

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rick Rheins
Shabbat Vayechi 5781

The Promise and Challenge of Tomorrow

Queen Elizabeth famously bid a not so fond farewell to 1992 calling it an “*annus horribilis*” (Latin for “horrible year”). Her British Bronx cheer came after a difficult year of marital strife for her children and a fire in Windsor Castle. With all due respect for the 94-year old monarch, 1992 was a walk in the park compared to 2020.

Last year at this time I wrote a Keshet article about the fallacy of prognostication and 20-20 vision (a rather obvious pun on the year 2020). I poked gentle fun at modern Nostradamus wannabes whose absurd annual predictions are prominently displayed on the covers of pulp mags near the grocery store checkout counters. And, in the interest of equal opportunity buffoonery, I pointed out the ridiculous Y2K hysteria created by serious scientists as we were closing out 1999. Making predictions is fool’s errand. Still, the wisdom of hindsight gives rather cold comfort. We had so much hope for 2020. So many plans and events and dreams . . . all put on hold or severely downsized or simply canceled.

So as we begin 2021, what will the future bring? Don’t ask!

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayechi* (Genesis 47:28- 49:33), we read about the end of an era. Jacob/Israel blesses his family and breathes his last. Joseph and his brothers live out their lives and pass, giving way to new generations of Israelites in Egypt. This *Parashah* concludes the Book of Genesis and it marks the beginning of an entirely new experience for our ancestors. The generations after Joseph and his brothers were born and raised in Egypt. That first Diaspora established an unfortunate template for future Diasporas: a life of ease, acceptance and prosperity followed by an antisemitic tyrant who oppressed our people. True, with God's help and the strong will of our people, we have been able to overcome those harsh Pharaohs who "knew not Joseph." That's the story of Exodus which we will begin next week. It's the story of redemption and renewal which we have seen played out throughout our history and are eye-witnesses to the latest and greatest example in the miraculous rebirth of modern Israel after the Holocaust.

Our ancestor Jacob/Israel could not have predicted that a Pharaoh would arise who would oppress and enslave his descendants. However, he did plant in their minds the importance of returning to their ancestral homeland in the Land of Canaan, *Eretz Yisrael*. Jacob/Israel was buried in Hebron, next to his wife Leah, his parents Isaac and Rebecca and his grandparents

Abraham and Sarah. Rachel is buried not too far away near Efrat and Joseph is buried near Shechem (modern day Nablus). Future generations would wander far and wide. We are well familiar with the feeling of being strangers in a strange land.

What will the future bring for us? What is in store for those that will follow us? Now is not the time for predictions. However, it is the time to appreciate the blessings that we have living in the United States, the freest, most secure and tolerant of nations. And it is also the time to reflect and appreciate that we live in an era with a free, strong, and vibrant modern Israel, the home of over 7-million Jews. While Jacob/Israel could not have predicted what would happen to his family, he did the next best thing: he provided for us an eternal connection to our ancestral land. He knew that even if we were lost in the wilderness, we could sustain ourselves with hope and visions of a Promised Land.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick