

Living in the Face of Death

Shabbat Va-y'chi 5782

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This Shabbat, we complete our reading of the Book of Genesis for the year. The name of this final portion is *va-y'chi*, which means “and he lived”—he, in this case, being Jacob. Despite the name of the portion, Jacob will die in these chapters, as will Joseph, who has been the main character throughout the last several chapters of the narrative.

Recalling the entire Book, we may reflect that each of our patriarchs has undertaken significant endeavors at the end of his life. Abraham is already a widower, and Torah tells us that he is “old, well advanced in years,”ⁱ when he arranges for his family and our people to have a future, dispatching his servant on a journey to identify and return with a wife for Isaac. Later, we read, “Isaac had grown old and his eyesight had dimmed,”ⁱⁱ when he calls his eldest son Esau to receive a blessing. Ultimately deceived, or perhaps playing along as if he has been tricked, Isaac instead blesses Jacob, whom God has decreed as the son destined to be the heir to the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, we meet Jacob as “his time to die drew near.”^{iv} He instructs Joseph not to bury him in Egypt, but to carry his remains back to the Promised Land, reinforcing the family’s connection to that place. Even then, though, Jacob does not merely die. Like his father and grandfather, he has much to do before his life ends. He meets two of his grandchildren, Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh, for the first time, pronouncing a benediction upon them in words that parents have repeated in Shabbat blessings for millennia.

Writing about this portion in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Susan Talve asserts: “Living in the face of death takes courage; it takes believing that we are part of something greater than ourselves, and it takes the hope that our legacy will live on through the blessings that we leave for future generations.”^v

These words resonate to us in our own day. This evening, we blessed Jana as she celebrates her sixtieth birthday. We’ve all heard pithy phrases like, “sixty is the new fifty.” On the one hand, such statements may be intended to belittle the aging process—a handy method of denial for we who are aging, which is to say all of us. On the other hand, “eighty is the new seventy” is simply factual: People are living longer. No, we don’t get to be 147, Jacob’s announced age at the outset of this week’s Torah portion.^{vi} Still, knowing that we may live longer, many of us seek to remain productive as we age, even if not in precisely the same way we once were.

In 2005, the late William Safire wrote a piece entitled “Never Retire”—ironically, on his retirement as a New York *Times* columnist. The title, “Never retire,” was a quote from “Nobel laureate James Wilson, [a] co-discoverer of the structure of DNA.” Specifically, Wilson told Safire, “Never retire. Your brain needs exercise or it will atrophy.”^{vii} Safire concluded that he had completed his work at the *Times*, but he undertook a new career at age 75.

Many of us do not relish the idea of working full time well into senior adulthood. Each of us is charged to find our own ways to remain as physically and mentally alive as our bodies, including our brains, will permit. We are not all going to be Fauja Sing, who ran a 5K at age 101. We may not stand “in line for several hours waiting to vote,” only to be lauded by the President, like Desiline Victor did at age 102. Nor is any of us likely to continue our careers full time to age 87—let alone, like Jiro Ono, as the chef of a “Michelin three star” restaurant.^{viii} Thankfully, our Torah reading offers us models that require no such superhuman feats, but rather the continuing eagerness to confer blessing to family and community.

Jacob is “retired” from his lifelong profession of shepherding. He continues, though, to embrace a patriarchal role that gives meaning to his life. Rabbi Talve, relying on classical midrash, explains that Jacob “wished to give his children a glimpse of the end of all exile,” not only their own expatriation to Egypt but of their descendants’ enslavement, which they could not contemplate. Those realities were unknown to Jacob or his children, and yet, Rabbi Talve explains that Jacob “wanted somehow to let his descendants know that no matter how devastating their enslavement would be, there would be an end to it. Jacob may not be able to see the end of exile himself, but with the blessings he gives to his children, he manages to reach into the future with the promise that there is a way through the suffering that will lead to peace.”^{ix}

After Jacob dies, Joseph and his brothers are old men themselves. Still, Joseph assumes a mantle of family leadership, building peace and offering security to his brothers. You will recall that the brothers, when young, had sold Joseph into Egyptian bondage. By the time of Jacob’s death, they have long been reunited. Still, their father now dead, the brothers wonder if Joseph has tolerated them only for Jacob’s sake. In the penultimate vignette of both his life and the Book of Genesis, Joseph reassures them: “Though you intended me harm, God intended it for good, in order to accomplish what is now the case, to keep alive a numerous people. Now, therefore, have no fear—I will provide for you and your little ones.”^x

Rabbi Talve reminds us of the *midrash* that, at the end of his life, Jacob fears that his descendants will not keep faith with their God in Egyptian exile. They

respond by proclaiming the words of *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel;” and in this case, “Israel” refers to the name bestowed upon Jacob by an angel. They reassure their dying patriarch that *Adonai* is **their** God, *Adonai* alone. To that, Jacob responds, in his last breath, *Baruch shem k’vod*, “Blessed is the Name whose glorious presence is forever and ever.” Rabbi Talve observes that, in the face of death, “The love expressed between the generations awakened the possibility of unity.”^{xi}

To that, our response can only be *chazak, chazak v’nitchazek*, the words we traditionally utter when we complete the reading of one of Torah’s five books as we do tonight—and, more broadly, as each of us faces the reality that we shall one day die, passing life and purpose to the next generation: “Let us be strong, strong, and then we shall strengthen one other.”^{xii}

ⁱ Genesis 24:1.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 27:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 25:23.

^{iv} Genesis 47:29.

^v Rabbi Susan Talve, “Living in the Face of Death,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 71.

^{vi} Genesis 47:28.

^{vii} William Safire, “Never Retire,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2005.

^{viii} Adrienne Farr, “6 Inspiring Stories. You’re Never Too Old to Dream,” *Reader’s Digest*, February 8, 2017.

^{ix} Talve, p. 71.

^x Genesis 50:20-21.

^{xi} Talve, p. 74.

^{xii} This paragraph is a paraphrase and adaptation of Rabbi Talve’s last paragraph, p. 74.