



Parashat Vayechi: One Span of Life, Two Dimensions of Existence

Dear Friends,

This week we take leave of the book of Bereishit. Yaakov, Yoseph, and that entire complex and entangled generation pass away.

The parasha opens with the verse: **“And Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt, so that the span of Jacob’s life came to one hundred and forty-seven years.”** (Bereishit 47: 28)

In Hebrew, the term “the span of Jacob’s life” - shnei chayav - can also be read as “his two lives”. The Sages loved such textual ambiguity. This term appears quite often, leading traditional interpreters to suggest that there was a significant event in that person’s past which split his life into two - a “before” and an “after.” Yaakov’s biography is full of such events: the day he stole his father’s blessing which was intended for Eisav, the night struggle in which he became Yisrael, the emotional reunion with Eisav, the birth of Yoseph, the death of Rachel, the “death” of his beloved son, and his reunion with him in Egypt.

Many of us have experienced significant or formative events that can be considered watershed moments in our lives. But there are other ways to understand the duality implied in the Hebrew term of “his two lives”. This week I wish to present one particular duality that may be very useful. We’ve been exploring it in our Beit Midrash course, “Oh, God!”.

So far in our course we have learned primarily about “Elohim” and about “El Shaddai”. This week we finally began to learn about Y.H.V.H., also called “Hashem” or “Adonai”. A new Divine appearance always occurs when a new vision of reality is required. The old vision of the Divine doesn’t disappear; they both serve us when needed.

In our learning I suggest that there are two main layers in which a person lives their life: the layer called “Elohim” (which includes “El Shaddai”, although I will not elaborate on this here), and the layer called “Y.H.V.H.”.

The first - Elohim - is visible, while the second - Y.H.V.H. - is concealed.

Many interpreters explain that “Elohim” stands for nature, i.e., the physical and material aspect of existence which forms that which is evident. As such, it is also considered “Din” (explained below).

Y.H.V.H., on the other hand, is formless. It is the aspect that is creative, formative, invigorating, and animating. It is creating everything anew in every moment, as we say in the verse of prayer “He who renews the act of Creation every day”). It is viewed as “Chessed”, the generous flow of abundance.

The word “Din” is often translated as harsh judgement, hence it arouses fearful anticipation, but it is much simpler than that. “Din” implies the notion of limits and boundaries. In the material world everything has a beginning, a middle, and an end, both in the realm of time **“A time for every purpose under heaven”**, and in the realm of space. Nature exists entirely in the sphere of “Din” because it exists within the boundaries of space and time. In nature there is no free will - every phenomenon has a necessary cause, even if we have not yet discovered it. In the Tanya, the founding book of Chabbad chassidism, Rabbi Shneur Miladi wrote that the name “Elohim” is the measure of “gvura” (=din), and this is why in gematria (in Hebrew) it equals “nature”.

“Elohim” - the physical/natural quality of God - is actually the aspect we find easiest to understand and accept. For many, the power and beauty of nature stirs deep religious feelings.

The layer of “Y.H.V.H.”, on the other hand, is more challenging for religious and atheist alike. I know many religious or traditional Jews who feel uncomfortable with the Y.H.V.H aspect of the Divine. This is because it is hidden, concealed, entirely invisible. None of our five senses have ever encountered Y.H.V.H. Only its impact can be seen on the physical, material plain.

Yet, Y.H.V.H is THE innovation of the Torah. It is the source of life. It is the “force” that invigorates and creates everything. It is the life-giving layer which gives life meaning. It is therefore worthy of being explored, discovered, and written about.

In one of the seminal moments of Yaakov's life he becomes Yisrael. Yet the Torah continues to refer to him using both of his names . This duality - of Yaakov and of Yisrael - echo these two dimensions of the Divine. He will be referred to as Yaakov at times when the material aspect of his life is heightened, particularly when he is in survival fear (an often occurrence in his life). And he is Yisrael when he draws sustenance from the essence which gives him the inner strength to overcome life's daunting limitations.

In the previous parasha, when Yaakov stands before Pharaoh, a significant dialogue occurs: **“Pharaoh asked Jacob, ‘How many are the years of your life?’ And Jacob answered Pharaoh, ‘The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life (again, “Shnei Chayay”)...”** (Bereishit 47: 8-9)

On the natural, material, physical level, Yaakov’s life was indeed very difficult! He lived in continual existential fear: his twin brother, his father-in-law, the mighty inhabitants of the land, and even his own sons caused him sleepless nights. His life, he says very accurately, was very hard! The experience he describes is that of “Din” - cruel boundaries and limitations.

But towards the end of Yaakov's life, in the current parasha that closes the book of Bereishit, he is granted much "Chessed" - solace, emotional sustenance. He spends the final 17 years of his life close to his lost son and even has the chance to bless him and his grandsons whom he had never met. He also gets to have all of his sons around his bed for his final blessing to them. It is Israel (rather than Yaakov) who is now connected to the source of all life, from which he is able to give these blessings!

Blessings - and the human ability to bless - is a wondrous thing. They belong to the layer of Y.H.V.H., the layer of Chessed. In the realm of nature - the domain of "Elohim" - there is no room for blessings - Life "naturally" happens. It may be beautiful, and even bountiful, but that is not due to someone's blessings. On the level of Y.H.V.H. - the layer that animates and forms - blessings bestow vitality, they invigorate, and they cause change to occur in the manifest world.

At the end of the parasha both Yaakov and Yoseph die. The Egyptians insist on embalming them, which is not the way of Bnei Yisrael.

The Jewish imagination has Yaakov returning his body to Elohim, the God of nature: **"By the sweat of your brow Shall you get bread to eat, Until you return to the ground — For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return"**, and his spirit/soul to Adonai, to Y.H.V.H: **"The LORD (Y.H.V.H) God... blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being."**

Like Yaakov/Yisrael, our lives too "span" these two layers. When we come to bless someone - "May God be with you" - we are essentially reminding one another of that hidden realm that is no less important than the evident one. It is that hidden, concealed dimension that enables the visible one. It animates it. It creates all that is. In fact, it is the source of all blessing.

How appropriate it is, therefore, to end with the priestly blessing which we preface with Yaakov's blessings to his grandchildren from this week's Parasha: **"So he blessed them that day, saying, 'By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manashe.'" (Bereishit 48: 20)** It is the opening blessing that we recite to our children on Erev Shabbat. We then continue: **"May Adonai (Y.H.V.H) bless you and guard you, may Adonai (Y.H.V.H) make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you, May Adonai (Y.H.V.H) lift up His face to you and give you peace."** (Bamidbar 6: 22)

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha