standing in the doorway, I noticed that his ordinarily messy table was neatly arranged. We parted without exchanging a word. Heschel died the next day. Now Lieberman's table was clear too... (He also died the next day). The Talmud tells us that the Righteous are warned of their impending death, to allow them to put their affairs in order...

מ"ח:א' ... ויאמר ליוסף הגה אביד חלתי וישלח את שני בניו עמנו את מנשה ואת אפרים:

48:1 ...Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. The first account of illness in the Bible. The information is relayed by intermediaries. Clearly, this signals to Joseph to come quickly. He comes from a distance. How far? We don't know. The distance raises suspense in the story. Why does Joseph bring his two sons? To give his father *naches*? To be present just in case the end is near? For a blessing? Or to be 'adopted' by Jacob? Have they discussed this? Bonus question: in what other Genesis story does a prominent character **bring two lads with him**?

מ"ח:ג' ויאמר יעקב אל-יוסף אל שני נראה-אלי בלוח בארץ כנען ויברך אתי:

48:3 And Jacob said to Joseph, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me. Why does Jacob invoke the Luz-Beit El story? Because he can't travel there physically. After all, this is a big moment. It calls for an altar, a sacrificial feast, a pilgrimage to a sacred site to invoke God's presence. None of that

is possible right now. They are in Egypt. They are not going to erect any altars there. All Jacob has is the story of the place. Could this be a milestone in religious evolution? When you can't make a pilgrimage to a sacred site, all that there is left for you to do is to tell a story about it.

מ"ח:ה' ועתה שגיר-בניי הנולדים לך בארץ מצרים עד-באני אליה מצרמה ליהם אפרים ומנשה כראובן ושמעון יהיו-לי:  
48:5 Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon. Jacob's statement is a compressed legal formula. The exact midpoint in this formula, in terms of the number of words is: **ליהם-they shall be mine.**

Jacob officially adopts them. Why? Neither fully Egyptian nor fully Hebrew, Joseph will always be differentiated from his brothers. He does not share the fraternal heritage, arguably, he never did. He has no personal 'estate' since he is totally dependent on Pharaoh's largesse which is revocable at any time; he has no property of his own to leave his sons upon his death. Joseph may be powerful, but Jacob sees how vulnerable he is. By adopting Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob bypasses Joseph and bequeaths directly to them. At the same time, by giving Joseph a double portion Jacob symbolically elevates Joseph to the status of firstborn.

מ"ח:ז' ואני ורבאי מפדן מתה עלי רחל בארץ כנען בדרך...  
48:7 I, when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, on me, in the land of Canaan, on the way...

Rachel's death was Jacob's personal loss. But her death was also a loss to Joseph and Benjamin! He doesn't express it that way. To Jacob, Rachel was first and foremost his wife, not the mother of his sons. Close to his death, he remembers her death.

מ"ח:ח' ויבא ישראל את בניו ויאמר מי-אלה:  
48:8 Israel saw Joseph's sons and asked, "Who are these?"

Does he not recognize them? Maybe they were so estranged from each other that he never really knew them. Sarna offers a compelling comment: this is part of the legal adoption formula which requires a statement of identification, as if it were a court proceeding.

מ"ח:י"ב ויוצא יוסף אתם מעם ברכיו וישתחו לאפיו ארצה:  
48:12 Joseph took them from between his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground. This

is a complicated text. After Joseph identifies them (v. 9) Jacob summons them to him for a blessing. Jacob has poor eyesight but kisses and hugs them. (v. 10) Jacob then says, (v. 11) *I never expected to see your face again, and here, God has let me see your seed as well!* - one of the tenderest moments in the story. The bitterness that has defined his character thus far has lifted. Perhaps this is the moment of his greatest wholeness. Then, *Joseph takes them from between his knees...* either he took them from between **Jacob's** knees, where they were after he hugged and kissed them, or from between **his own** knees because after Jacob hugged and kissed them, they returned to Joseph. Or it could be a metaphorical expression regarding the transfer of parental title.

מ"ח:י"ט וַיִּמְאֵן אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר יְדַעְתִּי בְנֵי יְדַעְתִּי

**48:19** *But his father objected, saying, "I know, my son, I know..."* This is one of the strongest lines in the whole scene. Joseph wants Manasseh to have the primary place because Manasseh is the firstborn. But Jacob overrules him. ***I know... more than you! I know what you want. But by me, the natural order of birth means bubkes. And besides, Manasseh will also be substantial!***

מ"ח:כ"א וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף הֲגַה אֲנֹכִי מֵת וְהָיָה אֲלֵיכֶם עִמָּכֶם וְהָשִׁיב אֲתֶכֶם אֶל-אֶרֶץ אֲבֹתֵיכֶם:

**48:21** *Then Israel said to Joseph, "I am about to die; but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers."* On the one hand, this is a great blessing, a reminder of God's promise and God's relationship. On the other hand, this destabilizes Joseph's position. It's a reminder to him that as talented as he is, he is simply an instrument in a larger story. They live in Egypt always knowing that they have no future there.

מ"ט:ל"ג וַיִּכַּל יַעֲקֹב לְצַנֵּז אֶת-בְּנָיו וַיֵּאֲסֹף רַגְלָיו אֶל-הַמִּטָּה וַיִּגָּע וַיֵּאֲסֹף אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ:

**49:33** *When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people. Rashi: since the word **death** is not mentioned here our Rabbis said: "Jacob, our father, is not dead".*

As *Miracle Max* said in *The Princess Bride*:

he might be **mostly dead**, but not **all dead**. There's a big difference between **'mostly dead'** and **'all dead'**. **'Mostly dead'**, is **'slightly alive'**! **'All dead'**, well, with **'all dead'**, there's usually one thing that you can do...go through his clothes and look for loose change!

Nachmanides: *the meaning of this midrash is that the souls of the righteous are bound up in the bonds of life.* In other words, Jacob is still alive because his life is bound to our lives.

נ"י:י"א וַיֵּרָא יוֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי אֶת-הָאֵבֶל בְּגֵרוֹ הָאֵטוּד וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵבֶל-כְּבֹדָה לְמִצְרַיִם עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ אֵבֶל מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן:

**50:11** *And when the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning at Goren ha-Atad, they said, "This is a solemn mourning on the part of the Egyptians." That is why it was named Abel-Mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan.* Jacob's funeral gets the attention of the Canaanites. They mistakenly identify it as Egyptian. But how do they react as they make their way to Hebron for the burial? It doesn't say. Three cultures are in collision here: Egyptian, Canaanite and Hebrew.

נ"י:י"ז כֹּה-תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנֵא שָׂא נָא לִפְשַׁע אַחִיד וְחַטָּאתֶם כִּי-רָעָה גְמִלוֹךְ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לִפְשַׁע עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ וַיִּבְכֶּה יוֹסֵף בְּדַבְרָם אֵלָיו:

**50:17** *So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father."* **And Joseph cried** as they spoke to him. How many times does Joseph cry in the story?

Source	Event
42:24	On the end of their first visit when they privately express guilt.
43:30	When he sees Benjamin the first time.
*45:2	When he reveals himself. "He gave his voice in weeping" not וַיִּבְכֶּה.
45:14	Upon hugging Benjamin.
45:15	Upon hugging all the brothers.
46:29	Upon seeing his father.
50:2	Upon Jacob's death.
50:17	Upon the brothers' confession.

Depending on how you count, 7 or 8 times.

נ"י:כ"א וְעַתָּה אֶל-תִּירָאוּ אֲנֹכִי אֲכַלְפֵּל אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת-טַפְכֶּם וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עִלְיָהֶם:

**50:21** *And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." Thus he comforted them, and he spoke to their hearts.* This is Joseph's moment of tenderness. Gone is the vindictive need to settle scores with them. Joseph's emotional trajectory is now complete. Having experienced 7 (or 8) moments of emotional catharsis, he arrives at a moment of wholeness (albeit with just a tiny hint of condescension, *I will sustain you and your children, ie. you will be dependent on me*) and speaks to their hearts from his own heart. Shabbat Shalom!

This week's Parasha Sheet is dedicated by Lila Frost in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of her great-grandson, Avraham Lev. Mazal Tov!