

Vayehi — Duree and Rebirth
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Many weeks ago in parashat vayeshev, Jacob settled in the land of Israel following a sojourn of 20 years in Lavan's house. Reading the word itself, vayeshev, one feels Jacob's sense of exhaustion and hoped-for completion — Jacob's life has not been easy, he has been deceived and enslaved. He has become the father of 13 children and he has lost his precious wife, Rachel. Now he just wants to settle down.

But as the midrash notes: When Jacob sought to dwell in tranquility, the troubles of Joseph sprang upon him. By the time we reach the end of that first chapter of vayeshev, Joseph has been thrown into the pit by his brothers and then sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites traveling south. The brothers dip Joseph's signature garment, his cloak, in goat's blood, and bring it to their father, who, recognizing the coat, infers that a wild beast has torn up Joseph — tarof, toraf yosef. Jacob rents his own cloak, puts on sackcloth and ashes, and mourns, dramatically and poetically, for many days. His children try to comfort him, but Jacob refuses saying, "I will go down to Sheol mourning my son." Jacob, it seems, has opted for a life of perpetual mourning. Although he later sends the brothers to Egypt to secure food, when faced with the possible loss of Benjamin or the certain death of the whole family, he refuses to part with Benjamin saying, "Joseph is no more and Simon is no more and now you would take Benjamin from me." Jacob appears to be stuck in some kind of suspended animation, mourning Joseph, unable to reconcile himself to a present without him or to care for his remaining 12 children. The word "aynenu" used over and over again to describe Joseph's absence is loaded with ambiguity — Joseph is no more — he doesn't say he is dead, but just gone. Does Jacob refuse to accept the fact that he is dead or does Jacob have some sense that Joseph is still alive? It is hard to say. What is clear is that Jacob has stepped away from his own life — he is neither father nor husband nor patriarch. Just pained and stuck, unable to move in any direction.

Jacob's spell, as it were, is of course broken, in last week's parsha, when he learns that Joseph is alive. Jacob says: od yosef beni chai, elcha erenu b'terem amut — my son Joseph is alive — I will go and see hi before I die! And after 22 years, Jacob arises from his slumber, and, at the age of 130 heads south to Egypt, his final sojourn.

My question is what happened to Jacob during those 22 years? Did he just live in suspended animation? Was he dead, as it were, for those 22 years, part of himself, or perhaps most of himself, already in the grave with Joseph? Or did something happen something that might make possible the transformation we see in our parasha this week?

I ask this question out of a deep curiosity about what is happening to us right now. It has not been 22 years, thank God, only 10 months, hopefully with an end in sight. And yet, like Jacob we have lived in some kind of suspended animation — neither here nor there. Waiting.

In a beautiful article in last week's Times, Megan Craig — someone find this woman, she lives in Bethany — describes the moment in time in which we find ourselves as duree. Duree she says is "a duration that opens like a yawn in the midst of time's relentless march." Duree, she writes, "is the unhinged time of labor or illness, the disorganized time of memory and dreams. Time loses recognizable geometric shape, failing to form a circle or a line. It drifts from the reliable rhythm of counting or dates. Denied an organized past or an open future, the present thickens. In moments of confrontation with duree's all-consuming, permeating quality, every moment feels weighty, requiring heroic effort to get from one second to the next. The horizon of the future contracts into the narrow but weirdly unyielding space of the now. These days feel that way — all duree all the time."

Craig goes on, “We are waiting. Waiting for the New Year, for a birthday, for COVID 19 tests... for a vaccine, for dinner...for grandparents to be able to visit...for the zoom meeting to end, for the next one to begin, for change, for the future, for news, for tenderness, for each other, for patience to wait some more.”

Jacob too was waiting. To learn that Joseph was alive. To accept that Joseph was dead. To be comforted. For life to resume its normal pattern, if such a thing can be said.

The question is, is this just endless waiting or is something being born? Is this a chrysalis or is it death? Labor or illness? It is hard to know and we probably won't know until some time in the future when we can look back on these days and make sense of them. But, I still want to ask, in these dark days of winter, what might be germinating beneath the frozen earth?

When Jacob learns that Joseph is alive, he says, “Rav!” Enough! Or, more accurately, it is too much. What is too much? The knowledge that Joseph is alive? Or the 22 years of mourning he has endured? Either way, he springs back to life. He goes down to Egypt, he meets God in a night vision and God calls him with the double call, “Jacob! Jacob” as he had called Abraham at the akedah, as he will call Moses at the burning bush and Samuel from slumber. And after so many years and so many missed opportunities, Jacob finally answers, Hineni. I am here. I am ready to take on the mission that you called me to 90 years ago.

Jacob travels to Egypt, he is reunited with Joseph, he blesses Joseph's children, effectively adopting them as his own, and on his deathbed, he blesses all his sons. This is the only deathbed scene we have in the Torah and only Jacob of the three patriarchs blesses his children upon his death. With his death, he founds the nation — Bnai Yisrael — the children of Israel. In these final 17 years in Egypt, Jacob seems to be able to integrate his life, to summon his spiritual strength, to harness and direct his energy, to pull the disparate pieces of his life together and to map coherence onto a life that has been, in many ways, incoherent.

It did not make sense to Jacob that after having settled down, Joseph was torn from him. But now, seeing Joseph alive, seeing his grandchildren and blessing them, reuniting his family, Jacob is able to bring the disparate fragments of his life together. Blessing his children, he sees the future. He becomes a patriarch alongside his fathers. He becomes Yisrael, the man he struggled to be all his life.

Was all this growth and prodigious energy made possible by the years of mourning and duress? Was this what grew from what appeared to be endless mourning and not living? Did those 22 years make this change possible? Or did it happen in an instant when Jacob awoke from his deep slumber? It is impossible to know. But I would suggest that it is possible, in fact probable, that in that long span of 22 years, Jacob developed resilience, reflected on his own role in Joseph's disappearance, and began to piece together the incoherent strands of his life.

And what of us? Are we just hamsters on our wheels or is something new being born? “what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” As with Jacob, it is impossible to say and we will not know, as I said, for years to come. Still, I was intrigued by the post of a retired public school superintendent in upstate New York, who expressed her frustration with the concerns of teachers and parents about the deficits children will demonstrate when they finally return to school and the need to “catch them up.”

She writes, “What on earth are we trying to catch them up on? The models no longer apply, the benchmarks are no longer valid...these arbitrary measure were established by people, not ordained by God.” She goes on to note that the children's minds have not been asleep for the past year and although they were perhaps focused on things other than the traditional school

curriculum, they undoubtedly learned a lot during this unprecedented time. Our job, she argues, is not to fill them with the facts they missed, but to help them make sense of their experience, to give them art supplies and writing materials and music and dance and stories and books to help them make sense of an upside down world. She entreats teachers to resist the urge to fix kids and make up for lost time. “The time,” she writes, “was not lost. It was invested in surviving an historic period of time in their lives — in our lives. The children do not need to be fixed. They are not broken. They need to be heard. They need to be given as many tools as we can provide to nurture resilience and help them adjust to a post pandemic world.”

I would argue, that a lot of the handwringing we see about children is really about us — it is safer for many people to express concerns about our children than it is to acknowledge our own fears and disorientation. Therefore, what is true for children must also be true for us. The time was not lost. We are not broken. Rather, we spent this time living differently than any of us expected. Perhaps we have crawled into our chrysalis soon to emerge as beautiful butterflies. I do not think that is a given. I don't think we can blithely depend on it. I cannot say definitively that Jacob's maturation at the end of his life was a result of all those suspended years, all that duree. Human motive is underdetermined and even harder to dissect. But I believe that it is possible and I believe that like the children we too have been alive. We too have learned things we did not expect to learn. We too are learning resilience and patience. We are learning what relationships really matter and how important physical presence is even as we get creative about connecting in other ways. We are learning to face the unknown, to hold death a little closer than most of us ever did. We are becoming more creative in so many disparate ways. We are gaining courage and strength. We too can use this time of duree — this unending waiting, this thick present — to become more than we were. It may not be the curriculum we planned for ourselves, but insofar as it is the only one on offer right now, we would do well to internalize it as a time of transformation and imagine how we might be reborn on the other side.