

This Week In Torah *Vayechi*

This week's *sedra* describes a lot of death—both Jacob and Joseph die as the Genesis narrative comes to a close. Yet—the heading for the *parasha* translates as “Jacob lived...” This is the second time in our Torah-cycle that the word for life is associated with death; the first time is when we read of Sarah's death in the portion *Chaye Sarah*. In that section, Sarah's death comes at the age of 127; Jacob's lifespan is 147 years. The rabbis break down Sarah's years by pointing out that each word of years stands alone—a hundred and twenty and seven—which they interpret that she had the wisdom of a hundred-year-old, beauty of a twenty-year-old and a childlike sense of awe of a seven-year-old. But Jacob's age is broken down differently; it is done backwards—he was 7 years and 40 years and 100! What is the meaning of that?

The classic Biblical commentator RaSHI states that listing their years backwards is essential so that Jacob would not see the harshness of slavery. His students whose anthology is known as “*Da'at Z'khanim*” wrote: “there is not even the space of a single letter between the last letter of the previous portion and the first letter of this portion. It is the only time this occurs in the Torah. RaSHI writes that as soon as the eyes of Jacob closed for the last time, so did the spiritual eyes of the Jewish nation and their hearts, on account of the hardships experienced when they became enslaved.” The 16th century Italian rabbi, Ovadia Sforno, believes that this is the reason why Jacob was insistent not to be buried in Egypt but rather to be interred in the Cave of the *Machpela*.

Yet—these numbers might point to a sense of hopefulness that other commentators may not have seen. Using the notion of *Gematria*—where every Hebrew letter has a numerical value—the number 147 corresponds to the Hebrew word *Emunah* meaning faith. 19th Century Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto [the SHaDaL] notes that in v. 29 Jacob makes Joseph swear with steadfast loyalty to bury him in Canaan. But what if that swearing was part of Joseph's inheritance? *Chesed v'Emet* could be a manifestation of Jacob's faith—trust to do what is needed, trust to carry on the legacy. Without being specific, *chesed v'emet*—kindness and truth—are the essences of 147 years or of Jacob's faithfulness!!

Jacob is leaving behind a very powerful legacy. One that exists on the surface—knowing the future of Israelite enslavement, he makes Joseph swear not to bury him in Egypt. But one that is unwritten; one that states that in a time of pending trouble that could last 400+ years, have faith and be kind as well as truthful and God will redeem you! Early 20th Century Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel [who was a Religious Zionist until his death in 1946] believed that here Jacob becomes our spiritual role model for encouraging hope in what could be appearing as hopeless. He writes that future generations would “suckle from Jacob” as an example how to hold on despite all adversities and that is why the portion begins with “*Vayechi Ya’akov...*” and Jacob lived.

For us, that sense of faith and optimism is an enduring legacy. One can even turn things around like Jacob’s age to find a glimmer of hope when others have given up. One can be both pragmatic and express a positive yearning at the same moment. One can admit the difficult of realities but still possess the desire to escape it and/or transform it.

Vayechi Ya’akov.. And Jacob lived... Jacob is us, *b’nei Yisrael*—the children of Israel... and *Am Yisrael Chai...* and the people of Israel still live!