

Torah Weekly

ת"ב

December 27, 2020- January 2, 2021
12-18 Tevet, 5781

Torah reading:
Vayechi: Genesis 47:28 - 50:26
Haftarah: Kings I 2:1-12

PARSHAT VAYECHI

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

Life Long Living A title usually reflects the theme of the subject matter. "Genesis" is about the beginning of the world, "Exodus" is about the Jews leaving Egypt. Whether it is a book, film or lecture series, the title should convey some idea of the content it describes. Which is why the title of this week's parshah (Torah reading) seems highly inappropriate. *Vayechi* means "And He Lived." The name derives from the parshah's opening line, "And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years..." The parshah, however, goes on to tell us not about Jacob's life, but rather about his death: his last will and testament to his children, his passing, his funeral, and his interment in Hebron in the Holy Land. Why would a parshah that concentrates on a person's last days on earth, his deathbed instructions and his burial be entitled "And He Lived?" The answer, say our sages, is that we are not discussing biological organisms, but Jews. And the test of true life for a Jew is whether he lived an authentic, consistent Jewish life — for life. Did he falter before the finish line, or was he faithful to his value system until the end? How do we know that Jacob did indeed *live*, in the fullest sense of the word? That his was a genuine, G-dly life? When we see that he remains true to those ideals until his dying day. Only then can we say with certainty that his life was truly alive; that his was a *Vayechi* life. The fact that Jacob died a righteous man validated his entire life-span, establishing it as a true life, alive and real from beginning to end. There are individuals who have their eight minutes of fame, who shine briefly and impress the world only to fade away and leave us disappointedly watching so much unfulfilled potential dissipate into thin air. Others are longer lasting, but don't quite go all the way. Like a certain man named Yochanon who — the Talmud tells us — served as high priest in the Holy Temple for 80 years and then went off the rails. Very scary stuff! No wonder Hillel, in *Ethics of the Fathers*, warns us not to trust

ourselves morally until the day we die. Complacency is dangerous. There are no guarantees. One must constantly "live" — i.e., grow and attempt to improve oneself — lest one falter before the finish line. I will never forget my experience with a very fine man who was remarkably loyal to the company he worked for. For 45 years he was with the same group, totally and absolutely dedicated. Then he reached the age of compulsory retirement. Suddenly he took ill. The doctors had no real diagnosis. But he got sicker and sicker until he became incapacitated and eventually died. To this day, nobody knows what he died from. But those who knew him well understood that once he left the workplace to which he had devoted his entire adult life, he had nothing left to live for. Sadly, he had no other interests. His work was his life, and without his work there was no life left. It is psychologically sound to take up a hobby, learn to play golf or develop other interests outside of work. A Jew, though, should ideally start studying Torah. Go to classes, read a stimulating book. Studying and sharpening the mind is good for the brain. Recent medical research confirms that it can even delay the onset of Alzheimer's. Most importantly, a person must have something to live for. Find new areas of stimulation. Discover, dream, aspire higher. Life must be lived with purpose and vigor. That's why at the end of this week's parsha, which also concludes the Book of Genesis, the congregation and Torah reader will proclaim *Chazak, chazak v'nischazek* — "Be strong, be strong, and we will all be strengthened." Because the tendency when we finish a book is to take a breather before we pick up the next one. Such is human nature. But a book of the Torah is not just any book. Torah is not just history or biography. Torah is our source of life, and we dare not ever take a breather from life. "*Chazak*" energizes us to carry on immediately. And so we do. The very same afternoon we open the Book of Exodus and continue the

learning cycle without interruption. Truth is consistent, from beginning to end. May our lives be blessed to be truly alive — with authenticity, faithfulness and eternal fulfillment. Amen. By Rabbi Yossi Goldman

Rachel's Amazing Secret
"As for me, [Jacob], when I came from Padan, Rachel died on me in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still a stretch of land to come to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem" — Genesis 48:7. And I did not take her even to Bethlehem to bring her into the [inhabited region of the Holy] Land...but you should know that I buried her there by divine command, so that she would be of assistance to her children. When [the Babylonian general] Nebuzaradan exiles [the Israelites] and they pass by there, Rachel will emerge from her grave and weep and beg mercy for them, as it is said: "A voice is heard on high, lamentation, bitter weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children." And the Holy One, blessed be He, answers her, "There is reward for your work... and the children shall return to their own border." (Jeremiah 31:14-16) — Rashi's commentary on the verse, from *Pesikta Rabbati* ch. 3. The Midrash explains the "work" for which Rachel was rewarded with G-d's assurance that her children would return to Israel: After the Jews were exiled to Babylon, the Patriarchs, Matriarchs and Moses went to appease G-d, attempting to evoke Divine mercy on their children's behalf. Each one invoked the various great deeds which he or she had performed, requesting that G-d reciprocate by having compassion on the Jews. But G-d was not swayed. Then Rachel entered and stated, "O Lord of the Universe, consider what I did for my sister Leah. All the work that Jacob worked for my father was only for me, however when I came to enter the nuptial canopy, they brought my sister instead. Not only did I keep my silence, but I gave her the secret password which Jacob and I had prearranged (which was intended to prevent any wedding

night bridal switch). You, too, if Your children have brought Your rival into Your house, keep Your silence for them." G-d answered her: "You have defended them well. There is reward for your deed and for your righteousness. Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your work, says the L-rd, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, says the L-rd, and the children shall return to their own border." Why, indeed, was Rachel's deed so much more precious in G-d's eyes than the accomplishments of all the other petitioners? Why was her gallant act dearer than Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son or Moses' forty years of selfless leadership of the relentlessly belligerent Israelites? Perhaps this question can be answered by examining the legitimacy of Jacob's marriage to Rachel and Leah. How was Jacob able to marry them both when the Torah explicitly forbids one man from marrying two sisters? Nachmanides explains that since the Patriarchs lived before the observance of the mitzvot became mandatory at Mount Sinai, they observed the laws of the Torah only whilst in the Land of Israel. Therefore, Jacob was "allowed" to marry two sisters while residing in Padan Aram. Following this line of reasoning, Nachmanides explains Jacob's real, but unstated, reason for not burying his favorite and most beloved wife Rachel in the Cave of Machpela, opting instead to reserve the resting place beside him for Leah. Simply put, Jacob was embarrassed to bring his second wife, the wife whom he married "illegally," to the family plot. What would Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebecca say about his deed? Furthermore, Nachmanides states, this is also the true reason why Rachel died immediately upon Jacob's arrival in Israel—the holy air of Israel could not tolerate Jacob's second wife. Rachel was a prophetess as well as a very learned and wise woman. When she agreed to give Leah the password which would allow her sister to become Jacob's first – and only "legitimate" – wife, she was fully cognizant of the extent of her sacrifice. She realized that – even if Jacob would agree to take her as a second wife – she wouldn't be able to live with her cherished husband when he inevitably would return to the land of his fathers. Her children would be raised by her maidservant Bilha and she would not live to see her grandchildren. And to top it all off, she wouldn't rest in her rightful burial plot, alongside Jacob and her holy in-laws. Instead, for thousands of years she would lie alone on the side of a remote road, awaiting the Redemption and the Resurrection of the Dead. Surrendering one's physical life pales in comparison to this mind-numbing sacrifice. Rachel sacrificed everything – both her physical and spiritual future – for her sister's sake.

The Patriarchs and Moses were magnificent. But they had nothing which even remotely rivaled such mind-blowing sacrifice.

Mother Rachel cried for us and G-d heard her pleas. It is certain that despite G-d's request that she "refrain her voice from weeping and her eyes from tears" she continues to cry until she sees the realization of G-d's promise. But perhaps G-d is waiting for her children to behave in Rachel-like fashion. One more totally selfless act on behalf of a Jewish brother or sister will finally cause Rachel to smile.

By Rabbi Naftali Silberberg

Sunday, December 27, 2020 --- 12 Tevet, 5781

Ezekiel Prophesies Egypt's Downfall (424 BCE)

On this day, Ezekiel prophesied that Egypt would be destroyed, as punishment for failing to keep their repeated promises to assist the Israelites.

So says the L-rd G-d: Behold I am upon you, O Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great serpent that crouches in the midst of its rivers, who said, "My river is mine, and I made myself." I will put hooks in your jaws and will cause the fish of your rivers to cleave to your scales; and I will drag you out from your rivers....I will scatter you in the desert, you and all the fish of your rivers...to the beasts of the earth and the birds of the heaven I have given you to be devoured. (Ezekiel 29:3-5)

Tuesday, December 29, 2020 --- 14 Tevet, 5781

Purim Hebron

On this day, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob came to the rescue of the Jewish community of Hebron, after an evil Pasha imprisoned its leaders and threatened to sell the entire Jewish population into slavery.

The Sephardic community of Hebron would celebrate this day to mark the great miracle which occurred.

R. Abraham Ibn Ezra Receives a Letter From the Shabbat Queen (1159)

R. Abraham Ibn Ezra was visiting London when, one Friday night, he had a fascinating dream. In it, a venerable man approached him and handed him a letter from the Shabbat Queen. R. Abraham read the letter, in which Shabbat informed him that one of his students had attempted to prove that Shabbat begins Saturday morning, and not Friday night, and beseeched his assistance. As a result of this dream, R. Abraham wrote his *Epistle of Shabbat*, in which he demonstrates beyond doubt that Shabbat indeed begins Friday night.

Thursday, December 31, 2020 --- 16 Tevet, 5781

Salvation of Baghdad Jewry (1638)

On this date, Murad IV, sultan of the Ottoman Empire, recaptured Baghdad from the Persian Shah after a forty-day siege. The Jews of Baghdad, who had suffered under the Shah's tenure, celebrated this day each year to praise G-d for rescuing them from Persian rule. According to legend, the Jews assisted in the capture by secretly conveying a message to the Sultan about a breach in the wall through which his forces could enter the city.

Friday, January 1, 2021 --- 17 Tevet, 5781

1st NY Synagogue (1728)

In 1684, a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who fled the Inquisition (see "Today in Jewish History" for Tevet 22) held a Rosh Hashanah service in New Amsterdam, thereby founding congregation Shearith Israel ("Remnant of Israel"). On this 17th of Tevet in 1728, the congregation purchased a lot in Lower Manhattan to erect the first synagogue in New York.

Toldot Aaron (1754)

Rabbi Aaron Zelig ben Joel Feivush of Ostrog, Russia, author of *Toldot Aaron*, passed away on Tevet 17 of the year in 5515 from creation (1754).

Maggid of Dubne (1841)

Tevet 17 is also the yahrtzeit of Rabbi Yaakov Wolf Krantz (1740-1804), the Maggid (preacher) of Dubna, particularly known for the parables (meshalim) he employed in his sermons and writings.

Shabbat, January 2, 2021 --- 18 Tevet, 5781

Huna Killed (469)

The Exilarch ("Reish Galuta") of Babylonian Jewry, Huna Mori bar Mar Zutra, was executed in Pumpadita by order of the Persian emperor on the 18th of Tevet of the year 4229 from creation (469 of the common era). Also killed on that day was Rav Mesharshia bar Pekod (the third Jewish leader who was arrested with them, Rav Ameimar bar Mar Yenuka, was executed two months later).

B'nei Yissachar (1841)

The 18th of Tevet the yahrtzeit (anniversary of the passing) of Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dynov (1783?-1841), author of the Chassidic work *B'nei Yissachar*.