

Sermon: Parshat Vayechi
January 2, 2021 / ח"י טבת תשפ"א
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

It's nice to go away, but it's better to come home. I used to say this when we would return from a vacation or any extended time away from the house. Like most of you, we rarely had such an opportunity in 2020, but we are hopeful that such opportunities will be available to us as we make our way through the new year of 2021. It is nice to go away, but it is always better to come home. There is something about home that is magnetic—it pulls you in and feels like the right place to be. Perhaps we have all had enough of seeing the four walls of our homes for quite some time, but I know that even after the first trip away, as magical as it may be, I will still appreciate that feeling of returning home. Parshat Vayechi demonstrates to us the power in this longing to return home, to be back in our own place and space. How can this sentiment help us as we step into the new year?

The *parsha* ends in the same way that it begins, with the impending death of our narrative's hero, both expressing their desire to return home. When Jacob calls his son, Joseph, forward at the *parsha's* beginning, he implores him on his deathbed,

וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת

Do me this immeasurable kindness,

אַל־נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרַיִם

Please do not bury me in Egypt.¹

¹ Genesis 47:29.

Jacob wants nothing more than to return home, and to be buried with his ancestors in their ancestral tomb, the Cave of Machpelah in the Land of Israel. He wants this so much that it is the first thing he demands of Joseph when he knows that his time on this earth is ending. He makes Joseph swear to it, and his devoted son obliges. Joseph sees to it that his father's wishes are fulfilled, and, with the support of his family and Pharaoh, Jacob is laid to rest in Israel.

Rashi suggests that are three reasons why Jacob does not want to be buried in Egypt. First, the ground will be afflicted by lice which will swarm beneath his body. Second, those buried outside of Israel will have to labor and tarry to return there during the days of the Messiah. Finally, Jacob did not want the Egyptians to engage in idol worship by venerating his body and grave. But even without these pushes, we can imagine the pull, the magnetism, drawing Jacob back to the Land of Israel. He lived a great deal of his life in the Land of Israel. His mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, and first wife are all buried at Machpelah. It is only fitting that he too be interred there. This is the pull to come home, to return to one's place and space. Jacob had serious concerns about being buried in Egypt, but he was also drawn to return home to the Land of Israel.

And what about Joseph? At the end of the *parsha*, Joseph addresses *B'nai Yisrael*, the other sons of Jacob, his brothers, and makes them promise "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here."² Like his father, he too, wishes to be buried in the Land of Israel, rather than remaining in Egypt. However, Joseph's request is slightly different, as has been his experience in Egypt. Joseph acknowledges that this will not be an immediately fulfilled promise. Rather, he will die and be laid to rest in Egypt, but his bones, that which remains of

² Genesis 50:25.

him in time, will be properly buried back in the Land of Israel. (We know that this promise was fulfilled because the Torah tells us, וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ, “And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph.”³) But, Joseph is not a stranger in Egypt. He arrived as a young man, made his way through a series of challenges, rose to great power, married, and built a family there. For Joseph, Egypt is diaspora, not exile. He is there because he built his life there, because he fits there. He has taken on certain aspects of Egyptian culture, albeit while remaining faithful to his God and his family. Joseph’s experience in Egypt is not unlike the experience of most Jews in America today. Few of us would call this experience “exile,” even while we acknowledge that it is our diaspora. The story is different for Jacob. He was forced to leave Israel for want of food and safety for his family. He only lived in Egypt a short time. Nevertheless, both Jacob and Joseph feel the pull of going home. Both articulated a desire to return to their own place. Even Joseph, for whom Egypt may have felt like a second home, even he felt the pull to return home to Israel. Because it may be nice to go away, but it is always better to come home.

This narrative arc is not unique to Jacob and Joseph. There are other stories of individuals who find refuge and comfort in a foreign land, only to return to their ancestral homeland. In fact, one comes from ancient Egypt itself. *The Tale of Sinuhe* (sin-YOU-hey), written around 1875 BCE during the era of the Middle Kingdom, tells of Sinuhe, a courier and assistant to the Pharaoh who flees to Syria.⁴ Sinuhe establishes himself in his new land: marrying the daughter of the leader, commanding the military, and succeeding in all his endeavors. Towards the end of his life, he feels the pull to return home to Egypt, and is

³ Exodus 13:19.

⁴ See Dr. Rachel P. Kreiter, “[Our Mummified Patriarchs: Jacob and Joseph](#),” *TheTorah.com*; and Dylan Campbell, “[The Tale of Sinuhe](#),” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

prompted to do so when invited back by the new Pharaoh. The Pharaoh writes to him, “Your death will not happen in a foreign country; Asiatics will not lay you to rest.” Sinuhe complies, returns to Egypt, and is buried with the elites in a tomb. There are numerous parallels between his story and that of Joseph, but suffice it to say that the end is what matters. Despite their feeling of being settled in this new land, they still desire to go home, to return.

We, too, have this desire to return from being away. Although we spent more than enough time at home during 2020, it felt like being away. We have lived a new, albeit temporary, normal. We all desire to return, to go back to the way things were, to return home. If only it were as simple as pressing the reset button. The truth is, however, I am no longer sure what it even means to “return to normal.” We have learned so much during this time. We have changed so much. There are things about how we work, how we live, how we exist that simply cannot be undone after a couple shots in the arm. God-willing, we will all be vaccinated and able to return to normal during 2021, but what that new normal looks like is anyone’s guess. So when we talk about returning to normal, returning home, I think we have to give serious consideration to what exactly we mean. When Jacob returned to be interred in Israel, the conditions must have been different. And we know that they certainly were when Joseph’s bones were returned home generations later. We are ready to go back, to return. But we must first figure out to what, exactly, we will all be returning.

I think it fitting that on this first Shabbat of 2021, when so many are accustomed to establishing resolutions and recommitting ourselves to that which we find most important, that we use this as a chance to affirm the importance of returning home, whether it be a physical, spiritual, or some other manifestation of home. To what would you like to return? What has

been calling out to you? What is pulling you forward on your life's journey? Jacob, Joseph, and even Sinuhe all felt called to return to their homes. If we attune our hearts and minds to hear that call, perhaps we too will hear the call to return. So listen carefully, and try to hear that still, small voice calling out to you. From where is it coming, and to where will you go? When we return home, what do we wish to find? How will we embrace that new reality and what opportunities will it bring? Wishing you all a healthy, happy, and fulfilling 2021, a year of returning home. Shabbat shalom and happy new year.