

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Rabbi Eleazar's Lesson: Facing Life and Death

Parshat Vayechi, Genesis 47:28

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Genesis is the story of life; it begins with the creation of the universe (and the first human being) and it ends with death of our forefather, Jacob. Having journeyed through the generations, humankind has matured and grown up. Our ancestors find themselves at the end of the patriarchal era in the land of Egypt. The future will be different and, to an extent, it is uncertain.

At long last, Jacob finds a little peace and dignity, living out the last years of his life surrounded by his children and grand children, and reunited with Joseph. As his death draws near, he calls his children to his bed side to set things straight. First, he asks his beloved son, Joseph to arrange for his burial in Canaan with his parents and grandparents. Jacob then blesses Joseph's two sons, thus adopting them as his own children. Finally, our forefather calls on his children so that he can offer them a blessing before he dies. His blessing, however, is more of a critique of their past behavior and his future hopes for them. They also mark the transition from family to nation and from one generation to the next that will set the stage for the book of Exodus.

Although Parshat Vayechi deals with the final years and the death of Jacob as well as the death of Joseph, the name of this Parshah means, "And he lived." An obituary is more of a 'life notice' than a notice reporting the death of an individual. Jacob spends his final days shaping the legacy that will remain behind after he is gone. It contains a powerful statement of faith and certainty in the face of life's inevitable truth: we all will die. Similarly, Rabbi Eleazar's statement in Pirke Avot contains a sense of calm certainty and resignation in the face not only of death but the belief in the final judgment.

Pirke Avot 4:29 Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kappar used to say: Those who are born will die. Those who are dead will live again. They who (then) live are to be judged, to know and to make known and to let it be known who is God, who is the Maker, who is the Creator, who is the One who understands, who is the Judge, who is the Witness, and who is the litigant. The Holy One of blessing is the one who will judge without iniquity, without forgetfulness, without partiality, and without being bribed. Know that everything will be added up. Don't let your inclination to do evil persuade you that you will be able to escape the grave, for against your will you were formed. Against your will you were born. Against your will you live. Against your will you will die. Against your will you will make a reckoning before the ruler of rulers, the Holy One of blessing.

Sources

Genesis 47:28-29

And Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt so that the span of Jacob's life came to 147 years. And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph...

Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzhak

And Jacob lived: Why is this section totally closed? Because, (comprising as it does the death of Jacob,) as soon as our father Jacob departed this life the eyes of Israel were closed (Their eyes became dim and their hearts troubled) because of the misery of the bondage which they then began to impose upon them. Another reason: Because Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the date of the End of Days (i.e. when Israel's exile would finally end) but the vision was concealed from him. (*Parshat Vayechi is different from the other parshiot in the Torah scroll in that there is no space separating it from the previous ones. Usually there is a space of at least nine letters separating one parshah from another. Rashi wonders why there is no separation between the previous chapter and the story of the death of Jacob*)

Tanchumah, Kedoshim , #8

"He brings everything to pass precisely in its time; He also puts the world/eternity in their mind but without man ever guessing" (Eccles. 3:11). The word *ha-'olam* [*h-'olam*], "world/eternity," spelled here defectively without the letter *vav* , is to be read *he'elim* [*h'lm*], "caused to be hidden." Had not the Holy One hidden the day of death from the heart of man, no man would build a house or plant a vineyard, for he would say, "Tomorrow I may die--why should I get up and weary myself for the sake of others?" Therefore the Holy One hid the day of death from human beings, in order that a man will go on building and planting. If he merits it, it will be his; if he does not merit it, it will be for others.

Commentary

Rabbi Eleazar Ha-kappar's powerful statement sounds like something we would expect to hear in synagogue on the High Holidays. It contains an acknowledgment of the inevitability of death as well as an affirmation of our belief in God's justice. Rabbi Eleazar articulates the rabbinic belief in resurrection but emphasizes the importance of human actions. We are judged according to our actions. Life and death are not our choice, but what we do in-between these two moments is up to us; we are accountable for the choices that we make.

At the end of his life, Jacob reflects on the events that have shaped his destiny and that of his family. Age has rewarded him with a prophetic insight into the future, but Rashi claims that when he tries to share that insight and prophecy with his family, God shuts his eyes so that the future is not shared with others. Some knowledge is better not revealed to others. The closed paragraph which marks the beginning of this *parshah* symbolizes the uncertainty of the future for Jacob's family, or possibly dark clouds which have already begun to appear on the horizon.

Jacob's testament sounds a lot like an ethical will, a statement left by a parent or a dear relative in which the deceased shares life's insights and teachings with others. Although we often refer to this passage as "blessing," Jacob does not really bless his children. He is brutally honest with some of them, reminding them of past errors, and in other cases he paints a vision of what he would like his children to become. Jacob's testament is not a prophecy either; it is an honest statement of assessment and hope. The Torah tells us at the end of Chapter 49 that Jacob "blessed each one according to the blessing appropriate to him he blessed them." (Genesis 49:28) In the end, the Torah suggests life's blessings reside not in the world to come but in the sum total of our own actions, and how we live. We must answer for the life we make and what we make of the life we have been given.

Questions to Ponder

1. The verses from Genesis 47 begin by referring to our forefather as Jacob ("And Jacob lived...") but it ends by calling him Israel ("When the time came for Israel to die..."). What is the significance of this patriarchal change of names mid passage? Why does the Torah continue to refer to Jacob as Jacob even after his name has changed?
2. Rashi suggests that there is something significant about the fact that Parshat Vayechi begins with a closed passage – that is, there is no space between it and the previous parshah. Do you agree with him? Why do you think this parshah begins in this fashion?
3. Jacob is never given the opportunity to reveal the hidden knowledge that he is vouchsafed at the end of his life (according to Rashi and the Midrash)? Why does God give him this knowledge and then rob him of it? Do you think there is something cruel about this?
4. According to Rabbi Eleazar Ha-kappar, what is the purpose of the final resurrection? What role will human beings play in the universe through this final judgment?
5. What is the significance of the statement, "against your will were you formed?" Against your will were you born?" this seems like an obvious statement. Why was it necessary for Rabbi Eleazar to make such a statement – what does it teach us about life's limits and constraints?
6. Imagine your final days on earth? What would you like them to be? What would you want to say to your family and friends?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center in New York. For more information on TTT contact me at Haravmark@optonline.net. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>. To download TTT you need Adobe Acrobat Reader; <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."

Copyright 2009 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan