

## Parashat Vayechi: To Live and to be Blessed? Only in Egypt!

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

With a heavy and somewhat broken heart, we bid farewell to the book of Genesis, Bereishit, the book that is the beginning of everything – the universe, humanity, the Jewish people, and the human journey. The last parasha, Vayechi, begins with these words: "**And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt...**" (Genesis 47:28)

Yaakov is 147 years old and he is on his deathbed. He has lived a full life. After all he has been through, he is surrounded in his final moments by his children and grandchildren, and he blesses his sons one at a time. What more can one ask for? A happy end to a circuitous life journey! But is this truly a happy end?

We are left with one niggling yet important difficulty: why Egypt? Why does Yaakov end his life in Egypt, and not in Canaan where Abraham and Isaac and their wives are buried, the country which will later bear Yaakov's other name, Yisrael. It feels as though the entire journey of "Lech Lecha" which Abraham began has become a huge failure.

There is something dissonant in the sentence "**And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt...**" If it had said "vayager" (resided) or "vayeshv" (settled) it wouldn't seem so, but the word "chai" implies that he really *lived* there. He wasn't just passing the time until the drought ended and he could go home. Of course Yaakov deserved to truly *live* at the end of his life after all he had been through. But why in Egypt? Why does he find inner peace and tranquility there?

In searching for an answer to this question I looked at the Zohar, which is not a source I usually use, and I found a very interesting answer. The Zohar always reminds us that the Torah is not a history book, but rather an ultimate guide to the mysteries of life. Here is what it says about our parasha, Vayechi:

"Come and behold, he did not deserve to bless any of his sons, and had no spirit with which to bless, except in Egypt. When he did, he blessed each of them according to a mystery, which is, "Now Jacob saw that there was corn (also: 'breaking') in Egypt. Jacob said to his sons, 'Why do you look at one another?'" Come and see, prophecy was given only to the broken - hearted, as it is written, "Go down there, and buy (also: 'break') us from there, that we may live, and not die" (Genesis 42:2).

**The Zohar teaches us that the goal of the descent of Bnei Yisrael to Egypt was to break – not bread, but their hearts.**

It appears that Yoseph's tragic story, his brothers' cruelty, the pain inflicted on Yaakov, the chasm that ripped the family apart – all of these had a point, and the point was heartbreak. The point of the heartbreak was two-fold: to live ("**that we may live and not die**"), and to enable Yaakov to bless his sons. ("**Prophecy was given only to the broken-hearted.**")

At the same time, the Zohar is reminding us that the main message of Genesis, and perhaps of all of the Torah, is to live and to be a blessing, beginning with "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth," and continuing with "And I shall make your name great, and you shall be a blessing... and all of the nations of the earth will be blessed through you."

But why is heartbreak necessary in order to really live???  
Is it necessary also for blessing?

Many of you are probably remembering the immortal quote from the Kotzker rabbi, "There is nothing as whole as a broken heart," or the poetic words of Leonard Cohen, *Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.* These quotes are beautiful, but they do not provide an adequate answer to the question of why heartbreak is necessary in order to truly live.

I searched for another answer in the same well of wisdom to which these masters turned: our Sages, and there I found this answer: "If a simple person uses a broke vessel it reflects badly on him, but God is not the same – everything He created is a broken vessel, because 19 'The LORD is close to those that are of a broken heart, and saves such as are of a contrite spirit.'" (Psalms 34)

Mere mortals that we are, we always try to use undamaged vessels. We consider a vessel (ourselves included) with a crack, a hole or a scratch in it to be inferior. We consider ourselves unworthy because we expect, for some reason, to be perfect. This is our own judgment, not the Creator's. He knows that all of his vessels, including us, are broken. He who is perfect in every way knows that a broken vessel is what He requires, because that which is not cracked is not alive; it is merely an inanimate object. Life is a process and it cannot be undertaken without creating blemishes.

Isaiah said it beautifully: "For the children are come to the birth ("mashber"), and there is not strength to bring forth." (Isaiah 37:3) Rashi understands "mashber" as the bed on which a woman gives birth. The Malbim (an important 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi) explains further: Mashber is the uterus, the opening of which the newborn passes through in the process of being born. Isaiah is describing something that wishes to be born "for the children are come to the birth" – something new wants to come into being but it does not have the strength with which to do so.

Parashat Vayechi is all about life and animation. The birthing mother needs all of her vitality to push a new human being out of her body through a narrow space. I have never given birth, but women who have relate that there is nothing comparable to it both in wonder and in pain – the extreme physical discomfort and the new life she has brought forth. This analogy explains something of the connection between imperfection and pain on the one hand, and life and blessing on the other.

Now we can understand the Zohar's enthusiastic explanation of the verse: "And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt."

Bnei Yisrael came to Egypt to break bread and to live. They did not know that it is there that they would also be broken and then be born as a people out of the biblical womb. It is only through the cracks that the light of life and blessing can enter our lives.

Shabbat Shalom,

A Shabbat of life and vitality

A Shabbat of acceptance and complete dedication to all that is broken within us,  
from which a new week will be born.

חזק חזק ונתחזק

Elisha