



Parashat Vayechi – December 18, 2021 – 14 Tevet, 5782

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

The closing installation of Sefer Bereshit (the Book of Genesis) contains a strange exchange between the last patriarch, Jacob, and his children and successors. Jacob, being already quite elderly when he descends with his family to Egypt, asks his sons, Joseph in particular, to commit to transporting his remains back to Eretz Yisrael upon his demise.

It is a strange request if you consider the purpose of burial to be both the dignified treatment of human remains (the transport of Jacob's remains requires that his body be embalmed, a practice eschewed elsewhere in the Jewish tradition) and the provision of a proximately site for survivors to mourn and remember their deceased (Jacob's descendants are all fated to remain for generations in Egypt, so visiting his grave in Eretz Yisrael will not be possible).

Of course, the statement that Jacob is making is asking that his remains be brought back to Israel has little to do with either of these principles. Instead, he is making a powerful statement about where his true "home" is – and is not. Although he has grudgingly agreed to (again) leave the Land of Israel to escape the famine in Canaan, he is making it clear to his sons – and to all subsequent generations – that Egypt (or Goshen) is not "home", that they should not become too comfortable or settled there.

Jacob's pronouncement, unsurprisingly, proves prophetic. The Israelites, while they remain in Egypt, do so not as valued guests but as indentured workers, unable to make their way back to the place where they once enjoyed autonomy and a relatively comfortable existence.

But in our own day of habitual itinerancy, the question is typically more complex and the circumstances that bind us to a particular place less coercive. We will, most of us, over the course of our lives have occasion to identify multiple locales as our place of residence. We may indeed be citizens of more than one land. So, which of these allegiances will prevail as the one that we ultimately cite when called upon by others or by our own internal voice to designate our "true" home?

As importantly, what are the traits of a place or of the life and experiences that we build in a place that make it a true home for us, and how can we endeavor to strengthen those qualities in the place that we now reside, whether or not we are committed to calling this specific place, this specific chapter in our lives definitional in terms of our identity?

These are the questions that I believe this week's Torah portion (Vayechi) and, indeed, the entire Book of Bereshit begs of us through its stories of serial displacements (and selective returns). It is not, I think, coincidental that it is the book of the Torah that contains some of the most compelling narratives of personal growth and interpersonal interactions, both I would argue, pivotal in rooting us to a place, to a people, to an identity.

I close with the hope that we will soon be privileged to return physically to our building, our sanctuary, to which it seems we were only quite recently able to return after our own experience of exile. For now, however, out of an abundance of caution and with a commitment to keeping our community safe, we will be returning to **exclusively virtual religious services** that can be

joined at **6 p.m. on Friday** and **10 a.m. on Saturday** using this [link](#) (Meeting ID: 826 6059 3980, PW: SHABBAT).

Shabbat shalom,

- Rabbi Rachel Safman

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