

Parashat Vayechi: Sickness & Health, Yaakov, & Yoseph

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Dear Friends,

"And the time drew near that Israel (Yaakov) must die." (Bereishit 47:29)

Like the deaths of his father and grandfather before him, these final moments are holy, formative, and even moving. It is a time when important blessings are given. All present are extremely attentive. Everyone is aware that these will be the final words, beyond which there is only infinity. Therefore, this is not just another reprimand or tiresome lecture. The message becomes very significant for those who are left behind. A dying person tends to have very little strength, and he or she will choose their words carefully, sometimes in a hurry, because time is too short for unnecessary utterances.

But then a very odd thing happens: "And it came to pass after these things (after it was announced that Yaakov was on his deathbed and the separation process began), that one said to Joseph: 'Behold, your father is sick.'" (48:1)

We knew Yaakov was dying, but now we are told that he is sick. This is the first time in the Torah that someone is thus described. This doesn't mean there were no illnesses, but for some reason - although we are at the end of the first book of the Bible and the third and final Forefather is dying - we meet human illness for the first time.

From this point on, disease, sickness, and illness will forever be connected in the Torah to Egypt! "...and He said: 'If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and will do that which is right in His eyes, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD that heals you.'" (Exodus 15: 26)

The metaphorical Egypt is a land of disease.

What is the disease?

The most serious human illness is that of "too much" – too much materialism, exaggeration, and excess of all kinds. Excess is a form of slavery. It appears that abundance has always been the precursor to excess. There is no end to what it is possible to accumulate, and if one can, then why not? A person never knows when enough is enough. From a young age our parents and/or life teach us that tomorrow we may not have enough. Therefore, it is important to save and accumulate. We all do it. Saving for a rainy day is wise, but saving has no measure. How do we know when we have enough? And even if we have enough for ourselves, perhaps we need more so that we can leave some for our children and die assured that they are taken care of?

Yoseph is the symbol of abundance in the Torah. He was the wise architect of the biggest storage effort, thus saving the entire region from hunger. Yoseph is not ill, not yet. But the disease is beginning to take hold of him too, he just doesn't know it yet.

Yoseph knew his father was dying. Therefore, when he is told that his father is **sick** (a message that the Midrash attributes to Ephraim, who stays in Goshen to nurse his grandfather when Yoseph returns to his royal duties) he understands it is a prophetic message and not medical information. Yaakov's illness, not death, signifies the end of an era. For three generations the tribe - its members and its wealth - is being built, and the grand finale is the miraculous saving of the family from hunger. From this point on a period of decadence, satiety, over-abundance, luxury, and forgetting begins.

Rot begins to set in.

My grandmother, z"l, taught me that the best cure for illness of any kind is fasting. When she was ill she would refrain from eating, and only drink water (also in moderation) allowing the body time to cleanse itself of physical or emotional excess that burdened the heart, kidneys, digestive system, and soul.

Fasting doesn't have to be only abstention from eating. A well-known spiritual remedy is abstention from speech! Yes, just being silent for a period of time (called ta'anit diboor in Hebrew).

Yaakov is ill, but no one understands his illness. Bereishit, the book of Creation of the world and of humans, bestows a significant parting gift on us, its loyal readers: it reminds us that Creation contains much blessing, but also great danger; the danger of excess, of too much. Be careful, human beings! Unlike animals in nature, you are never satiated. You know how to produce and enjoy Divine abundance, but you are never content. Creation remains good and blessed as long as there is no excess. If there is, the arteries of life get clogged with fat. Even oxygen in excess causes rust and rot. (Rust in Hebrew is רִחַן, which is also a word for old age).

Rest In Peace Yaakov/Israel, our father, whose name in Hebrew means "to struggle".

Rest in peace Yoseph, whose name in Hebrew means "more".

Rest In peace Yehuda, who was named by his mother, who said Toda - thank you, I have enough ("Duy").

You, and the rest of the brothers, have returned to infinity, but have left us life-enhancing lessons and that will remind us - year after year - to appreciate the difference between the blessing of abundance and the curse of excess.

And thank you, Sefer Bereishit.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha