

VA-Y'CHI—GENESIS 47:28–50:26

Living in the Face of Death

RABBI SUSAN TALVE

“VA-Y'CHI (וַיִּחִי), And Jacob lived” (Genesis 47:28). We know from previous use of this language (Genesis 23:1) that there is a reason that Torah does not say, “And Jacob died.” Living in the face of death takes courage; it takes believing that we are part of something greater than ourselves, and it takes the hope that our legacy will live on through the blessings that we leave for the next generations. Rashi’s first comment on the *parashah* asks why it is a closed portion,¹ that is, why does it begin without the usual space in the Torah scroll separating it from the last portion? He tells us that space represents the pause needed for contemplation and preparation for what is to come. Jacob’s death and the four hundred years of slavery arrive so quickly that there is no time for preparation, and “the eyes and hearts of Israel were closed.”² *Midrash Rabbah* suggests that the portion is closed because Jacob wished to give his children a glimpse of the end of all exile, but that was hidden from him.³ He wanted somehow to let his descendants know that no matter how devastating enslavement would be, there would be an end to it. Jacob may not be able to see the end of exile himself, but with the blessings he gives to his children, he manages to reach into the future with the promise that there is a way through the suffering that will lead to peace.

This closed portion pushes us to discover truths about living together as human beings, sharing a planet that will let us live, even in the face of death. It pushes us to ask what it means to live with the tension of knowing that disaster may come at any moment and threaten to close our eyes and hearts, and yet still maintaining the hope that we can survive even our worst nightmares. The narrative of the end of

both Jacob's and Joseph's lives helps to prepare us to live intentionally as individuals and as a people, even in the face of death.

The last chapters of Genesis prepare us for the transition from being a family to being a people with a purpose. Jacob has been living in Egypt under the protection of his son Joseph, who has a seat at the current table of political power. Joseph learned at an early age that unshared privilege could be dangerous. His father's favoritism earned him the ire of his brothers and set off the journey that would take us to Egypt, where the injustice of slavery would imprint on our collective soul. We would remember the bitterness and vow never to do to others what was done to us. Joseph heard the words spoken by his brother Judah suggesting that if something were to happen to their brother Benjamin, Jacob would surely die, because *nafsho k'shurah v'nafsho* (נַפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה כְּנַפְשׁוֹ), "one soul was bound up with the other" (Genesis 44:30).⁴ Hearing these words, Joseph's heart opens to forgiveness; he embraces his brothers, he gives them what they need to feed their families and all the families of the region, and a time of peace prevails.

By the end of this portion, both Jacob and Joseph have died. In the next, a pharaoh arises who knows not Joseph (Exodus 1:8), and our fleeting place of privilege is lost. But even with eyes and hearts closed, the S'fat Emet reminds us that the spark of godliness may be hidden but is always there. He tells us in a commentary on this portion that the text does not say that Jacob *va-y'hi* (וַיְהִי), "was," in the land of Egypt; rather that, *va-y'chi* (וַיַּחֲיֶה), "he lived" in the land of Egypt (Genesis 47:28), teaching that he was truly alive, even in that narrow place. According to the S'fat Emet, "'Life' here means being attached to the root and source from which the life-force ever flows."⁵ To reveal the end means to let his children know that even in the depths of despair, it is possible to be awakened by our desire to bless the generations that are yet to come, to reject self-interest and work for the common good, and to embrace that vision of harmony, unity, and a more just world even in the worst of times.

The years of slavery deepened the understanding in our bones that until all are free, none can be completely free; thus, our purpose as

people is to level the playing field for the citizen and the stranger alike. The journey through our exodus unfolds a theology of liberation that we will carry with us. We will take the lessons of our story into our journey through many lands—setting up settlement houses for the immigrant, aid societies for the poor, and hospitals to make sure that no one is excluded from access to health care. When we would have our own nation, we would try to create a system in which health care is a right for all and not a privilege for some. As challenging as our political positions in other nations would be, we would champion public health systems, while at the same time recognizing that no amount of privilege can protect people from the effects of pollution or pandemics. Knowing what it meant to be blamed for plagues, we worked to understand the scientific causes of illness. We understood the importance of addressing the social, economic, and racial disparities that affect mortality rates and health outcomes. We knew that education was among the strongest indicators of health and life expectancy,⁶ so we valued, invested in, and sacrificed for learning above all else.

Many times in our story, our eyes and hearts have been closed by our own suffering. At other times, we have been part of systems of oppression running so deep that we cannot see or feel the pain of others, losing sight of the very values that define us. When suffering has hardened our hearts, we have forgotten that our lives are all connected, one soul bound up with the other; and we have become part of the problem, rather than part of the repair.

Our third child was born with congenital heart disease. For years, as she received care, I would sit by her bedside in a state-of-the-art hospital where no expense was spared to save lives. Just outside, however, in the same zip code, children went to bed hungry. These disparities, especially along racial lines, cause mortality rates 40 percent higher than in the general population. The stress of racism, the hopelessness of poverty, and growing gun violence threaten our collective health. Seeing this up close pushed me to found Missouri Health Care for All, a statewide grassroots organization that fights for equity in health care and the adoption of a public health approach to protect us all. Much of our work has been to cross the many divides

and work for unity across urban and rural, religious, racial, gender, and economic differences. We seek to show how our personal health is connected to our community's health and how none can be safe and healthy until all are safe and healthy. The relationships we have made across divisions have helped us become a force for the common good, even as so many still hold onto the illusion of separateness and self-interest. Without a national, perhaps even a global, commitment to the principles of public health—living by the values we have learned through our years as a people—pandemics will continue to threaten our lives, and the disparities that cause the most vulnerable to suffer will continue to divide and devastate our dreams of peace.

Just before Jacob dies, the midrash tells us that he gathers his children and grandchildren around his bed to give them a glimpse of redemption—but the *Shechinah*, the Holy Presence, departs from him. He worries that this has occurred because one of his sons is not worthy of this knowledge, but they assure him that they understand his lessons of unity and the connectedness of all.⁷ The Talmud has his sons respond to his fears with the words *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*, "Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One" [Deuteronomy 6:4]. Just as in your heart there is only oneness, so in our hearts there is only oneness." Relieved that this essential lesson has been passed on, Jacob gives us his blessing with this response: *Baruch shem k'vod malchuto Polam va-ed*, "Blessed is the Name whose glorious Presence is forever and ever."⁸ In that moment the *Shechinah* is restored. The love expressed between the generations awakened the possibility of unity and harmony, because we found it with each other. We put aside our self-interest and were willing to sacrifice for the common good. This is why the portion begins with the word *va-y'chi*. Jacob *lived* with purpose in the face of death to teach us that no matter how stuck or sad or broken we might be, no one can take from us the inner spark that promises that equity, justice, and peace are possible.

And at the end of every book of Torah we say *Chazak, chazak, v'nit'chazeik*, "Be strong, be strong," each of us making sure that everyone is cared for, and we will be stronger and healthier together.

NOTES

1. Rashi on G
2. Rashi on G
3. *B'reishit Ra*
4. Author's tr
5. Rabbi Yehi
of the Sefat
Jewish Pul
6. "Adolesce
August 13.
7. *B'reishit Ra*
8. *Babylonia*

NOTES

1. Rashi on Genesis 47:28.
2. Rashi on Genesis 47:28.
3. *B'reishit Rabbah* 96:1.
4. Author's translation.
5. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 73.
6. "Adolescent and School Health," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 13, 2019, www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics.
7. *B'reishit Rabbah* 98:3.
8. Babylonian Talmud, *P'sachim* 56a.