

A Name Synonymous with Goodness

Parashat Vayechi

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

The first lesson that I learned in the new year of 2023 is that when enduring the modern day indignity called commercial air travel, it is very important to select your seats ahead of time. I know you were expecting something more sublime, more philosophical or spiritual, less banal. But this too is Torah, my friends. Select your seats early. I found myself wedged into a middle seat last weekend on an international flight that was completely full. I was too cramped to read, and too constrained to sleep. Considering how I would spend the next few hours of my life in confinement, it occurred to me that I had downloaded a movie on my iPad that I had never watched. I thanked God for that blessed realization and I shimmied my device out of the backpack between my feet, popped open the tray table, popped in my earbuds, and plugged into the 2017 Israeli film *Maktub*.

Maktub is actually an Arabic word that has become an Israeli expression, meaning ‘that which is written.’ I suppose the Hebrew equivalent would be *mah katuv* or *mah she’katuv*. It is the story of two Jewish gangsters in Jerusalem—yes there are Israeli gangsters—who, by means of intimidation, and sometimes violence extort money from restaurant owners all over the city on behalf of a ruthless kingpin. During one of their “visits,” the restaurant become the scene of a terrorist attack. Since our two gangsters happened to be in the bathroom when the bomb exploded, they are the sole survivors. Totally shaken as they step out into the rubble; witnessing the utter destruction and loss of life, these two criminals decide this must have been a sign. They believe they have survived for a reason, and at that very moment determine that they are done with the degenerate lifestyle they have been living. They decide that they are going to use the gift of their inexplicable survival to help others...but their first stop is the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, to give thanks to God. Without going into too much detail they begin reading notes of other people who have come to pray at the Wall before them. A woman struggling with infertility. A husband who desperately wishes to return the spark to his marriage. A Russian immigrant and single mother who can’t afford to give her son a proper bar mitzvah. These two erstwhile criminals decide that their mission in life will be to help make prayers come true for these people. They surreptitiously remove notes from the cracks in Wall, and like real live angels, go about making people’s dreams come true. It’s such a clever film...it is funny, heart

wrenching, and very entertaining. And it's on Netflix, with subtitles, so if you didn't have plans tonight before, now you do. You're welcome!

This terrific film also reminded me of an episode in the Torah portion this morning. There is some mysterious language surrounding the death of our patriarch Jacob. After bestowing instructions and blessings upon his children who surround his deathbed the Torah says:

Vay'chal Ya'akov letzavot et banav... When Jacob concluded his final messages to his sons

Vaye'esof raglav el ha'mitah... he pulled his feet under the covers of his bed

Vayigvah va'yeiy-asef el amav... he “expired” perhaps, and was gathered unto his people.

That word *vayigvah* is not the typical word used for death. For example, in the very last verse of the parasha we read:

Vayamot Yosef ben me'ah v'eser shanim.

And Joseph died at the age of 110 years. *Vayamot*: that's the word we usually associate with dying. Why in the case of Jacob does the Torah say *vayigvah* and not *vayamot*? Of course this is the kind of stuff that keeps people like me in business! Language, word choice, spelling, syntax—these are all critical to the understanding of Torah in the original. So rabbis long before me noticed this nuance; this use of a less common word for death and wondered what it must mean to teach us.

The first century sage Rabbi Yochanan said: What it means is that “*Ya'akov avinu lo met!*” “Our father Jacob did not die!” Simple as that!

To which Rabbi Nachman responded, ‘How do you explain, Rabbi Yochanan, all the eulogies that were given for Jacob, not to mention that they also embalmed his body and buried him?!’”

Rabbi Yochanan responded with the following verse from Jeremiah:

The prophet said: ‘Fear not, Jacob My servant... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity’ ([Jeremiah 30:10](#)). This verse, said Rabbi Yochanan, proves that both Jacob and his offspring will be rescued and will remain alive!” ([Ta'anit 5b](#))

I actually do not think that Rabbi Yochanan was suggesting that Jacob did not experience the bodily death. He did not escape physical mortality. Even though there is a belief in our tradition that the bodies of *tzadikim*, the especially righteous never decay. I think what Rabbi Yochanan meant by associating Jacob with the eternity of his offspring is that the impact his legacy had on his descendants, the fact that his descendants are actually called by his name...To this day we are the people of Israel and Israel was also Jacob's name...this eternal association of Jacob with his descendants is in some sense immortality! As long as his people, his offspring, feel bound to him, inextricably connected to him, he continues to live. When we sing Am Yisrael Chai, we are saying not only that the People of Israel lives, but that the namesake of that people, Yisrael, Israel, Jacob also lives! I think this is what Rabbi Yochanan meant when he said *Ya'akov avinu lo met*. Our patriarch Jacob did not die.

The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Betzalel who lived in the 16th Century said something very beautiful. The Maharal said: *Tov Yisrael she'yi'hiyu nitzhiim*...It was Jacob's goodness that continued to live on eternally; that continued to inspire his offspring and define his legacy. It reminds me of that wonderful modern prophet, Maya Angelou, who famously said: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." That, my friends, is immortality. The imprint we leave on the hearts of those we encounter lasts long after our physical existence.

Chuma and Steve, the two main characters from *Maktub* decided that they didn't want to be known in perpetuity as hooligans or criminals; people who smash chairs over the backs of people who owe their boss protection money. They instead wanted to be known for helping make people's prayers, their deepest dreams and wishes come true. They wanted their acts of goodness to last forever.

There is a powerful Mishnah in Pirkei Avot taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon. He taught that in life, people can wear various crowns. In other words, they can be distinguished in several ways. Rabbi Shimon said one wear a *keter Torah*, a crown, so to speak of Torah. Meaning they can become great Torah scholars. Or a *keter Kehunah*, they can be revered for being descendants of the priests of Israel...Kohanim and Levi'im. Or a *keter Malchut*, if you could ever prove it, presumably one of you could be a descendant of King David—Jewish royalty! But then he said *v'cheter shem tov oleh al gabay*, but above all of that, more impressive, more

esteemed, more illustrious than Priesthood, Royalty, even Torah learning is a Keter Shem Tov! The crown of a good name. This is usually understood to mean that your reputation is your most valuable asset, and I tend to agree. But what if shem tov also means that your name is synonymous with goodness. That when people speak your name, they immediately think of how good you made them feel? Think about it, could there be any greater crown, any more valuable legacy to leave in this world than that? I hope that as we begin a secular new year, that what we all aspire to, that our new year's resolution more than weight loss or saving more money or eating healthier is also to have a shem tov...a name, an identity, a presence in the world that adds goodness to other people's lives. May that be our blessing...Amen.