

PARASHAT VAYECHI

Genesis 47:28–50:26

Vayechi may be translated “and he lived” and records the last years and death of Jacob. After living in Egypt for seventeen years, Jacob calls his son Joseph and his grandsons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to his bedside for a blessing. He asks Joseph to bury him with Abraham and Isaac at the cave of Machpelah. Afterwards he calls all of his sons to his side and blesses each one. When Jacob dies, Joseph and his brothers bury him in Hebron. After their father’s death, Joseph’s brothers begin to fear that Joseph will now punish them for selling him into slavery. He reassures them that they are safe and promises to care for them and their families. Joseph lives to the age of one hundred and ten. Just before he dies he tells his family that God will return them to the Land of Israel and instructs them to carry his bones up from Egypt at that time.

OUR TARGUM

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When Jacob is one hundred and forty-seven years old and has lived in Egypt for seventeen years, he calls Joseph to him and makes Joseph take a vow. “Promise that when I die you will bury me with my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, in the cave of Machpelah.” Joseph assures his father that he will carry out his wish.

Afterwards, when Jacob is ill, Joseph brings his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to him for a special blessing. Jacob reminds Joseph of God’s promise to give the Land of Israel to his children and tells Joseph that Manasseh and Ephraim shall be counted as his own sons. He then blesses his grandchildren, placing his right hand upon Ephraim’s head and his left hand upon Manasseh’s head. Joseph notices that his father is blessing the younger with his right hand and the older with his left hand and tries to move his father’s hands. Jacob, however, indicates that he knows what he is doing by putting Ephraim before Manasseh.

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Jacob calls his twelve sons to gather about his bed. He presents each of them with an evaluation of and a prediction for the future. He reminds them that they are to bury him in Hebron, and then he dies.

· 3 ·

Joseph weeps for his father and orders that he be embalmed. After a mourning period of seventy days, he requests permission from Pharaoh to take Jacob's body to the Land of Israel for burial. Pharaoh grants his wish, and Joseph, his brothers, and many Egyptians travel to Hebron for the burial. Once there, they observe a mourning period of seven days. Then they bury their father and return to Egypt.

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Upon their return, Joseph's brothers fear that he will now punish them for having sold him into slavery. So they send him a message indicating that, before he died, their father asked Joseph to forgive them. They tell Joseph: "We are prepared to be your slaves."

Joseph assures them that, while they might have intended harm for him, God intended what they had done for good. He promises to care for them and their families.

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After living to one hundred and ten years, Joseph is about to die. He gathers his family about him and tells them that God will one day return them to the Land of Israel. "When that day comes, carry up my bones from here." Upon his death, Joseph is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.



THEMES

Parashat Vayechi contains three important themes:

1. Burial and mourning traditions.
2. Making honest evaluations; defining "leadership."
3. Lying in the cause of peace.

PEREK ALEF: *Jacob's Death—Burial and Mourning Traditions*

Our Torah portion provides an important description of burial and mourning practices. Jacob requests that he not be buried in Egypt but rather in Hebron with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah. At his death, we learn that Joseph orders Egyptian physicians to embalm Jacob, a process that takes forty days. The Torah also tells

us that the Egyptians mourned for Jacob's loss for seventy days and that Joseph and his brothers mourned him for seven days before his burial in the cave of Machpelah.

Jewish burial and mourning customs have changed and evolved since biblical times. For instance, although embalming a dead body in order to prevent its decay was accepted during the time of Jacob and Joseph, later Jewish authorities opposed the practice.

Several reasons were given: First, embalming delays burial. Jewish tradition favored immediate burial most likely out of consideration for the health of the community. Some commentators also suggest that the rule of immediate burial may have been derived from God's statement to Adam: "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19)

Second, embalming prevents the natural decay of the body and is actually a desecration of the body. Within Jewish tradition the human body is considered the sacred container for the soul. It should be buried with honor and without any mutilation or unnatural interference with its decomposition.

Third, embalming was opposed because it interfered with the mourner's necessary acceptance of the reality of death. Rabbi Maurice Lamm comments that "the art of the embalmer is the art of complete denial. Embalming seeks to create an illusion, and, to the extent that it succeeds, it only hinders the mourner from recovering from . . . grief." In other words, because the embalmer's job is to make the dead person appear "alive" and "beautiful," the result may be that mourners are actually prevented from accepting the finality of death. When that happens, a mourner often has difficulty getting on with all the responsibilities of life. (*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 1975, pp. 12-15)

Reform Judaism on burial

Since Judaism prescribes that the body should be returned to the dust from which it came, embalming is discouraged except when required by law or circumstances.

Burial is the most widely practiced method of disposition of the body among Jews and is, in fact, the only method allowed by tradition. However, it is clear that other methods (interment in caves) were practiced among Jews in ancient times. And so, while both cremation and entombment in mausoleums are acceptable in Reform Judaism, burial is the normative Jewish practice. (Simeon J. Maslin, editor, Gates of

Mitzvah, Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1979, pp. 52-57)

Among the ancient commentators a serious disagreement developed over whether or not Joseph should have embalmed his father, Jacob. Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi believed that Joseph had made a serious mistake and that his life ended early because he did not honor his father in death.

Other rabbis argue that Joseph honored his father by following his instructions to bury him in the Land of Israel with his family. By embalming him they prepared his body so that it could be taken on the long journey from Goshen to Hebron. (*Genesis Rabbah* 100:3)

Although Jewish tradition opposes embalming, or any delays in burial, it did allow room for special circumstances. Embalming was permitted in cases where public health was endangered. It was also permitted when it was necessary to send the body long distances for burial (as in the case of Jacob) or when there was a necessary delay in the burial because close relatives needed to travel to the funeral.

Reform Judaism on mourning

Jewish tradition prescribes several periods of mourning, differing in intensity and obligation, following the death of a loved one. These are:

Avelut: The name applied generally to the entire mourning period.

Aninut: The period between death and burial.

Shivah: The seven days of mourning following the funeral. Mourners are encouraged to remain at home during these days (except on Shabbat or festivals, when they should join the congregation in prayer), to refrain from their ordinary pursuits and occupations, and to participate in daily services in the home. . . . The first three days of the shivah period are considered the most intense and in Reform congregations are considered the minimum mourning period.

Sheloshim: The thirty-day period (including shivah) when normal life gradually resumes,

and the mourners return to their daily activities while yet observing certain aspects of mourning. One should avoid joyful social events and entertainment during this period.

The First Year: *The period during which a mourner recites Kaddish for a parent.* (Gates of Mitzvah, pp. 59–60)

Our Torah portion makes it clear that it took forty days to embalm Jacob but that the Egyptians mourned him for seventy days. Afterwards, Joseph and his brothers took their father's body to Hebron. Once there, they mourned for seven days and then buried him in the cave of Machpelah.

The mourning period observed by Joseph and his brothers does not conform with what has evolved into accepted Jewish practice. The seven days (*shivah*) are observed after burial, not before it. However, if the burial is at a great distance, then it is permitted to begin the *shivah* period at the time the vehicle carrying the body sets out on the journey. (I. Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, Jewish Theological Seminary, distributed by Ktav, New York, 1979, p. 286)

The *shivah* period of mourning and the other designated times for grief (*sheloshim* and the saying of *Kaddish* during the first year after the death of a loved one) are all meant to ease the pain of losing someone we loved. Visits from friends provide comfort at a time when loneliness and loss are felt most deeply. Prayers recited with others, especially the *Kaddish*, affirm that we are not alone. They remind us that death is a part of the pattern of life and that God is to be thanked for the gift of the loved one we have lost and whose memory we cherish.

Commenting on the Jewish periods of mourning, Rabbi Jack D. Spiro writes: "Judaism . . . recognizes that the difficult work of mourning takes time; there is no shortcut on the road to recovery." (*A Time to Mourn*, Bloch, New York, 1968, p. 138)

Through the centuries, Jewish tradition has developed a process for confronting death and mourning. The procedures for burial are ones that honor the body and spirit of the dead. The designated periods and rituals of mourning allow for a healthy—and necessary—expression of grief. Ja-

cob's death and his children's mourning teach us that losing a loved one is a deep wound. It requires time, support, and care from others to heal.

PEREK BET: *Jacob and His Sons—Honest Evaluations*

Just before he is about to die, Jacob calls his twelve sons to gather about his bed. His words to them are a combination of blessing, criticism, and prediction.

The dying patriarch is bluntly honest in his evaluation of his sons. He tells Reuben that he is "unstable as water," accuses Simeon and Levi of "lawlessness" and "fierce anger," and assesses Issachar as a "strong-boned ass." He calls Dan a "serpent"; he tells Joseph that he is "a wild ass" and Benjamin that he is "a ravenous wolf."

Why, we might ask, was Jacob so harshly critical of his sons?



Peli

Modern interpreter Pinchas Peli believes that Jacob's evaluation was meant to be helpful to them. His honesty taught them important lessons about their strengths and weaknesses. As their father, he could say things that no one else would tell them. Peli argues that "our lives often become confused and entangled for lack of a precise definition of who and what we really are." He claims that Jacob's evaluation of his sons "was meant to help his children find their proper identity. Such a criticism of them," Peli comments, "would help them find their way towards the future, in which they were destined to assume the roles as heads of the tribes of Israel."

Peli's psychological approach has special appeal. A parent's role is to help children understand their strengths and weaknesses. Constructive criticism builds character. It can deepen sensitivity to one's self and to others and improve one's social skills.

But parental criticism can also undermine confidence or mislead children about their real talents. Perhaps, instead of being helpful, Jacob's last words to his sons were harmful. How were they to feel about themselves when their father on his

deathbed characterized them with such negative descriptions?

Not all commentaries, however, agree that “improving character” was the reason for Jacob’s critical evaluation of existence.

Abravanel



Don Isaac Abravanel offers a different answer. It is the one most accepted by Jewish interpreters.

Abravanel’s theory is that, when it came time for Jacob to die, he decided to pass on the leadership (or rule) of his family to the son who was most qualified. He struggled with his decision because he realized that the future of the Jewish people depended upon his choice.

For that reason, he assessed carefully the strengths and weaknesses of each son. When he reached his conclusion about who was the most qualified leader, he then gathered his sons together and announced it to them. Because he wanted them to appreciate his conclusions, he honestly shared his evaluation with them. Jacob wanted each of them to understand why he had disqualified him for leadership of the Jewish people.

Whether or not Abravanel’s view of what motivated Jacob is correct, his discussion of what qualifies or disqualifies someone for leadership is very valuable. The following summary presents what Abravanel believes Jacob was saying about his sons and the important qualities he took into consideration when he thought about each of them.

Jacob’s Sons and Leadership

Qualities for leadership

Judah: Trusted and accepted by his brothers.
 Brave and successful in battle.
 Steady, thoughtful, and dependable.
 Clear about his goals and determined to fulfill them.

Qualities that disqualified for leadership

Reuben: Unstable as water.
 Simeon, Levi: Use of violence and force.
 Zebulun: Always looking for profit.

Issachar: Use of others to fight his battles.

Dan: Snipes at others behind their backs.

Gad: Weakly gives in to his opponents.

Asher, Naphtali: Serve others but do not command respect.

Joseph: Hated and distrusted by his brothers.

Benjamin: Lacks balance of judgment and concern for others.

Abravanel’s emphasis here is upon the important qualities that define leadership. Jacob, he argues, did not speak to his sons in order to hurt their feelings or to cause bitterness between them. His purpose was to clarify for them why Judah, above them all, qualified as the leader of the tribe that would produce King David and future rulers of Israel.

What makes a leader?

No fanatic can be a leader of the people of Israel.
 (Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk)

A gentle leader here on earth will also be a leader in the world to come. (Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat)

A leader must always show respect for the community. (Rabbi Nachman ben Jacob)

God weeps over a community leader who is domineering. (Hagigah 5b)

Jacob’s last words to his sons were neither a blessing nor a promise for a peaceful future. Instead, Jacob presented them with a blunt and honest evaluation of their behavior and personalities. Our interpreters believe that his purpose was to provide his sons with some critical insights into themselves and their motivations. In doing so, Jacob also created some valuable standards for defining

the difference between good and bad leadership qualities.

PEREK GIMEL: *Are We Permitted to Lie in the Cause of Peace?*

The Torah reports that, after Jacob's death and burial in Hebron, Joseph and his brothers return to Egypt. The brothers, however, fear that they are in danger. They say to one another: "What if Joseph seeks to pay us back for all the wrong that we did to him?"

So they decide to send a message to Joseph. They tell him: "Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.'" (Genesis 50:15-17)

The message is a strange one and raises many important questions. A bit of research reveals three important facts: First, Joseph never told Jacob that his brothers had thought to kill him and then sold him into slavery. Second, none of the brothers is reported to have told Jacob what they did to Joseph. Third, Jacob never indicates that he knew what the brothers had done to Joseph or gives any instruction about what they should say to Joseph after his death.

So why do the brothers make up such a story? Why do they lie to Joseph?

Many biblical interpreters have explored these questions. One of the first was Rabbi Levi, who lived in the Land of Israel during the third century. Rabbi Levi explains that, prior to Jacob's death, Joseph invited his brothers to dinner with him every evening. Suddenly, they were not invited, and they began to suspect that his attitude toward them had changed and that they were in danger.

Rabbi Isaac, who taught at the same time as Rabbi Levi, disagrees with his interpretation. The brothers, he suggested, suspected that Joseph was plotting to harm them because, on their way back to Egypt from Hebron, they watched Joseph stop at the pit into which they had thrown him before selling him into slavery. Rabbi Levi explains that, when the brothers saw him standing by the pit, they feared that he remembered how badly they

had treated him and that he would soon seek revenge. (*Genesis Rabbah* 100:8)

Leibowitz

The modern Torah commentator Nehama Leibowitz explains Joseph's behavior and his brothers' reaction to it in a slightly different way. She points out that, after Jacob's death, Joseph, who was still in mourning, was overwhelmed by the responsibilities of governing Egypt. His schedule did not permit him to see his brothers and family each day as he had when his father was sick. Jacob's illness and all the responsibilities of his burial no longer held the family together. As a result, the brothers may have suspected that Joseph's attitude toward them had changed and that he was about to harm them. Perhaps, that is why they decided to lie to him about what Jacob had said before his death. (*Studies in Bereshit*, pp. 556-558)

Nearly all commentators agree that the brothers lied to Joseph about Jacob's instructions to them. While commentators may cite different reasons for the behavior of the brothers, all conclude that the brothers were deliberately dishonest. That, however, is not the only instance of deception in our Torah portion. Joseph and his brothers also kept the truth from their father about how they had sold Joseph into slavery.

Some interpreters point out that the brothers said nothing because they feared their father would curse them. Other commentators claim that Joseph said nothing because he did not want to make trouble for his family. In other words, for the sake of peace, Joseph and his brothers did not reveal to Jacob what had happened between them in the distant past.

Others paint a slightly different picture. They maintain that Joseph visited his father only a few times after his arrival in Egypt. Joseph feared that, if he visited him often, Jacob would ask him embarrassing questions about how he had reached Egypt. Joseph preferred avoiding such discussions. He did not want to be forced into explaining to his father that his brothers had lied about what they had done to him. Joseph realized that his father might never forgive his brothers if he knew

that they had plotted to kill him and then decided to sell him into slavery. So, for the sake of peace in the family, Joseph seldom visited his father and refused to speak with him about the past. (*Pesikta Rabbati* on Genesis 48:1)

If this explanation is correct, then another question should be asked. Does Jewish tradition justify lying—or avoiding the truth—for the sake of peace?

Peace and truth

Peace without truth is a false peace. (Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk)

Seek peace

“Seek peace and pursue it.” That means, seek it in your own place and pursue it in all other places. (Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 1:1)

Peace is more important than anything else. (Sifra Bechukotai)

Great is peace. Quarreling is hateful. (Sifre to Naso 2)

According to most interpreters of our Torah portion the answer is yes. For example, the respected president of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem during the first century, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel, taught that peace was so important that it was permissible to lie for the purpose of promoting it. This great leader of the Jewish people justified his argument by using Joseph and his brothers as an example. “They lied about what their father had said to them in order to convince Joseph not to punish them but to accept them and live with them peacefully as his brothers.” (*Genesis Rabbah* 100:9)

Other commentators not only agree with Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel’s position, but they elaborate on it. Rabbi Il’a, quoting Rabbi Eleazar ben Shimon, says that, when the brothers altered the facts for the sake of peace, they did the right thing.

Rabbi Ishmael notes that even God occasionally changes the facts for the sake of peace. He explains

that, when God told Sarah that she would bear a child, she replied that it would be impossible because Abraham “is an old man.” (Genesis 18:9–15) But, for the sake of peace, Rabbi Ishmael says that God lied to Abraham about Sarah’s reaction. Instead of reporting that she had responded with the insult “Abraham is an old man,” God reported that she had said, “I am old.”

One of Ishmael’s students summarized his teacher’s attitude when he concluded: “For the sake of family peace, even the Torah allows for misquotes or a shaving of the truth.” (*Yevamot* 65b)

In the same commentary, Rabbi Nathan holds that it is a mitzvah, “an obligation,” to lie or to change the facts if it will bring about peace. Illustrating his position, he recalls the story of God’s asking Samuel to appoint David in place of Saul as king of Israel. Samuel is frightened that Saul will kill him. So God tells him to make it look as if he were going to offer a sacrifice. Then Saul will be fooled, and Samuel will be saved and able to appoint the new king. Samuel lies and lives, and Rabbi Nathan concludes by teaching, “For the sake of peace, you can lie.” (*Yevamot* 65b)

But this is not always so. The modern interpreter Rabbi Elie Munk reports an important exception that appears in *Sefer Hassidim* (426): “If a person comes to you for a loan, and you do not want to give the money to him for fear that he will not repay it, you *do not* have the right to lie and say that you *do not* have the money to give him for a loan. You must tell him the truth. For the permission to tell a ‘white lie’ in the interest of peace applies *only* to cases that have already happened, and which cannot be changed, but not to events that are in the future.”

In summary, the rule of lying for the sake of truth is as follows: If you are faced with a situation that has already happened, then, for the sake of peace, you can alter the memory of it, as the brothers did about what their father had instructed them to say to Joseph. Creating trust and caring among family members is more important than recalling accurately all the facts of the past, especially when we know those facts will only hurt others and divide the family into angry factions. But, when dealing with others in business or in other negotiations, you must not lie or deal in falsehoods.

The present and future must be built on honesty. Jewish tradition teaches: "Every person shall speak the truth with his neighbor." (Zechariah 8:16)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. If the body is merely a repository for the soul, why does Jacob request that his bones be brought back to the Land of Israel? What does it say about Jacob's view of Egypt? What might the biblical authors have intended by his request?
2. Should parents present their children with critical evaluations? What are the dangers of such evaluations? What are the dangers if they are not offered? What do we learn from Jacob's critique of his sons?
3. Is there a difference between lying about the past to foster family peace and rewriting, distorting, or avoiding history in order to further better relations between nations? Examples might include avoiding such subjects as the Holocaust with Germans, civil rights for Indians or Blacks with Americans, or terrorism with Palestinians.
4. Can you think of an example when, for the sake of family unity and peace, it would be better to lie?