

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

## Final Blessings

Rabbi Mychal Springer, Director, Center for Pastoral Education, JTS

We often refer to aggressive high-tech treatments as ‘heroic’ measures, but the real heroics take place in the living room of a ranch house or the bedroom of a small apartment, when a family tends to the care and comfort of a dying loved one . . . . I talked with many people who mourned the loss of a parent, sibling, spouse, or dear friend, but felt grateful for and transformed by the experience of helping the person pass.

—Fran Smith and Sheila Himmel, *Changing the Way We Die: Compassionate End-of-Life Care and the Hospice Movement*

This model of family caring for the dying is embodied powerfully in this week’s parashah. Jacob, aware that he is dying, speaks plain words to his sons: “I am about to die” (Gen. 48:21) . . . “I am about to be gathered to my kin” (49:29). By giving voice to the reality that his life is ending, Jacob opens up sacred opportunities with his family. He creates moments to put his blessings into words and communicates his wishes for what will happen to his body: that he be buried with his family in the family cave so that he can be gathered to his kin in all ways. The naming of this truth enables closure and peace.

As a chaplain, I have accompanied many people and their families as they’ve journeyed toward death. It is a holy process, and I feel honored to be part of it each time. In my personal life, I’ve entered into this process with my brother-in-law, Peter Cicchino, who died at 39, and my father, James Springer, who died at 89. Peter lived out Jacob’s model with inspiring intentionality. He sent word to all his family and friends, “Come for a blessing.” I sat with people who were waiting for their time alone with Peter, nervous about what they would find. And with those who had received his blessing, overcome with the gift of his kindness and wisdom. Peter was able to imagine their futures even as he embraced the knowledge that his time on earth was coming to an end. And then I had my moment. I do not remember the content so specifically, just the experience of abundant love that we shared. And that love stays with me and guides me in my life.

When it was time for my father to die, 12 years later, Peter’s blessings were still palpable. My dad had Alzheimer’s and could not articulate eloquent blessings. But his very presence was a blessing. So was the opportunity to be with him until the end, when, like Jacob “he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people” (49:33).



Vayehi 5779

ויחי תשע"ט



## Questions of Life and Legacy

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

This final parashah of Genesis bears a cryptic title: *Vayehi*, “He (that is, Jacob) lived.” Well, of course he lived, and soon he will die, but *how* has he lived? What legacy does he bequeath? These are the questions that concern *Vayehi*. What is the Torah’s final judgment of Jacob, a man who has wrestled, mourned and rejoiced, deceived and been deceived; a man who has been wounded and yet prevails, who has been humbled by his sons and yet manages to retain enough vigor and authority to command them until his dying breath? *How* has he lived?

The question of life and legacy pertains also to Jacob’s 12 sons as they are summoned to their father’s deathbed to hear his final testament. This is not a Hollywood ending with soaring violins and tearful embraces. Jacob is a tough man, and his assessments of the boys are frank and often cutting. He addresses each in turn—how did *they* live, and what will be the consequences of *their* deeds?

The same question of life-judgment is especially keen regarding the enigmatic figure of Joseph. Jacob lavishes his favorite son with covenantal blessings (Gen. 49:22–26), calling Joseph a great man, “the elect of his brothers.” Still, Jacob’s blessing contains obscure images of Joseph, who is also described as a “wild ass.” How, in the end, does Jacob regard this son and sometime stranger, a man who has been beloved and despised, enslaved and enriched, magnanimous and vindictive? Joseph has been both dutiful and subversive toward his father. Who, in the final reckoning, is Joseph? How did *he* live and what is *his* legacy?

The Rabbis are of two minds about Joseph. In the Talmud (BT *Sotah* 13a), Rav Yehudah cites Rav in criticizing Joseph for allowing his own father to be

humbled before him. This refers to the occasions (five times in chapters 43–44) in which the brothers address the still-disguised Joseph and refer to Jacob as “your servant, our father.” According to Rav Yehudah, Joseph should somehow have corrected his brother’s description of their father as “your servant,” even if it meant blowing his cover. As a result, Joseph had to suffer the indignity of requesting that his brothers “take my bones up with you” when they leave Egypt.

Rabbi Samuel Eliezer ben Rabbi Judah Halevi Edels (known as “the Maharshah,” Poland, 1555–1632) explains that according to the Talmud, the father contributes the bones to his child (because they are white, like semen), thus explaining Joseph’s curious statement. If so, then Joseph was really saying, “Because I did not honor our father properly, take his contribution, my bones, away with you.” Perhaps, but it is simple enough to feel the pathos of Joseph’s plea to have his desiccated remains transported to his unhappy homeland several centuries hence. Moreover, this verse hardly captures the enormity of Joseph’s 20-year silence and the torment he visited upon his father by imprisoning Simeon and then demanding that Benjamin be brought to him in Egypt. Is Joseph a good guy or not? How did *he* live?

On the same page of Talmud, Rav Yehudah cites Rav again (or perhaps this time it is Rabbi Hama citing Rabbi Hanina) to tell us that, furthermore, Joseph died before his brothers did because he “conducted himself with arrogance” (see the parallel statement in BT *Berakhot* 55a). What does this mean? It is undeniable that Joseph was a commanding figure, but can you blame him? Wasn’t his forceful personality the key to saving Egypt and thereby his own family? And didn’t Joseph’s dreams teach him to expect obeisance from others, especially from his family?

This tradition of ascribing arrogance to Joseph is opposed by another rabbinic tradition claiming that despite his power, Joseph retained his sense of humility. In Midrash *Shemot Rabbah* (1:7) the Rabbis claim that Joseph thought of himself as the least of the sons, both when he was a slave and also when he had ascended to power in Egypt.

Furthermore, the Rabbis give Joseph the superlative title of “the Saint” (*Yosef Hatzaddik*). Whether it is for resisting Potiphar’s wife and then crediting God for his ability to interpret dreams, or for his ramified rescue plan for Egypt and his great concern for the physical and even spiritual

welfare of his family—in all of these ways Joseph earns the respect of the Rabbis.

I would add another point of admiration for Joseph: in all of his great deeds, he acts alone. To borrow from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s famous title, Joseph is a “lonely man of faith.” With whom can he share his faith in God or take counsel? With the brothers who nearly murdered him and then sold him into slavery? With his wife, the daughter of the priest of On? With Pharaoh? Yet for all his isolation, Joseph is never shaken from his abiding faith in God or from his dedication to moral conduct. Joseph does not receive prophecies from God in the same way as his ancestors did. His knowledge of God is the product of dreams and introspection. It is not family, society, or even prophecy that establishes Joseph as a servant of God—he himself must invent his religious persona, and in this he is both extraordinary and accessible.

Joseph is understandable to modern readers because we too function in a seductive society in which our Jewish identity is either hidden or at least partitioned from our more universal identity. Many of us are blessed with supportive families, and few of us suffer the trials of Joseph, but all of us can relate to the demand that we invent our own individual relationship with God. The book of Genesis, the story of Creation, ends with a form of creation that we each undertake—the creation of a lifestory.

For us, too, the title of the final parashah is a question and a challenge: Vayehi. When our own story is over, when we are spoken of in the past tense, how will others say that we lived? Like Joseph, we will present our heirs with a bundle of contradictions—which of our qualities and deeds will be deemed most significant and representative of the whole? What will have been our distinctive contribution, and what spiritual legacy will we bequeath to others? These are the questions that hovered over the heads of our ancestors, and these are our questions too. As we complete the first book of the Torah, we pray for strength to move through its five stages, growing with our ancestors in merit and in the knowledge of God’s path to holiness