

# The Immortality of Influence

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*Abstract: Our rabbis derive a beautiful teaching from title of this parashah. The Hebrew verb "Vayechi" means "and he lived," referring to Jacob. But why give a title about life to a parashah in which both Jacob and Joseph pass away? The deeper message here is: Even after death, we live on through the legacy we leave behind. The Talmud has a lovely expression for this: "The righteous are always called living." Mitch Albom put it beautifully in his classic book, Tuesdays with Morrie: "Death can end a life. Death cannot end a relationship." The juxtaposition of "Vayechi" and the passing of Jacob and Joseph speaks to the immortality of our loved ones' shaping influence upon us.*

As you know, we read the entire Torah – all five books -- every year. With the Torah reading for this shabbat, *Vayechi*, we conclude *Sefer Bereshit*, Genesis, the Torah's first book.

This parashah is somewhat mournful in tone. Not just because it brings an end to the book of Genesis, but also because it brings an end to the patriarchal generation. In this Torah portion, both Jacob and his most famous son, Joseph, pass away. Jewish history is on the march from being made a family to 12 tribes and ultimately to an entire nation.

Our Rabbis derive a beautiful teaching from the title of this parashah. The Hebrew verb "*vayechi*" means "and he lived," referring to Jacob. But why give a title of life to a parashah in which both Jacob and Joseph pass away?

The deeper message here is: even after death, we live on through the legacy we leave behind. The Talmud has a lovely expression for this: "the righteous are always called living." And Mitch Albom puts it beautifully in his classic book, Tuesdays with Morrie: "Death can end a life, but it can never end a relationship." The juxtaposition of "*vayechi*" and the passing of Jacob and Joseph speaks to the immortality of our loved ones' shaping influence upon us!

This book of Genesis ends on a cliffhanger. God makes two promises to Abraham. Abraham's descendants shall be as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea. They shall inherit the land of Israel. But as we conclude the book of Genesis, neither promise has come true. Neither promise has been fulfilled. Indeed, the text of *vayechi* alludes to a serious deterioration of the Hebrew's status in the land of Egypt. Let me show you just a few examples. Let's read Genesis chapter 50, verses 1-9.

Now, what do you hear in this narrative that suggests the Hebrews are in trouble, that they are no longer free?

Joseph requires Pharaoh's "favor" to bury Jacob. As the second in command of all Egypt, why does Joseph need a favor? And why doesn't Jacob speak to Pharaoh directly, as he always did in the past? Note also that the Hebrew children remain behind. Perhaps, it was not common for children to attend a funeral. On the other hand, it surely guarantees that the Hebrews will come back from the land of Israel. And why the armed guard? Are soldiers and chariots there to protect the Egyptian officials or to guard against the Hebrews' flight?

Now let's read Genesis chapter 50, verses 22-26.

What makes you suspicious here? If Joseph is the viceroy of Egypt, why can't he be buried immediately? Moreover, what is the significance of Joseph's ominous words "God will surely take notice of you"? Finally, notice the very last words of this parashah. Egypt has become a "coffin" for the Hebrew people! So God's promises not only remain unfulfilled. Matters are going to get far worse before they get better. Egyptian slavery looms on the horizon.

Will the Hebrews get back to the land of Israel? Will God's promises truly be fulfilled? As we begin next Shabbat the reading of *Sefer Shemot*, the book of Exodus, stay tuned....

Now let us recite the traditional words upon the completion of a book of Torah: *Chazak chazak venitchazek*: "Let us be strong and strengthen each other."