

TorahFax: Vayechi
Rabbi Zalmen Marazov

Tuesday, Tevet 14, 5784 / December 26, 2023

This week's Parsha, Vayechi, begins, "And Yaakov lived in the Land of Egypt seventeen years."

The name "Vayechi" - and he "lived" indicates that the final years of Yaakov's life were good years. Yaakov himself expresses this best. When Joseph brought his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim to their grandfather for his blessing, Yaakov kissed and embraced them. Then he said to Joseph, "I didn't think I would ever see your face and now, G-d had let me see also your children."

Yaakov's fondness and admiration for these two grandchildren is clearly seen in the Parsha. In addition to giving Menashe and Ephraim special blessings, Yaakov appoints each as the head of a tribe in Israel. Thus, they are the only grandchildren to merit becoming tribes.

In addition, Yaakov proclaims, "By you shall Israel bless saying, 'May G-d make you as Ephraim and as Menashe'." Jewish parents have used this phrase to bless their sons each Friday night for thousands of years.

Q. What was special about Ephraim and Menashe?

A. Our sages explain that Ephraim and Menashe were Yaakov's only grandchildren who were born and raised away from their grandfather. All Yaakov's other grandchildren were raised under his guidance. This naturally instilled in them their spiritual heritage and love of G-d. However, Ephraim and Menashe were born and raised in Egypt.

Yet, Ephraim and Menashe were not swayed by the Egyptian culture. Instead, they conducted their lives as befitting grandchildren of Yaakov, thus bringing the greatest pleasure and Nachas to their grandfather. Menashe and Ephraim proved to Yaakov that the education their father, Yosef, received during his youth remained with him and enabled him to transmit the same values to his children even in such an alien environment.

This is what Yaakov means, "By you shall Israel bless saying, 'May G-d make you as Ephraim and as Menashe.'" This is a blessing to Jewish children throughout the generations to withstand all tests and pressures and stay loyal to our heritage, just as Menashe and Ephraim did.

In the Parsha we read that Yaakov makes Joseph swear that after Yaakov's passing, he will take his remains out of Egypt and bury him in the Me'arat Hamachpeilah, the family burial plot, in Hebron. The Me'arat Hamachpeila in Hebron is the resting place of Adam & Eve, Abraham & Sarah, Yitzchak & Rivkah, Yaakov and Leah.

The Parsha concludes with the passing of Joseph. Joseph too made his brothers promise to take his remains out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Joseph passed away at the age of 110.

Wednesday, Tevet 15, 5784 / December 27, 2023

In this week's Parsha, Vayechi, which is the last Parsha in the Book of Genesis (Breishis), we read how Yaakov (Jacob) asked his son, Joseph, that after his passing in Egypt he will take him back to the Land of Canaan to be buried in the family burial plot in Hebron. Joseph tells his father he will do so. Yaakov is not satisfied and makes him swear. Only after he swears that he will be taken out of Egypt to be buried in Hebron, is Yaakov pleased.

In return for this favor, Yaakov gives Joseph the city of Shchem in the land of Canaan. Joseph is buried in Shchem (Nablus). Before his passing, Joseph makes his family swear that they will also take his body out of Egypt to be buried in the Land of Canaan.

The Torah tells that when Yaakov died, at the age of 147, all of Egypt mourned his death. After 70 days, Yaakov's children carried him out of Egypt to be buried in Hebron. Joseph's body stayed in Egypt until the Jewish people left Egypt, at the time of the Exodus. Then they took Joseph's bones with them and later buried him in Shchem, the city which his father gave him as a gift.

Q. How many years passed from Yaakov's moving to Egypt until the Exodus?

A. Two hundred and Ten years.

Q. How old was Joseph when he passed away? How many years later was he taken out of Egypt?

A. Joseph lived 110 years. The Exodus took place 139 years after Joseph passed away. Thus, Joseph's bones were taken out of Egypt 139 years after his passing. Jews stayed in the desert for 40 years before coming into the Promised Land when they were able to give Joseph a proper burial.

Q. We understand Yaakov's family mourning after his passing, but why did all the Egyptians mourn for Yaakov?

A. In Pharaoh's dream he saw that there will be seven plentiful years in Egypt and then seven years of great famine. Yaakov and his family moved to Egypt at the end of the second year of famine. When Yaakov was introduced to Pharaoh, he blessed Pharaoh and as a result, the famine stopped. Instead of seven years it only lasted two years! The Egyptians realized how holy a man Yaakov was and that his blessing saved them from five years of famine. Thus, they all mourned his passing.

Q. Why was Yaakov afraid of being even temporarily buried in Egypt until Jews left Egypt, as was the case with Joseph? Why did he want to be carried out of Egypt immediately after his passing?

A. After all that he did for the Egyptians, as mentioned above, Yaakov was afraid that the Egyptians will declare him a god, and would worship him, as they did their many other Gods. This is why he made Joseph swear that he will not bury him in Egypt even for a while.

Thursday, Tevet 16, 5784 / December 28, 2023

This week's Parsha is Vayechi, which concludes the first Book of the Torah, Breishis (Genesis)

The Parsha begins with the words, Vayechi Yaakov – Yaakov lived in the Land of Egypt 17 years.

Joseph was separated from his father for 22 years. His first 13 years in Egypt were spent as a slave and as a prisoner. After the 13 years he became ruler of the Land of Egypt. It took another nine years, and only due to the great famine, when his brothers came to Egypt to buy food did they discover Joseph. For twenty-two years, Yaakov mourned his lost son, whom he considered dead.

Thus, the last seventeen years of Yaakov's life, which he lived in Egypt, were the best years of his life after being united with his son Joseph and his family. Yaakov had a difficult life compared to his father, Yitzchak, and grandfather, Abraham. Yaakov expresses it himself when he was introduced to Pharaoh. He tells Pharaoh, "Few and troublesome have been the days of my life, and I have not attained the years of my father's life." These last 17 years of his life were Yaakov's best years.

Q. When Joseph became ruler of Egypt, why didn't he let his father know that he was alive?

A. Here are two answers: 1) The reason that G-d decreed that Joseph be away from his father for twenty-two years was a punishment to Yaakov, measure for measure, for the twenty-two years which Yaakov spent by his father-in-law, Lavan, and was away from his elderly parents, Yitzchak and Rivkah. Thus, before the 22 years were up Joseph couldn't tell his father where he was.

2) Yaakov never knew that his children sold their brother. He believed that Joseph was killed and devoured by a wild animal. Joseph was afraid to let his father know that he was alive because then he would figure out that his own children had sold him into slavery. That would be "loshon hara" – "speaking slander," which was prohibited by the Torah. He was also afraid that Yaakov would punish his brothers if Yaakov found out the truth. Thus, he decided not to tell about his whereabouts and left it up to G-d to decide how Yaakov would find out.

Q. Yaakov's father, Yitzchak, lived 180 years, while Yaakov lived only 147 years. Why?

A. Our sages explain that Yaakov should have lived 180 years. But, as mentioned above, when Joseph presented his father to King Pharaoh, he asked Yaakov his age. Yaakov replied, "The days of the years of my life are a hundred and thirty years; few and bad have been the days of my life and they have not attained the days of the years of the life of my fathers" (Gen. 47:9). This verse contains 33 Hebrew words. As a result of Yaakov complaining about his bad lot and misfortunes in life and not accepting happily that which G-d had in store for him, G-d shortened his life by 33 years – the amount of words he used when he complained!

It teaches us to have faith and accept whatever G-d has in store for us and say, Thank You G-d.

Friday, Tevet 17, 5784 / December 29, 2023

This Shabbat we will read Parshat Vayechi, which concludes the first Book of the Torah.

There are twelve Parshiot in the Book of Breishis. The first Parsha (Breishis) tells the story of creation; the second Parsha (Noach) relates the story of Noah and the Great Flood. The next ten Parshiot present the life stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish people; Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah.

The lives of Abraham and Yitzchak take up four Parshiot (Lech Lecha, Vayeira, Chayei Sarah, Toldot). Yet, the story of Yaakov and his children is told in much more detail and covers over seven Parshiot (Toldot, Vayeitzei, Vayishlach, Vayeishev, Mikeitz, Vayigash, Vayechi).

Although the Torah dedicated so much more space to Yaakov, yet, he lived the shortest of all the Patriarchs. Abraham lived 175 years. Yitzchak lived 180 years. Yaakov lived 147 years.

Q. Why is it that by Abraham and Yitzchak the Torah tells us that they died (Vayamat). But when the Torah speaks about Yaakov's passing in this Parsha, there is no mention of the word "death"?

A. Because of this, our sages say, "Our forefather Yaakov did not die!"

The Talmud explains the above concept as follows: Abraham's son Yishmael and his descendants departed from Abraham's ways. Similarly, Yitzchak's son Esau and his descendants strayed from the teachings of Yitzchak. Yaakov was the only one of the Patriarchs whose children all followed in their father's tradition and kept true to their teachings and heritage. Thus, say our sages, "Yaakov didn't die. As long as his children continue in his ways he too is alive."

In other words, true life is not measured by the length of one's days. It is measured by the values one lives by and the ability to transmit these values to future generations. Since Yaakov's children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, throughout the past 3000 years, until our very generation continued in his footsteps, Yaakov is always considered alive.

Q. When paying condolences to the mourners at a Shiva house (house of mourning), we comfort them with the traditional saying of, G-d should comfort you amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Why do we add the words, "amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem"? What comfort lies in these words?

A. As Jews we have great confidence that G-d will one day rebuild the Holy Temple and Zion and Jerusalem, with the coming of Moshiach. When Moshiach will come there will be the revival of the dead (Techiat hameitim). By including them amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem we say to the mourners that with the coming of Moshiach, their dear departed one will be reunited with them once again. There is no greater condolence than knowing that death is only temporary, and life is permanent. May we merit the coming of Moshiach in our days.