

## *“And Yaakov Lived: Affirming Life by Planning for The Future”*

Why do human beings get sick?

Of course we can't answer that question, but in struggling with it in this week's parashah, our Sages offer a fascinating approach – one that enables us to talk about two aspects of a heavy topic that is almost always on my mind in my line of work: our end-of-life wishes and perpetuating our legacy.

Yaakov our patriarch is in a certain way the first person to fall ill, and when Yosef is told, “your father is sick”, he takes Menasheh and Efrayim with him to his father. It is on the announcement of Yaakov's illness that the Rabbis expound in the Midrash:

*הנה אביך חולה. מעולם לא חלה אדם עד יעקב שבא וביקש רחמים שיחלה האדם, אמר רבש"ע מתוך שאדם חולה מרגיש בעצמו והוא מצוה את ביתו, ומתמרקים עונותיו והוא חוזר בתשובה, א"ל הקדוש ברוך הוא דבר טוב שאלת, חייך ממך אני מתחיל: (פסיקתא זוטרתא (לקח טוב) בראשית פרק מח סימן א)*

*“Your father is sick”: No human being ever fell ill until Yaakov. For Yaakov came and asked for compassion from God that human beings fall ill. He said, “Master of the World, when a person will fall ill, one becomes aware of oneself. One charges one's household (about the future), and one's iniquities are cleansed, and one engages in teshuvah.” The Blessed Holy One responded, “You have asked well. By your life, I will begin with you first.” (Pesikta Zutarta (Lekah Tov) Genesis 48:1)*

Now this is of course complicated. For some people disappear from this world in an instant without warning, and indeed they and we experience the lack of opportunity to put affairs in order, to express wishes, and to say goodbye. And we can of course have no judgment on them as a result. And we take some comfort in their having been spared suffering.

And on the other hand, while there is a gift in knowing one's end is coming in the opportunity to express final wishes and plan a legacy, we certainly don't want the suffering – we'd be happy to make those plans without the pain and the compromised conditions that sickness bring.

So there is nothing simple about this text.

But there are two powerful instincts that this midrash picks up on that I want to unpack.

The first is what Yaakov wishes for which he then expresses as the desire for illness - that we want to have the opportunity to take stock, to do teshuvah, and to express final wishes and give charges and ultimate messages to our families and those close to us, and maybe even beyond. That is an instinct I believe we have.

And the second is that that desire is really hard to implement. It often takes a crisis, an encounter with death or a prognosis with a limited timeframe that impels us to do it. It is simply really hard to carve out the time in our busy and regular lives to set affairs in order and envision how we want to be remembered in and impacting on this world after we leave it.

Why is it so hard?

Maybe it's because it forces us to think of death – our own mortality, and death in general – something we generally don't – and don't want to – think about.

Maybe it's because we feel we won't know what our true wishes are until the end of our lives.

And maybe it's because we aren't sure if we'll be listened to without the power and force of the end of life behind our final communications.

We want to engage in this thinking and preparation, but not until we have to. But then it can be too late. So, say the rabbis, God invented sickness.

Leave aside for now the midrashic approach of the origins of illness. Let's dwell for a moment on what Yaakov suggests to God we want to do before we die, and let's reflect on what place they have in our lives:

מרגיש בעצמו – these are those stark and powerful moments when we truly sense, truly feel, ourselves and our identities. We are forced to confront something of who we really are – to hold up our ideal vision of ourselves against our reality of ourselves upon the backdrop of the ticking clock of our time on this earth, and ask if we are living how we want to.

חוזר בתשובה – this can be the outgrowth of true self-awareness, the previous step. We choose, then, to carve out the time to engage in self-improvement and a return to a better self.

מצוה את ביתו – going beyond who we are in our lives, we try to formulate and offer our ethical and spiritual mandate for our family and those who will succeed us. The language the midrash uses of מצוה את ביתו, something Yaakov suggests we only do when we feel the end is near, is quite powerful language, because it is the language of Avraham's basic mode of being. In the closest hint in the Torah to why God chose Avraham as a covenantal partner, we are told,

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך יקנוק לעשות צדקה ומשפט למען  
הביא יקנוק על אברהם את אשר דבר עליו: (בראשית פרק יח/יט)

*For I, God, have known about Avraham that he will instruct his children and his household after him to preserve God's path – to do righteousness and justice... (Genesis 18:19)*

Avraham is able to do in daily life what Yaakov knows most of us are only able to do when the end looms.

How often do we invest in these projects? How do we carve out time and space not only to think about how we want to live our lives, and to engage in teshuvah, but most of all, the third. How often do we say, here's how I would like my legacy to be perpetuated?

We are gifted with the High Holidays as a time to do some of this work, but perhaps we need more opportunities. Maybe it is once a year, or a few times a year. Maybe it is on the High Holidays, or on the secular New Year that we just observed, a time of resolutions. Maybe it's on our birthday.

Maybe it is done in writing. Perhaps it is done in conversation with a loved one, or multiple loved ones. And it can and should be revisited and revised.

Yaakov did it, albeit under the pressure of terminal illness, and we can draw a few lessons from how he did it.

He gathered his children and grandchildren – casting a wide net with whom he shared his end-of-life reflections, his aspirations for them, and his visions and values of a future.

He brought them all together in some settings, and spoke to them individually in others.

He was not afraid to offer critique and challenge, but following Rashi's interpretation towards the end of the parashah, he ultimately blessed all of them.

He did his own self-reflection, thinking about his life in the context of his forebears, thinking about his relationship with God, and even does, in a certain sense, teshuvah.

And so my first hope of what we can learn from Yaakov is not to wait until illness or the threat of death strikes to truly look at ourselves, engage in teshuvah, and craft and articulate for others a perspective on who we are, what our values are, and how we would want to see them carried through in a world which will continue after we are not here.

But all this midrashic development is made about the *second* end-of-life conversation in the parashah. Equally important, I believe, is the first, recorded in one of the very opening verses:

וַיִּקְרָבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת וַיִּקְרָא לְבָנוֹ לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ... וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֶמֶת אֵל נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי  
בְּמִצְרַיִם... וּנְשָׂאתֵנִי מִמִּצְרַיִם וּקְבַרְתֵּנִי בְּקִבְרֹתָם... (בראשית מז/כט-ל)

*When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, "...show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, ... but, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they (my fathers) are buried..." (Genesis 47:29-30)*

This is Yaakov modeling for us all what we call in the business, "pre-arrangements". It is one of the conversations that are so important to have before we are ill, before we are compromised, when we are healthy and well.

This is about practical end of life wishes, not blessings or prophecies.

Where do I want to be buried? Are there any special ways I want my funeral, burial or shiva to be conducted?

And, I would expand: what are my other end of life wishes? Do I have a health care proxy? Are my medical preferences known? Do I have the right insurances – is my family protected after I am gone? Do I have a will? Do my family or other closest loved ones know all of my wishes? Am I disbursing that which I have in accordance with my values?

These are never an easy set of conversations, and in fact it even feels a little uncomfortable to stand up here talking about them, but it is so critical. We have sustained a number of losses in recent weeks in our Bayit, and over the years, I have seen that the difference between a smoother and a bumpier end of life is often in whether the family knows the wishes of their loved ones in so many different areas.

I would submit that these topics all come together. While not always easy to talk about, *they are not morbid or depressing – they are life-affirming*. They give us a chance to articulate our values, our legacy, what matters to us in life and after.

*Engaging our loved ones in this conversation is a gift. A life-affirming gift.*

So let's return to our midrash for a moment, and let me propose a different frame. While in God's conversation with Yaakov, it takes illness to elicit the critical self-reflection and legacy articulation that is so important, Yaakov's point is that we need to do this in life and in health if we possibly can.

So let me suggest a different beginning to the midrash. ויחי יעקב – and Yaakov lived – the opening words of our parashah. How did he live? He taught us how to live. He taught us to strike one of the hardest balances: that life is about living in and being in the moment – *and* about planning for the future. And that envisioning and articulating our wishes and our legacy should not be driven by illness or terminal condition, but by the energy of life, of living.

May we live the lesson of ויחי יעקב – of ויחי ישראל – of ויחי עם ישראל – that living our lives as Jews and as people, entails affirming life and our values by thinking about, reflecting on, and sharing our wishes for our legacy that will follow us even when we are no longer here.