

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 5781

ויחי תשפ"א



## In Every Place

**Rabbi Rafi Cohen, Director of Admissions, The Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial School, JTS**

Just about anyone who has moved homes will agree that sometimes one place will take on outside influence in our lives. Indeed, even environments in which we’ve only briefly resided can have a resounding impact on our upbringing and outlook.

I was born in Charleston, South Carolina, and lived there until I was nine years old, at which point my family moved to West Palm Beach, Florida. After three years in Florida, we moved to Overland Park, Kansas, where I had my bar mitzvah and completed middle school and high school. Following high school, I moved again to go to college in Boston. Ask someone who knows me well where I’m from and they will likely answer *Kansas*. To this day, I root for Kansas City sports teams and maintain an affinity for all things Midwest. Though the number of years I lived in Kansas City is less than my time in Charleston or in my current home, New York, my Kansas experiences and connections shaped me in ways that my other homes did not.

Parashat Vayehi opens with an invitation to recognize that Jacob’s sojourn in Egypt was not insignificant, even if he lived in Egypt for only a small fraction of his entire lifespan. “And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years” (Gen. 47:28). What is the text trying to impart to us with the distinction between the 17 years he lived in Egypt and the total 147?

Vayehi begins in a way that is unique among the weekly parshiyot: between every two other parshiyot in the Torah we can see a break—either a *parashah petuhah*, an “open” line break, or a *parashah setumah*, a “closed” extended mid-

line space. Vayehi is the exception: it begins without any clear demarcation of the end of the parashah that comes before it, Vayiggash.

Rashi's very first comment on Vayehi addresses this, explaining that the difficulties of the Israelite slavery began when Jacob passed away. Rashi points out that the *totally* closed nature of the text, with no extra space, shows that "the hearts and eyes of Israel were closed because of the misery of the bondage which [Egypt] began to impose upon them." Rashi wants us to take note of the continuation of the story of the people of Israel even in Jacob's death. I'm reminded of my wife's late *bubbie* who was fond of saying: "I try to live every day with my eyes wide open." It's as if Rashi wants us to read the text with *our* eyes wide open, finding meaning in every detail, despite the closing of the hearts and eyes of the people of Israel.

Hizkuni (Hezekiah bar Manoah), a 13th-century French rabbi and Bible commentator, gives further reasoning for understanding Vayehi as inextricably interwoven with what preceded it in Vayiggash. Jacob's provisional move to Egypt due to economic pressure and famine turned out to be anything but temporary. Once Jacob arrived in Egypt and was reunited with Joseph, the previous anguish and trouble of his life were closed.

Therefore, the later commentator Keli Yakar notes, immediately after telling us that Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years the text says, "The years of Jacob's life were 147" (Gen. 47:28). It is almost as if these final years were so good to Jacob and his family that the past was forgotten and it was as if his whole life had been enjoyable. He may have intended his time in Egypt to be short-lived, but in the end it was more than a blip of his life. Jacob's family took root in the land and prospered.

Hizkuni further suggests that "all the years of Jacob until he settled in Egypt could not truly be described as חיים—*life*—seeing that they were all clouded by different kinds of anguish". It was only during his last 17 years in Egypt that his mind was at rest and not beset by worries of one kind or another. According to Hizkuni, this verse was inserted in the Torah as a compliment to Joseph, who was the cause of Jacob's last years being happy ones. During those years he repaid his father who had sustained him for the first 17 years of his life, by providing for him during the last 17 years of Jacob's life.

As someone who has moved around, there are times when I am nostalgic for past experiences. I am at times compelled to try to piece things together and see how one place I lived, or one life experience, can directly link to another.

I see the merit of each place and aspire to enjoy it to the fullest. Part of moving and settling in new places means determining what to keep with you and to leave behind. It means remembering your background while also paying attention to the present and the future.

As such, my Midwestern association contributes to who I am as a person and as a rabbi. When I first lived in New York following college, I would periodically visit my parents in Kansas, and on my return flight to NYC I used to feel a little anxious about the pace of life I would reencounter. Nowadays, more than ten years later, while my time in Kansas City has had a lasting impact on me, I am accustomed to the New York way of life.

Jacob's story shows us that life is fluid, and it can change course at any time. How we manage the changes and the people around us is one way to determine a life well-lived. The "closed opening" of Vayehi reminds us of the need to pay attention because, as the saying goes, "life is in the details."

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### Final Blessings

**Rabbi Mychal Springer, Adjunct Instructor of Professional and Pastoral Skills, 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