Va-Y’hi (Vayechi)

**SECOND/THIRD PORTION IN THE TRIENNIAL CYCLE**

**BERESHIT (GENESIS) 47:27- 50-26**

**Etz Hayim 305; Hertz 187; Plaut 314**

Parashat Ya-Y’hi—also called Va-Yechi—is the final part of the *Book of Bereshit* or *Genesis* in the Hebrew Bible, so, whether we are reading in the annual or the triennial cycle, we follow it by saying loudly, Chazak / Chazak / V’Nitchazak; Strength / Strength / And we shall be strengthened. My d’var will focus on the deaths of, first, Jacob, and, later, Joseph

The parashah begins with Jacob concluding his earlier tribe-by-tribe review of their characteristics—and perhaps suggesting if not asserting that it was a forecast of their futures. As noted in *Eitz Hayim,* that review is the first reference in the Hebrew Bible to there being exactly 12 tribes. Then, just before dying, Jacob states that he wants to be buried in the land of Canaan alongside Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rivkah, and Leah. And, as it says in the text (49:33), “When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people.” That expression—to be gathered to his people--which indicates that someone had a long and successful life, originates in the Hebrew Bible with the stories about Abraham. Hertz (note to Verse 49:33 on pg 188) says that it is not burial of the body that is important, “but the soul’s departure to join the souls of those who have gone before.” Of course, the phrase carries so many possible meanings that it was later adopted by other people.

Upon Jacob’s death, Joseph kisses his body and pretty much takes over the burial procedure. Two strange things occur: The first of them is that Joseph orders that Jacob’s body be embalmed. Presumably, he was influenced by the Egyptian tradition or maybe he wanted to indicate his deference to the Pharoah (50:4-6). However, later in Jewish history, embalmment was forbidden for Jews. As various websites indicate, there are at least rhree reasons why Jewish law does not permit embalming:

* Jewish law requires that the natural body to be returned to the earth.
* Embalming is considered to violate the modesty of the deceased.
* Jewish faith considers embalming to be a desecration of the body.

More broadly, apart from special circumstances, cremation, autopsies and embalming are all forbidden for Jews.. Hertz (note to Verse 50:2 on pg 188) attributes Joseph’s order of embalming by the necessity of protecting the body during the long journey to the burial site, but that sounds like a modern-day excuse. particularly when we read (50:3) that the embalming process itself took 40 days.

The second strange thing that occurs was a big lie, as described in 50:15*ff*. One of the brothers says, or, perhaps, as Hertz says (note 15 on page 50:), It is “A notable example of the never-to-be-silenced voice of the guilty conscience:” What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him! So they sent this message to Joseph:

Before his death, your father sent this instruction. So shall you say to Joseph: “Forgive,

I urge you, the offense and the guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.“

Now the text says that Joseph was in tears when he heard their words, and further that the brothers offered to be his slaves. I cannot take either of these statements seriously. Joseph came back to his father as little short of a nobleman, someone responsible for thousands of Egyptians at all levels of society. Did no one ever come to him with special pleas, or with fear of punishment? Did it not bother him that he had never heard those words himself from his father? Admittedly, his response was strong and memorable (50:19-20):

Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the survival of many people.

To now, I have taken the brothers’ action as entirely self-serving, a way of avoiding punishment. There is another way to treat their supposed instruction from Jacob—As a white lie. According to Rabbi Plaut (318 in the first edition of his Chumash), the burden of Jewish thinking is that one can tell a white lie for the sake of peace. R. Simeon b. Gemaliel wrote in the Talmud (Yeb, 65b): “Great is peace, for even the tribal ancestors resorted to a fabrication to make peace between Joseph and themselves.”

Returning to the middle portion of Parashat Va-Y’hi, just as it begins with the death of Jacob, so does it end with the death of Joseph. Indeed, there are a number of similari-ties. Jacob died at 147; Joseph at 110; not too different given the life expectancy of those early days. Both Joseph and Jacob’s ancestors lived relatively happily in Egypt Both urged that their survivors carry their bodies to the land of Canaan and there bury them in the Cave of Machpelah (near Hebron in modern day Palestine), where so many of their ancestors are buried. And less happily to us, their distant ancestors, both Jacob and Joseph were embalmed.

There is another analogy between Jacob and Joseph, and it serves well as the conclusion of the *Book of Bereshit* aka *Genesis.* Both were leaders of their people, the Israelites. No one appointed them. Obviously, there were no elections. Most importantly, God played a role in the history that brought them to leadership—more directly and forcefully in the case of Joseph, yet indirectly and slowly in the case of Jacob. However, at that point, the analogy between Joseph and Jacob begins to fail. As I mentioned before, in the first triennial’s portion of Parashat Va-Y’hi, Jacob goes through a tribe-by-tribe evaluation. It is lively, even colourful, and certainly sets the stage for Judah to take the lead in the future, but for most tribes, it is far from comforting as their father’s last words. How different from Joseph, who has good reason to blame his brothers, but never does. When Joseph asked, “Am I a substitute for God?” Plaut says that he “shows himself the prototype of the religious man”—note that, if you will excuse the sexism, it is “man;” it is not just the religious Jew. “He acknowledges his human limitations in the midst of affluence and power and, at the same time, acknow-ledges the ultimate power of God.”

Rabbi Plaut (317) recognizes Joseph’s superior character and presents it is as the appropriate ending for the book:

In his devotion to his father and in his warm affection for his brothers, we see a full picture of this man who is “the true son, the true brother, the true servant . . . loyal and faithful, disinter-ested and sincere, modest and considerate.”[[1]](#footnote-1) But while he is the obvious hero of the tale, the reader realizes that behind the man, beyond the friend of Pharaoh and the guide of Egypt, stands God, the friend of Abraham and the Guardian of Israel.

The *Book of Bereshit* opens with, “When God began to create,” and then turns to the story of the Fathers. It is a book that reaches from the creation of the world to the creation of the people of Israel.

Shabbat shalom.

1. Quotation from page 400 of book by Driver entitled *Genesis.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)