

Parshat Vayechi brings us to the end of the life of Yaakov Avinu, and thus, the end of Sefer Bereshit. Yaakov lives the final 17 years of his life in Mitzrayim and asks Yosef to take an oath that he will ensure that he will be buried in Canaan. The death of Yaakov represents the end of an era for the Jewish People, as the patriarchal age comes to a close and a new generation will begin with his demise. Yaakov uses the last moments of his life as an opportunity to set his affairs in order, to transmit his final messages, teachings and instructions to his sons. We would think that a parsha called “Vayechi,” literally “And he lived,” would refer to how Yaakov lived his life, yet instead, we are presented with the events leading up to and following his death: he blesses his children and grandchildren, breathes his last breath, and is buried by his sons in the Ma’arat haMachpelah, the Machpelah Cave in Chevron, all followed by the death of his beloved son and chosen successor Yosef. This is reminiscent of what we learned several weeks ago in Parshat Chayei Sarah, literally “the life of Sarah;” which describes not Sarah’s (earthly) life, but her passing and its aftermath. What is the Torah teaching us by framing these narratives concerning the deaths of our ancestors in the language of life?

I believe that the answer to this lies in the understanding that death is not an end unto itself, but rather, a point of transition. R’ Yochanan, in Ta’anit 5b makes a startling claim about Yaakov:

“Rabbi Yochanan stated, ‘Our father Jacob did not die.’

Rabbi Nachman asked, ‘Was it in vain that they eulogized Jacob and embalmed his body and buried him?’

Rabbi Yochanan responded, ‘I derive this from a verse: ‘Fear not, Yaakov My servant... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity’ (Yirmiyahu 30:10). The verse likens Yaakov to his offspring: just as his offspring lives, so too, Yaakov lives.”

Obviously, Yaakov died in the physical sense; the Torah says explicitly (Bereshit 50:15) that “Yosef’s brothers had realized their father had died.”). Yet the Baalei haTosafot come to teach us that R’ Yochanan’s teaching that Yaakov didn’t die is supported by the Torah’s language itself; they point out that when describing Yaakov’s death, the Torah only says that he “expired,” not that he “died” (Bereshit 49:33). Thus, the Torah’s description about the “end of Yaakov’s life” does not employ the verb “וַיָּמָת - and he died.” In contrast, when describing the deaths of Avraham Avinu and Yaakov Avinu, the Torah does use the וַיָּמָת term. Why is Yaakov different?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, in Midbar Shur (pp. 242-251) explains that there are two aspects to death. There is the physical expiration, *geviya*, in which there is cessation of natural bodily functions, as well as a secondary spiritual aspect of *mitah*, in which death cleanses the soul of physical desires and bodily attachments that distance the self from true unity with the Creator, as decreed after the sin of Adam haRishon. Avraham and Yitzchak, teaches Rav Kook, needed to undergo *mitah* upon their passings, and this is why the Torah uses the term וַיָּמָת in connection with their deaths: Avraham bore and raised Yishmael, whereas Yitzchak bore and raised Eisav, and these offspring contested and opposed the mission of the Avot. Yaakov, on the other hand, dies in a state of wholeness and eternity, surrounded by his progeny, who are all included within the children of Israel. Yaakov was able to die without needing to experience soul-death because

his offspring were aligned with HaShem's design for the world. Yaakov, also known as Yisrael, thus represents all of the Jewish People: death represents an expiring or passing away from earthly, physical, and worldly matters, but the soul itself lives, as death serves as a means of merely severing the soul from physical attachments and occupations.

Our reverence for the soul persists even after the bodily self expires; when Yaakov asks Yosef to not let him be buried in Mitzrayim, and instead, entreats him to "deal with me kindly and truly," (Bereshit 47:29), we learn that attending to the matters of burial and care for the deceased serve as a reflection of our belief in the eternity of the soul itself. Rashi, on the verse, comments, based on midrash, that the chesed we do with the dead is a chesed shel emet, a kindness of truth-- an ultimate kindness- because we do not expect anything in return. We are acting kindly towards a person who cannot repay us in any tangible sense. Interestingly, Yaakov requests something of Yosef that he himself failed to do; recall that Yaakov mentions the death of Rachel when Yosef brings his children to Yaakov's deathbed. Yaakov is concerned that he won't be brought to the Ma'arat Machpelah for burial because he did not see to it that Rachel was brought to burial even in Bethlehem; he buried her on the way, where they were, yet according to the Ramban, he seeks his own burial in Chevron as a means of reparation, as an apology to Yosef; he asks for a chesed shel emet to make amends for his own shortcomings in extending this to Rachel (Bereshit 48:7).

In contemporary Jewish life, we learn from Yaakov's request the basis for one of the most enigmatic yet necessary institutions: the Chevra Kadisha. The practices of the Chevra Kadisha serve as a tangible, embodied reflection of our tradition's deepest truths regarding the nature of the soul and the afterlife. Just as we say Yaakov Avinu never died because he departed the world in a state of fulfillment and alignment with G-d's wishes, and because His descendants carry on his teachings, we, as the descendants of Yaakov Avinu, are able to fulfill his wishes for chesed shel emet and live in fidelity to the truth that the soul is to be treated with honor and dignity as it leaves behind the material accretions and physical distractions of this world for the olam haemet, the realm of truth. Providing shmirah and taharah, the guarding of the deceased and the washing, purification, and dressing of the deceased in accordance with the requirements of halakha serve as the ultimate fulfillment of Yaakov Avinu's wishes of chesed shel emet, by his descendants.

As we read and learn from Parshat Vayechi, as we are oriented towards matters of eternity, legacy, and the soul, let us take this opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the texts that guide us in the proper ways to treat our dear departed ones with the fullest sense of kavod hameit, respect for the deceased. Indeed, these texts can offer us great insight into how we conceptualize death itself. For instance, the Shu"t Binyamin Zev (204), from the responsa of Binyamin Ze'ev ben Mattathias of Arta (1539), brings from the Tza'avah (Ethical Will) of Rabbi Eliezer haLevi (d. Mainz, 1327), that the deceased should be washed and groomed before burial in the same manner as the living prepare themselves on Erev Shabbat to enter into Shabbat: "I very much asked to be purified slowly and in purity and cleanliness between the fingers and toes as well as between my backside. And they should wash and comb my hair with a comb just as living people do, and they should cut the nails of my hands and feet so that I will come pure and clean to [eternal] rest, as I went to the synagogue every Shabbat, with washed hair and cut nails and combed hair, after going to the bathroom. So should they do for me before my eternal rest." R'

Moshe Isserles, in his *Darkhei Moshe* (YD 352:4), brings this as halakha, that the *rechitza* (washing) component of the *taharah* is learned out from the laws of preparing for shabbat for the living, demonstrating our belief that death does not mark the end of life, but rather, marks the individual's entrance into the next world, which is akin to the eternal, unending Shabbat. The *Sefer Ma'avar Yabok*, written by R' Aharon Berachia of Modena (c. 1626, Mantua), in *Sefat Emet* 25, explains that just as *geviya* marks the transition by which the soul leaves behind the physicality and temporality of this life, when our loved ones, the descendants of Yaakov Avinu, pass away, the *tahara* ritual itself serves as a physical means by which we mark the transition of our loved ones into the next world; just as we are born in water, we leave the world by water, as "after the washing, the deceased is less aware of the happenings in this world than before the washing. We might explain that the washing distances the person and their soul from the corporal nature of our world. After they are cleansed of the filth, they long to wrap themselves in coverings, garments of light, like the atmosphere of the lower Garden of Eden. This is the inner meaning of the biblical sequence - "It will be purified" and after that- "and sanctified". (Vayikra 16:19) This is also why people usually call this washing - *Taharah*. This process diminishes the interaction the soul has with the material nature of this world."

Likewise, *shmira*, guarding the deceased, is a practice which serves to bring honor to the deceased, reflecting our belief in the inherent worth and value of the soul, fashioned in the Divine image and likeness. *Shomrim* should be in proximity to the deceased, should not leave the chapel, should be reciting *Tehillim* and learning torah for the sake of the deceased, and should conduct themselves with reverence, not watching television on the job, not disappearing to go shopping or to go to shul (*shomrim* explicitly are exempt from time-bound positive commandments, in accordance with the principle, "Osek b'mitzvah, patur min hamitzvah," one engaged in a mitzvah is exempt from performing another mitzvah, as brought in the *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 71:3-4, unless if there are two *shomrim* in the same chapel and they can switch off). Instead, their duty is to safeguard the deceased from physical degradation and from negative spiritual forces (*ruchot ra'ot*), as explained by R' Avraham Danzig, in his *Hanhagot Chevra Kadisha* 4: "*Chiyuv gadol lishmor hamet vechiyuv gadol al ha'avelim kol zman shehamet beveitam sheyihyeh sham shomer bein bayom uvein balaylah;*" there is a great obligation to guard the deceased and a great obligation is upon the mourners to guard the deceased at all times, morning and night. This serves a twofold purpose, according to the *Gesher HaChaim*, *chelek daled* (R' Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, 1871-1955, Israel): *ha'echad mishum kevodo*, the first for the honor of the deceased, *she'im yanichuhu levado harei zeh ke'ilu azavuhu ki'kli ein chafetz od bo umutal bevizayon*, so that the deceased not be left alone, cast aside as a useless vessel, as if there is nothing left to the deceased, left in a state of loneliness and contempt, and the other reason is, *shehaguf nartik kadosh shehurekah haneshamah mimenu*, *she'lefi mah shekatevu hamekubalim sho'afim az yetzurei dim'sa'avuta lechadur el tocho*, that the body is a sacred sheath from which the soul was emptied, according to what the Kabbalists wrote, that the forces of impurity seek to penetrate it, thus, *V'shomer hamet tzarich lomar devarim shebikdushah, mizmorei tehillim utefillot*, the *shomer* must say sacred things, psalms and prayers, in honor of the deceased.

May we strive for and enforce the highest standards in kavod hameit in our communities, in the fullest spirit of chesed shel emet.