

kindness and truth: please, do not bury me in Egypt. I will lie with my fathers; and you shall carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burial place."

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeichi

Genesis 47:28-50:26

Torah Reading for Week of December 15-21, 2002

"And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty seven years." So begins the Torah section of *Vayeichi* ("and he lived") — the closing Parshah of the Book of Genesis and the last of the seven Parshahs describing the life of Jacob.

And the days drew near for Israel to die. And he called his son Joseph, and said to him... "Do me a

Joseph swears to do his father's bidding, and Jacob bows to his son. Shortly after, Jacob falls ill, and Joseph brings his two sons, Menasseh and Ephraim, to their grandfather's bedside. Jacob blesses them that they will each father a tribe in Israel, thereby elevating them to the status of his sons: "Ephraim and Menasseh... as Reuben and Shimon they shall be to me."

In blessing them, Jacob places his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left on Menasseh's, crossing his arms, since Joseph had placed the elder Menasseh to his father's right. Joseph thinks that his father—who has grown blind in his old age and illness—doesn't realize that the elder son is to his right; but Jacob says:

"I know it, my son, I know it; he (Menasseh) also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but

Commentary

AND JACOB LIVED IN THE LAND OF EGYPT SEVENTEEN YEARS (47:28)

These seventeen years were the best years of his life — years of prosperity, goodness and peace; his other 130 years were filled with toil and pain..

(Midrash; Baal HaTurim)

When Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866) was a child attending *cheder*, his teacher taught the verse, "And Jacob lived for seventeen years in the land of Egypt," according to the commentary of the Baal HaTurim — that Jacob lived the best years of his life in Egypt.

When the child came home he asked his grandfather, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi: How can it be that our father Jacob, the greatest of the Patriarchs, lived the best years of his life in pagan Egypt?

Replied Rabbi Schneur Zalman: It is written that Jacob "sent Judah ahead of him... to show the way to Goshen" (Genesis 46:28). The Midrash explains that this was to establish a house of learning, where the sons of Jacob would study Torah. When one studies Torah, one is brought close to G-d, so that even in Egypt one can live a true "life."

(HaYom Yom)

Nevertheless, in the very next verses we read how Jacob entreats Joseph: "Carry me out of Egypt!" So great is his urgency that he is not content with an agreement or promise on Joseph's part, but insists that his son take a solemn oath to fulfill his request.

A Jew might find himself living a most ideal life in *galut* (exile)—a life of material comfort and spiritual fulfillment, a life of Torah, mitzvot and charitable works. Nevertheless, *galut* can never be our true home. We constantly sense that this is not our place, constantly beseech G-d to "carry us out of Egypt."

Nor do we content ourselves with the guaranties and promises written in the holy books that the redemption will eventually come. After praying for the redemption in the morning prayers, we do so again in the afternoon prayers, and yet again in the evening prayers. We approach G-d every day, many times a day, to plead and clamor: Take us out of Egypt!

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND THE DAYS DREW NEAR FOR ISRAEL TO DIE (47:29)

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: the days of the righteous die, but they do not die... It does not say, "and Israel drew near to die," but "the days of Israel drew near to die."

(Midrash Rabbah)

DO ME A KINDNESS AND A TRUTH (47:30)

A kindness done to the dead is a true kindness, for one does not expect a favor in return.

(Rashi)

The Midrash relates that when G-d desired to create man, Truth argued that "he should not be created, for he is full of lies." Kindness, however, said, "He should be created, for he is full of kindness."

To this, Truth might have replied: "But that, too, is just another of man's lies. Yes, man does acts of kindness to his fellows, but not because he is 'full of kindness'—only because he expects them to be kind to him in return."

However, there is one act of kindness that proves Truth wrong: the kindness done to the dead. This "kindness and truth," as the Torah calls it, shows that man is capable of a truly altruistic deed, thereby attesting that all our acts of kindness—even those superficially tainted by selfish motives—are in essence true, deriving from an intrinsic desire to give of ourselves to our fellows.

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truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations."

Jacob grants Joseph an extra portion in the Holy Land—the city of Shechem, "Which I took out of the hand of the Emori with my sword and with my bow."

Reuben, Shimon, Levi and Judah

And Jacob called to his sons, and said: "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days."

Jacob then proceeds to bless each of his twelve sons; his blessings define the respective roles of the twelve tribes which will issue from them to comprise the nation of

Israel. Some of the sons are also rebuked for their failings.

Reuben is rebuked for his interference in Jacob's marital life:

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first of my strength; the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power.

Hasty as water, you shall not excel; because you went up and violated your father's bed...

Shimon and Levi are rebuked for the massacre of Shechem and their role in the sale of Joseph:

Shimon and Levi are brothers; instruments of violence are their weapons... in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they maimed a bull. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

Judah is praised for saving Joseph's life and is invested with the leadership of Israel: the kings, governors and legislators of the Jewish people, up to and including the Messiah, shall be from the tribe of Judah:

Commentary

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND ISRAEL BOWED [TO JOSEPH] UPON THE BED'S HEAD (47:31)

This bears out the popular saying, "A fox in its hour—bow down to it."

(Talmud, Megillah 16b)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS, THAT IT WAS SAID TO JOSEPH: BEHOLD, YOUR FATHER IS ILL (48:1)

Abraham introduced aging to the world, Isaac affliction, and Jacob illness.

Abraham requested old age, pleading before G-d: "Master of the Universe! When a man and his son enter a town, none know whom to honor." Said G-d to him: "By your life, you have asked a proper thing, and it will commence with you." Thus, from the beginning of the Book aging is not mentioned, but when Abraham came, old age was granted to him, as is written: "And Abraham was old and come along in days" (Genesis 24:1).

Isaac asked for affliction, pleading thus: "Master of the Universe! When a man dies without affliction, Judgment threatens him; but if You afflict him, Judgment would not threaten him." Said G-d to him: "By your life, you have asked well, and it will commence with you." Thus affliction is not mentioned from the beginning of the Book until Isaac, as is written: "And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dimmed" (ibid., 27:1).

Jacob requested illness, saying to Him: "Master of the Universe! A man dies without previous illness and does not settle his affairs with his children; but

if he were two or three days ill, he would settle his affairs with his children." Said G-d to him: "By your life, you have asked well, and it will commence with you." Thus it is written: "It was said to Joseph: Behold, your father is ill."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND I, WHEN I CAME FROM PADDAN, RACHEL DIED BY ME IN THE LAND OF CANAAN ON THE WAY, WHEN YET THERE WAS BUT A LITTLE WAY TO COME TO EFRAT; AND I BURIED HER THERE IN THE WAY OF EFRAT, THAT IS BETHLEHEM (48:7)

Why did Jacob evoke the memory of Rachel's burial?

So said Jacob to Joseph: I am asking you to trouble yourself to take me to be buried in the Land, even though I did not do the same for your mother. She died a short distance from Bethlehem, and I did not even take her to [Bethlehem] but buried her at the wayside.

I know that there is resentment in your heart to me over this. But know that it was by Divine command that I buried her there, so that she should be a help for her children when Nebuzaradan will exile them and they will pass by there. Then Rachel will come out upon her grave and weep and plead for mercy for them, as it is written (Jeremiah 31:14): "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping; Rachel is weeping for her children..."; and G-d will answer her, "There is reward for your toil... The children shall return to their own borders" (ibid., v. 15).

(Rashi)

["MENASSEH] ALSO SHALL BECOME A PEOPLE, AND HE ALSO SHALL BE GREAT; BUT TRULY HIS YOUNGER BROTHER SHALL BE GREATER THAN HE..." (48:19)

Zebulun, Issachar, Gad, Asher and Naphtali

"**Zebulun** shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a haven for ships," for his descendants will be seafaring merchants.

Issachar is endowed with the perseverance that is demanded of the tribe of Torah scholars he will yield; he is "a strong-boned ass couching down between the boundaries, bowing his shoulder to the load..."

Dan shall produce great judges. Foreseeing the heroic life of one such judge, Samson, Jacob prophesies:

Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that bites the horse's heels, so that his rider shall fall backward. I hope for your salvation, O G-d.

Gad shall produce the victorious warriors of Israel; **Asher** is blessed with a bounty of olive oil that will be grown and produced on his lands; **Naphtali** is a deer running free,

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Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have risen...

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the legislator from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and nations submit to him.

Judah's portion in the Holy Land will be blessed with vineyards and prime pastureland: "His eyes are red with wine, and his teeth white with milk."

Commentary

Menasseh shall be great in that Gideon shall come from him, and G-d will perform miracles through him (see Judges chs. 6-8); but his younger brother shall be greater yet in that his descendant, Joshua, will conquer the Land and teach the Torah to Israel.

(Rashi)

I HAVE GIVEN TO YOU... SHECHEM (48:22)

As it is written, "And Joseph's bones... they buried in Shechem" (Joshua 24:32).

This is analogous to thieves who stole a barrel full of wine; when the owner found them, he said: "Be so kind, when you finish drinking up the wine, put the barrel back in its place." So, too, Joseph was kidnapped by his brothers in Shechem, and to Shechem they returned his bones.

(Daat Zekeinim)

SHECHEM... WHICH I TOOK OUT OF THE HAND OF THE EMORI WITH MY SWORD AND WITH MY BOW (48:22)

Jacob had not desired his sons to perpetrate that deed; yet when they did perpetrate it, he exclaimed: "Shall I leave my sons to fall into the hands of the heathens!" What did he do? He took his sword and bow and stood at the gate of Shechem, saying: "If the heathens come to attack my sons, I will fight against them."

(Midrash Rabbah)

Did Jacob then conquer Shechem with sword and bow? But "my sword" is his prayer, and "my bow" is his supplication.

(Mechilta; Rashi)

Why is prayer like a bow? Just like a bow, the more a person draws the bow-

string to himself, the further the arrow flies, so it is with prayer: the deeper one delves into one's own heart, the higher one's prayer ascends...

(The Rebbe of Kotzk)

AND JACOB CALLED TO HIS SONS, AND SAID: "GATHER YOURSELVES TOGETHER, THAT I MAY TELL YOU THAT WHICH SHALL BEFALL YOU IN THE END OF DAYS." (49:1)

Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the end of the days (i.e., the time of the ultimate Redemption) whereupon the Divine Presence departed from him.

(Talmud, Pesachim 56a)

[When the Divine Presence departed from Jacob] he said: "Perhaps, Heaven forbid, there is one unfit among my children, like Abraham, from whom there issued Ishmael, or like my father Isaac, from whom there issued Esau?" His sons answered him: "'Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d the L-rd is One.' Just as there is only One in your heart, so is there in our heart only One." In that moment our father Jacob exclaimed, "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever."

Said the Rabbis: How shall we act? Shall we recite it (the verse, "Blessed be..." after the Shema) — but our Teacher Moses did not say it. Shall we not say it — but Jacob said it. Hence they enacted that it should be recited quietly.

(ibid.)

SHIMON AND LEVI ARE BROTHERS (49:5)

Said Jacob to them: You were brothers to Dinah, but you were not brothers to Joseph.

(Midrash Rabbah)

INSTRUMENTS OF VIOLENCE ARE THEIR WEAPONS (49:5)

whose branches run over the wall.

The archers fiercely attacked him, and shot at him, and hated him. But his bow abode in strength...

The blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that couches beneath, blessings of the breasts and womb.... they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of the elect of his brothers.

Benjamin is likened to "a ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil."

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel; and this is that which their father spoke to them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them.

And he charged them, and said to them: "I am to be

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who delivers words of beauty."

Joseph and Benjamin

Joseph is granted the blessings of fertility:

Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well;

Commentary

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

Said Jacob to Shimon and Levi: These instruments are stolen by you. They are not yours but Esau's, to whom it was said (Genesis 27: 40), "And by your sword shall you live." (The word used by the verse for "violence," *hamas*, also means "robbery.")

(Midrash Rabbah)

IN THEIR ANGER THEY SLEW A MAN, AND IN THEIR SELFWILL THEY MAIMED A BULL (49:6)

"In their anger they slew a man" — the inhabitants of Shechem, who could offer no more resistance than a single man; "And in their selfwill they maimed a bull" — Joseph, who is likened to a bull (Deuteronomy 33:17).

(Rashi)

CURSED BE THEIR ANGER (49:7)

Even when he rebuked them, he cursed only their anger; thus Baalam says (Numbers 23:8): "How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed?"

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

I WILL DIVIDE THEM IN JACOB, AND SCATTER THEM IN ISRAEL (49:7)

The tribe of Levi did not receive a province in the Holy Land (like the other tribes) — only cities scattered throughout the land. And all the paupers, scribes and schoolteachers of Israel, who are scattered about the land, are of the tribe of Shimon.

(Rashi; Lekach Tov)

JUDAH IS A LION'S WHELP; FROM THE PREY, MY SON, YOU HAVE RISEN (49:9)

From the prey of Joseph you rose, preventing his killing; from the prey of Tamar you rose, by conceding, "She is more righteous than me."

The kingship of Israel originally belonged to Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. But Reuben forfeited this right when he sinned by "violating his father's marriage bed," and the sovereignty was transferred to Judah. In his blessing to Judah, Jacob alludes to two virtues for which Judah merited the leadership of Israel:

a) When the other sons of Jacob plotted to kill Joseph, Judah saved his life by arguing that selling him into slavery would be a more "profitable" solution (Genesis 37:26-27).

b) Judah publicly admitted his culpability in the incident of Tamar, thereby saving her and her two unborn sons from death (ibid., 38:26).

It would seem, however, that on both accounts, Reuben was Judah's equal, if not his superior. Regarding the plot to kill Joseph, it was Reuben who first saved Joseph's life by suggesting to his brothers that, instead of killing him, they should throw him into the pit. The Torah attests that he did this "to save him from their hands, in order to return him to his father" (Reuben did not know that there were snakes and scorpions in the pit, and that he was in fact jeopardizing Joseph's life). The Torah also tells us that Reuben was not present when Joseph was sold and was shocked at not finding Joseph in the pit when he returned to take him out, and that he berated his brothers for what they had done. Judah, on the other hand, only suggested a more profitable way of disposing of Joseph (the Torah says nothing about any hidden intentions), and was the cause of Joseph's sale into slavery. Indeed, we later find the others accusing Judah: "It was you who told us to sell him. If you would have told us to return him to his father, we would have listened to you" (Rashi on Genesis 38:1).

As for Judah's public penance, here, too, Reuben excelled him. Reuben, too, admitted and repented his sin. And while Judah was faced with a choice to either admit his responsibility or cause the destruction of three innocent lives, the need for Reuben to publicly confess was far less compelling. Furthermore, Reuben's penance did not end with a one-time admission of guilt, but continued to consume his entire being for many years. Our sages tell us that the reason that Reuben was not present at the time of Joseph's

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gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers... in the cave that is in the field of Machpeilah... There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebecca his wife; and there I buried Leah."

The Passing of Jacob

And when Jacob had made an end of commanding his

sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and expired, and was gathered to his people.

And Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept upon him, and kissed him.

And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father... and Egypt wept for him seventy days...

And Joseph went up [to Canaan] to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt and all the house of Joseph, and his brothers, and his father's house... a very great company...

And his sons carried him into the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the Machpeilah field, which Abraham bought with the field for a possession of a burying place from Ephron the Hittite...

Commentary

sale-nine years after his sin—was that “he was occupied with his sackcloth and fasting” (ibid., 37:29).

Indeed, as far as personal virtue is concerned, Reuben surpassed Judah, both in the purity of his intentions regarding Joseph and the intensity of his repentance over his failings. But Judah was the one who actually saved Joseph, while Reuben unwittingly placed him in mortal danger. In the same vein, Judah’s repentance saved three lives, while Reuben’s remorse helped no one—in fact, had he not been preoccupied with “his sackcloth and his fasting” he might have prevented Joseph’s sale into slavery.

Accordingly, Reuben retained his rights as Jacob’s firstborn in all that pertained to him as an individual (see ibid., 35:23). But Judah surpassed him in the most basic prerequisite for leadership: that concern for one’s fellow must always take precedence over one’s own pursuits, no matter how pious and lofty these pursuits might be. Believing Joseph safe for the time being, Reuben rushed back to attend to his prayers and penance, in effect abandoning him to his fate.

While Reuben prayed and fasted, Judah acted. Judah earned the leadership of Israel because he recognized that when another human being is in need, one must set aside all other considerations and get involved. Even if one’s own intentions are still short of perfection and one’s own character is yet to be refined. Sometimes, one cannot afford to wait.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

UNTIL SHILOH COMES (49:10)

The disciples of Rav Shiloh would say: The Messiah’s name is Shiloh, as it is stated, “Until Shiloh comes.” The disciples of Rabbi Chaninah would say: His name is Chaninah, as it is stated (Jeremiah 16:13), “I will not give you Chaninah.” The disciples of Rabbi Yannai would say: His name is Yinnon, for it is written (Psalms 72:17), “E’er the sun was, his name is Yinnon.”

(Midrash Rabbah)

ZEBULUN SHALL DWELL AT THE SHORE OF THE SEA, AND HE SHALL BE A HAVEN FOR SHIPS... ISSACHAR IS A STRONG-BONED ASS... BOWING HIS SHOULDER TO THE LOAD (49:13-14)

The tribes of Zebulun and Issachar formed a partnership: Zebulun engaged in commerce and Issachar occupied himself in Torah study.

Thus Jacob placed Zebulun before Issachar (although Issachar was the elder of the two)—since if it were not for Zebulun, Issachar would not be able to occupy himself with the Torah.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

ISSACHAR IS A STRONG-BONED ASS, COUCHING BETWEEN THE BOUNDARIES (49:14)

“A strong-boned ass” enduring the yoke of Torah, like the ass who is capable of carrying very heavy loads; “couching between the boundaries” like the ass who walks day and night, never sleeping at home, resting only at the city limits where he delivers his bundles of merchandise.

(Rashi)

“Couching between the boundaries”—between the secrets of creation and the secrets of the Divine Chariot.

(Yalkut Albichani)

DAN SHALL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE, AS ONE OF THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL (49:16)

One who says, “Give me justice,” indicates that he is from the tribe of Dan; as it is written: “Dan shall judge his people.”

(Talmud, Pesachim 4a)

DAN SHALL BE A SERPENT BY THE WAY, AN ADDER IN THE PATH, THAT BITES THE HORSE’S HEELS, SO THAT HIS RIDER SHALL FALL BACKWARD (49:17)

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The Testament of Joseph

After Jacob's passing, his sons are seized with a new fear: perhaps Joseph has waited these seventeen years out of respect for their father, but will now avenge himself on them for selling him into slavery? So they send word to Joseph:

"Your father did command before he died, saying: 'So shall you say to Joseph: Forgive, I pray you now, the trespass of your brothers, and their sin; for they did evil to you.' And now, we pray you, forgive the trespass of the servants of the G-d of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him...

And Joseph said to them: "Fear not; for am I in the place of G-d? You thought evil against me; but G-d meant it for good, to bring it to pass at this day that much people should be saved alive. Now therefore fear not; I will nourish you, and your little ones." And he comforted them, and spoke to their hearts.

Joseph lived 110 years, living to see his children's grandchildren: "Also the children of Machir the son of Menasseh were raised on Joseph's knee." Before his passing, he conveys the following testament to the Children of Israel in Egypt:

G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

G-d will surely remember you; and you shall carry up my bones from here.

It is from these words that the Children of Israel will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come.

Joseph's body is placed in a coffin to await the day of return to the Promised Land.

Commentary

This refers to Samson, who was of the tribe of Dan.

(As related in the Book of Judges (16:27-30), when Samson was captured by the Philistines, blinded, and brought in chains to a palace where "on the roof were three thousand men and women to watch the torment of Samson," he "grasped the two central pillars on which the house stood... and he bowed with all his might, and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were in it. And the dead whom he slew at his death were more than those he slew in his life.")

(Rashi)

I HOPE FOR YOUR SALVATION, O G-D (49:18)

Jacob saw Samson and thought that he was the Messiah. But when he saw him dead he exclaimed: "He, too, is dead! Then I wait for Your salvation, O G-d!"

(Midrash Rabbah)

OUT OF ASHER HIS BREAD SHALL BE FAT, AND HE SHALL YIELD ROYAL Dainties... (49:20)

There will be an abundance of olives in his portion of the Land, and it will flow with oil like a wellspring. Moses, too, blessed the tribe of Asher thus, proclaiming: "He dips his foot in oil" (Deuteronomy 33:24).

(Rashi)

Once the people of Laodicea were in need of oil; they appointed an agent and instructed him, "Go and purchase for us a hundred maneh worth of oil."

He came first to Jerusalem and was told, "Go to Tyre." He came to Tyre and

was told, "Go to Gush Halab." When he came to Gush Halab he was told, "Go to So-and-so in that field." He went there and found the man breaking up the earth around his olive trees.

The agent said to him. "Have you a hundred maneh worth of oil that I require?" "Yes," replied the other; "but wait until I finish my work." After he had finished his work, the man threw his tools on his back and went on his way, removing the stones from his path as he went. The agent thought to himself, "Has this man really got a hundred maneh worth of oil? I see that the Jews have merely made game of me."

When the man reached his home, his maidservant brought out to him a bowl of hot water and he washed his hands and his feet. She then brought out to him a golden bowl of oil and he dipped in it his hands and his feet, thus fulfilling the verse, "He dips his foot in oil." After they had eaten and drunk the man measured out to the agent a hundred maneh worth of oil, and then asked, "Do you perhaps need any more oil?" "I do, indeed," replied the agent; "but I have no more money with me." "Well, if you wish to buy more, take it, and I will go back with you for the money," said the man. He then measured out for him another eighteen maneh worth of oil. It is said that he hired every horse, mule, camel and ass that he could find in all the Land of Israel [to carry the oil back to Laodicea]...

(Talmud, Menachot 85b)

NAPHTALI IS A DEER RUNNING FREE, WHO DELIVERS WORDS OF BEAUTY (49:21)

This refers to the Genousar valley (in the province of Naphtali), which is quick to ripen its fruit as a deer is swift to run, and upon which one delivers words of thanks and praises G-d.

Another meaning is that Jacob prophesied on the war with Sisra (Judges ch. 4), in which victory was achieved through 10,000 swift warriors from the tribe of Naphtali; "Who delivers words of beauty," refers to the song of Deborah (from the tribe of Naphtali, sung to celebrate that victory).

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(Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi)

BENJAMIN IS A RAVENOUS WOLF; IN THE MORNING HE SHALL DEVOUR THE PREY, AND AT NIGHT HE SHALL DIVIDE THE SPOIL (49:27)

This refers to the altar in the Holy Temple (which stood in the province of Benjamin), upon which the sacrifices were offered every morning and evening.

(Midrash Rabbah)

This is a reference to Mordechai and Esther (who were of the tribe of Benjamin) who divided the spoils of Haman, as it is written: "On that day, King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the house of Haman" (Esther 8:1).

(Midrash Tanchuma)

ALL THESE ARE THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL... EVERY ONE ACCORDING TO HIS BLESSING HE BLESSED THEM (49:28)

Since there were some regarding whom the Torah only records Jacob's rebuke to them, one might, perhaps, think that they were not blessed; so the verse says, "every one according to his blessing he blessed them"-to tell us that each one was also blessed.

(Rashi)

AND WHEN JACOB HAD MADE AN END OF COMMANDING HIS SONS, HE GATHERED UP HIS FEET INTO THE BED, AND EXPIRED, AND WAS GATHERED TO HIS PEOPLE (49:33)

Rav Nachman said to Rav Yitzchak: "So said Rabbi Jochanan: Our father Jacob did not die."

Asked Rav Yitzchak: "Was it for no reason that the eulogizers eulogized, the embalmers embalmed and the buriers buried?"

Replied Rav Nachman: "I am only citing a verse. It is written (Jeremiah 30:10): 'And you, my servant Jacob, fear not, says the L-rd, and do not tremble, O Israel. For behold, I shall save you from afar, and your progeny from the land of their captivity.' The verse equates Jacob with his progeny: just as his progeny are alive, he, too, is alive."

(Talmud, Taanit 5b)

AND JOSEPH COMMANDED HIS SERVANTS THE PHYSICIANS TO EMBALM HIS FATHER (50:2)

Why did Joseph die before his brethren? Rabbi [Judah HaNassi] said:

Because he embalmed his father. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Could I not preserve My righteous ones? Did I not say thus to him, 'Fear not the worm Jacob (Isaiah 41:14)'?" The Rabbis disagree: It was Jacob who charged them to embalm him, as it says, "And his sons did unto him according as he commanded them" (Genesis 50:12).

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND PHARAOH SAID: "GO UP, AND BURY YOUR FATHER, ACCORDING AS HE MADE YOU SWEAR" (50:6)

When Pharaoh appointed Joseph viceroy over Egypt, his ministers protested: "Would you place over us a slave whom his master bought for twenty pieces of silver!" He replied to them, "I discern in him royal characteristics." They said to him, "In that case he must be acquainted with the seventy languages." That night, the angel Gabriel came to Joseph and taught him the seventy languages... On the morrow, in whatever language Pharaoh conversed with Joseph, Joseph replied to him; but when Joseph spoke to Pharaoh in the holy tongue, Pharaoh did not understand what he said. Pharaoh asked Joseph to teach it to him; he taught it to him but he could not learn it. Said Pharaoh to Joseph, "Swear to me that you will not reveal this"; and Joseph swore to him.

When Jacob died, Pharaoh refused to allow Joseph to bury him in the land of Canaan. When Joseph said to him, "My father made me swear, saying..." (Genesis 50:5), Pharaoh said, "Have your oath annulled!" Said Joseph to Pharaoh, "Should I also annul my oath regarding yourself?" So although it was displeasing to him, Pharaoh said: "Go up and bury your father, according as he made you swear."

(Talmud, Sotah 36b)

AND THEY CAME TO THE GOREN HAATAD ("THE THRESHING FLOOR OF BRAMBLES")... AND THERE THEY MOURNED WITH A GREAT AND VERY SORE LAMENTATION (50:10)

But is there a threshing-floor for brambles? Rabbi Abbahu said: The verse teaches us that they surrounded Jacob's coffin with crowns like a threshing-floor which is surrounded with a hedge of brambles, because the sons of Esau, of Ishmael and of Keturah also came... They came to wage war [against the Israelites]; but when they saw Joseph's crown hanging upon Jacob's coffin, they all took their crowns and hung them upon his coffin. It was taught: sixty-three crowns were hung upon Jacob's coffin.

(Talmud, Sotah 36b; Rashi)

AND [JOSEPH] MADE A MOURNING FOR HIS FATHER OF SEVEN DAYS (50:10)

From here is derived the law of seven ("shiva") days of mourning after the dead.

(Jerusalem Talmud)

AND THEY BURIED HIM IN THE CAVE OF THE MACHPEILAH FIELD (50:13)

When Jacob's funeral procession reached the land of Canaan, Esau heard of this and came with many armed men to Hebron, and would not allow Joseph to bury his father in the Cave of Machpeila, saying: "There are eight burial places in the Cave; already buried there are Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob has buried Leah in his portion, and the one remaining plot belongs to me."

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayechi

Genesis 47:28-50:26
Torah Reading for Week of December 15-21, 2002

Commentary

Said Jacob's sons to him: "You sold your portion to our father."
Said Esau: "Granted that I sold my birthright, but did I sell my ordinary heir's right?"
Said they: "Yes, you did sell it."
Said he to them "Produce a document of sale for me."
Said the sons of Jacob: "The document is in the land of Egypt. Who will go for it? Let Naphtali go, because he is swift as a deer."
Among those present was Chushim the son of Dan, who was deaf; so he asked them, "What is happening?" They said to him, "Esau is preventing the burial until Naphtali returns from the land of Egypt."
Said Chushim: "Is my grandfather to lie there in contempt until Naphtali returns from the land of Egypt!" He took a sword and severed Esau's head, which rolled into the Cave of Machpeilah and came to rest in Isaac's lap, where it remains to this day. Thus it came to pass that "Esau's head lies in the bosom of Isaac."
(Thus was fulfilled the prophesy of Rebecca, who said: "Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?" (Genesis 27:45). Although the death of the two of them did not occur on the same day, their burial took place on the same day.)

(Targum Yonatan; Talmud, Sotah 36b)

AND WHEN JOSEPH'S BROTHERS SAW THAT THEIR FATHER WAS DEAD, THEY SAID, "WHAT IF JOSEPH WILL HATE US, AND WILL PAY US BACK THE EVIL WHICH WE DID TO HIM?" (50:15)

What did they see that made them fear him now? They saw that on their return from the burial of their father, Joseph went to the pit into which they had thrown him. (Joseph went there to recite the blessing a person is commanded to recite at the place at which a miracle was performed for him, "Blessed are You... who performed a miracle for me in this place" —see Talmud, Berachot 54a)

(Midrash Tanchuma)

AND THEY SENT WORD URGENTLY TO JOSEPH, SAYING: "YOUR FATHER DID COMMAND BEFORE HE DIED, SAYING, SO SHALL YOU SAY TO JOSEPH..." (50:16-17)

Said Rabbi I'laah in the name of Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Simeon: A person is allowed to lie for the sake of peace, as it is written: "And they sent word urgently to Joseph, saying: Your father did command before he died, saying, So shall you say to Joseph..."

(Jacob did not, in fact, say this, for he did not suspect Joseph of revenge.)

(Talmud, Yevamot 65b; Rashi)

AND JOSEPH WEPT WHEN THEY SPOKE TO HIM (50:17)

He wept that they had suspected him of this.

(Rashi)

AND JOSEPH SAID TO THEM: "FEAR NOT; FOR AM I IN THE PLACE OF G-D?" (50:19)

He said to them: If ten candles were unable to extinguish one candle, could one candle extinguish ten?

(Talmud, Megillah 16b)

"FEAR NOT; FOR AM I IN THE PLACE OF G-D? YOU THOUGHT EVIL AGAINST ME; BUT G-D MEANT IT FOR GOOD..." (50:19-20)

Joseph was saying: You did me an evil which turned out for the good; if I wished to avenge myself on you, I, too, would have to do the same. But this I cannot do, for only G-d can do so...

(The Ozrotzver Rebbe)

AND JOSEPH LIVED ONE HUNDRED AND TEN YEARS (50:22)

The life-spans of six pairs were equal: Rebecca and Kehot (both lived 133 years), Levi and Amram (137), Joseph and Joshua (110), Samuel and Solomon (52), Moses and Hillel the Elder (120), Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba (120).

(Midrash Rabbah)

Why did Joseph die before his brothers? Because he assumed airs of authority. But did not Rabbi [Judah HaNassi] say to Rabban Gamliel, "Rule high-handedly and sow terror in your disciples?" This is to be a leader's public behavior, but not his private behavior.

(Talmud (manuscript), Berachot 55a)

G-D WILL SURELY REMEMBER YOU (50:24)

The Children of Israel were given this sign: whoever comes and says *pakod yifkod* ("surely remember") is their true redeemer.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

AND HE WAS PLACED IN A COFFIN IN EGYPT (50:26)

The Egyptians placed Joseph in an iron coffin and submerged it in the Nile, so that its waters should be blessed.

(Talmud, Sotah 13a)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

THE THREE LIVES OF JACOB

The Lubavitcher Rebbe notes that Jacob's 147 years can be divided into three general periods:

a) The first 77 years of his life were spent in the Holy Land, secluded in "the tents of study" and sheltered from the entanglements of material life.

b) These were followed by 20 years in Charan in the employ of Laban, during which Jacob married, fathered 12 of his 13 children, and amassed much material wealth.

c) Following a further period in the Holy Land, Jacob "descended" to Egypt, where he lived for the last 17 years of his life.

The years that Jacob dwelled in the Holy Land were years of tranquil perfection—years in which nothing alien to his soul intruded upon his life of Torah study, prayer and service of G-d.

In contrast, Jacob's sojourn in Charan was characterized by challenge and struggle. In Charan, Jacob locked horns with "Laban the Deceiver" and bested him at his own game. To marry and support his family, he worked to exhaustion as "heat consumed me by day, and frost at night; and sleep was banished from my eyes" (Genesis 31:40). In the words of Esau's angel to Jacob upon Jacob's return from Charan, "You have struggled with G-d and with men, and have prevailed" (ibid. 32:29).

These, however, were struggles in which Jacob held his own, and in which he eventually triumphed. But in the seventeen years he lived in Egypt, Jacob experienced, for the first time in his life, a state of true *galut*—subjugation to an alien environment. In Egypt, Jacob was compelled to pay homage to Pharaoh, the arch-idol and demigod of the land (see Gen. 47:7-10). Upon Jacob's passing in Egypt, his body was in the possession of the Egyptian "physicians" for 40 days, who embalmed it after their custom. Indeed, the reason why Jacob commanded Joseph to bury him in the Holy Land (a feat which required much maneuvering and manipulation to secure Pharaoh's consent) was that he feared that, in Egypt, his body and gravesite would become an object of idolatry.

After a lifetime in which he either inhabited his own sanctum of hermetic holiness or struggled against

adversity, Jacob's Egyptian years were a time of subjugation to a society which the Torah calls "the depravity of the earth."

And yet the Torah regards these 17 years as the very best years of Jacob's life! For Jacob knew to exploit his *galut* in Egypt to drive the strivings of his soul and further its aims. Thus it was in Egypt, under the rule and subsequent enslavement of the Pharaohs, that Jacob's descendants were forged into the people of Israel.

"Everything that happened to the Patriarchs," writes Nachmanides in his commentary on the Book of Genesis, "is a signpost for their children. This is why the Torah elaborates its account of their journeys, their well-digging and the other events [of their lives] ... these all come as an instruction for the future: for when something happens to one of the three Patriarchs, one understands from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants."

For we, too, experience in the course of our lifetimes the three states of being which Jacob knew: sovereignty, struggle, and subjugation.

We each harbor a vision of a transcendent self—of a soul, pure and inviolable, at the core of our being. This self, we are convinced, is not subject to the caprice of circumstance, remaining forever aloof from the shifting dictates of society and convention. And though this core self is not always accessible to us, there come moments in our lives—"moments of truth," we call them—in which it asserts its will over every and any influence save its own internal truth.

But these moments, for most of us, are few and far between. More often, we are in a state of struggle—struggles with our environment, struggles with our own habits and behavior patterns, struggles with the passions of our divided hearts.

A state of struggle indicates that we have not attained full mastery over our existence; but it is also a sign that we are free. We are resisting the forces that seek to sway us from our internal truth; we are engaging them and battling them. Indeed, this is life at its fullest and most productive—even more so, in a certain sense, than those "moments of truth" of resolute perfection.

But we also know times of powerlessness and subordination. Times when we are faced with circumstances which we have neither the ability to control nor to even resist; times when it seems that life has been stopped dead in its tracks, arrested by an impregnable

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wall of helplessness and despair.

“Everything that happened to the Patriarchs ... is decreed to occur to their descendants.” Not that they occur in exactly the same manner. Our own moments of transcendence seem fleeting and inconsequential in comparison with Jacob’s decades of tranquil perfection in the Holy Land; our own struggles seem wan and inept when measured against Jacob’s Charan years; our own lives under circumstances of subjugation and oppression seem black indeed when set against Jacob’s Egyptian period. Yet the three lives of Jacob are “signposts” that guide, inspire and enable our own.

Jacob’s life in the Holy Land empowers us to experience moments of true freedom—moments in which we assert our true will over all forces, both external and internal, that seek to quell it.

Jacob’s Charan years inspire and enable us to not only persevere in our struggles but to revel in them, to experience them as vibrant and exhilarating periods in our lives.

And Jacob’s Egyptian period teaches us how to deal with those situations in which we feel overpowered by forces beyond our control. It teaches us that these times, too, are part and parcel of our lives; that these times, too, can be negotiated with wisdom, dignity and integrity. That these times, too, can be realized as vital and productive seasons of our lives.

THE HUMAN STORY IN TWELVE WORDS

The book of Genesis, the first of the five books of the Torah, chronicles the lives of the founding fathers and mothers of humanity in general and of the Jewish nation in particular: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah; Joseph and his brothers. More than history, their lives are templates of our own, in which we find the precedents for our every challenge and experience.

The book of Genesis consists of twelve sections (“Parshahs”), the last of which, *Vayechi*, is this week’s Torah reading. The twelve sections of Genesis are: *Bereishit*, *Noach*, *Lech-Lecha*, *Vayeira*, *Chayei Sarah*, *Toldot*, *Vayeitzei*, *Vayishlach*, *Vayeishev*, *Mikeitz*, *Vayigash*, and *Vayechi*.

Our sages tell us that the name of a thing is the articulation of its essence. Each of these twelve names

embodies an entire Torah section, encapsulating the common theme and quintessential import of the section’s many narratives. So if we take these twelve names and read them in succession as a sort of shorthand or code, we get a synoptic account of the human story: the purpose of our creation, the soul’s transformation from a wholly spiritual entity to a physical human being, the manner in which we develop our self and environment, and the ultimate realization of our mission in life.

The twelve-word version of the human story reads like this:

Bereishit — Purpose
Noach — Tranquility
Lech Lecha — Journey
Vayeira — Vision
Chayei Sarah — Invigoration
Toldot — Production
Vayeitzei — Excursion
Vayishlach — Delegation
Vayeishev — Integration
Mikeitz — End
Vayigash — Union
Vayechi — Life

Purpose

If there is one basic question that all “isms” and value systems must address, it is this: does the world exist for its own sake, or for the sake of some other, greater aim? Is there an axiomatic purpose upon which our existence turns, or is our existence its own axiom?

Bereishit is the Torah’s opening word and the name of its first section. The word means “in the beginning,” and it commences the Torah’s narrative of the world’s creation: “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth...”¹ But in addition to its literal meaning,¹ *bereishit* expresses the axiom that G-d created the world to serve a purpose. Our sages note that the word *bereishit* begins with the letter *bet*, the *second* letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The story of creation, the Torah is saying, does not begin with G-d’s creation of the world; there is something that precedes it and upon which it is predicated.

Bereishit is also an acronym of the words *bet reishit* (“two firsts”) — a reference to the two primary components of the purpose of creation, both of which are called *reishit*: the Torah (called *reishit* in Proverbs 8:22) and the people of Israel (Jeremiah 2:3). The Torah is the guidebook that outlines how this purpose is to be fulfilled, and the people of Israel are the principal actors in its realization.

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Tranquility

Having established that creation has a purpose, we now proceed to the name of the second Torah section, *Noach*, which conveys what this purpose is: to transform a chaotic existence into a harmonious world.

“G-d desired a dwelling in the lowly realms.” In these words our sages (Midrash Tanchuma, Naso 16; Tanya ch. 36) describe G-d’s motive for the creation of the world. The “lowly realms” is our physical world — a world whose coarseness and diversity belie the sublimity and singularity of its divine source. G-d desired that this lowly realm be transformed into a “dwelling” for Him — a place that is receptive to His presence, a place in which He is “at home”; that this diverse and strife-torn environment be transformed into a tranquil world, a world at peace with itself and its Creator. In the words of our sages, “The Torah was given in order to make peace in the world” (Talmud, Gittin 59b; Mishneh Torah, *Laws of Chanukah*, 4:14).

Noach (Noah) — the name means “tranquility” — achieved this on a microcosmic level when he created an island of tranquility amidst the raging waters of the Flood: a floating island which contained specimens of every animal, bird and plant, and in which, for 365 days, the lion lived in peace with the lamb. Of course, Noah’s messianic world was temporary and embraced only a tiny corner of creation; the divine desire is that we transform the entire world into a “Noah’s ark” of tranquil perfection.

Noach also means “satisfaction” — a reference to the fact that this purpose has significance only because it satisfies the divine desire for “a dwelling in the lowly realms.” The creation of a tranquil world cannot be an end in itself — had the world not been created, there would have been no strifeful entity upon which tranquility need be imposed. The endeavor of making the world a home for G-d is meaningful only because G-d desires it.²

Journey, Vision and Invigoration

The created existence is purposeful, the purpose being the satisfaction of the divine desire for a tranquil home on earth. To fulfill this purpose, the human soul is dispatched to the physical world, imbued with a

vision of the purpose, and granted the ability to integrate this vision into all components of its psyche and character.

Lech-Lecha (“Go, you”), the third section of Genesis, derives its name from its opening verse, “And G-d said to Abram: ‘Go, you, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.’” This, say the Chassidic masters, is the command issued to every soul before it enters this world: depart from your lofty origins, from your state of oneness with G-d, to journey to an unknown, alien place. Descend from your spiritual birthplace to enter a physical body and world, for this is “the land that I will show you” — the arena in which your mission in life will be fulfilled.

The soul, however, does not go alone. It is fortified with a vision (*Vayeira* — “And He revealed Himself,” from *Vayeira*’s opening verse “And He (G-d) revealed Himself to Abraham”) of the divine truth, a vision that will be its guiding light in its effort to make the world a place that is hospitable to the divine presence.

But a vision alone is not enough. Unless the vision saturates the soul, permeating its every nook and cranny, it will be little more than an abstract theory or a “religious belief,” with limited effect upon the person’s day-to-day life. If our vision of G-d is to serve as the focus of our lives, it must become the object of our will, the vista of our mind and the yearning of our heart.

This is the message implicit in the name of the next Torah section, *Chayei-Sarah* (“The Life of Sarah”). The fifth section of Genesis begins with the verse, “And the life of Sarah was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years.” In the language of Kabbalah, the number “one hundred” represents the faculty of will, “twenty” connotes the intellect, and “seven” refers to the emotions; the Torah is telling us that all aspects of Sarah’s psyche and personality were invigorated by her soul’s vision of G-d.

Production, Self-Extension and Delegation

We know why we’re here, and that we have been supplied with the vision and spiritual resources to carry it out. Now it’s time to get to work.

The word *Toldot* — the name of the sixth section of Genesis — means “progeny” and “products.” “The *toldot* of the righteous,” say our sages, “are their good deeds.” The bricks out of which the earthly “dwelling for G-d” is constructed are the mitzvot, the deeds which transform a physical resource into an object of

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the divine will.³

Sanctifying one's own life and surroundings through the performance of mitzvot is not enough: one must also extend oneself (*Vayeitzei* — “And he went out”) to places and people that lie outside one's immediate environment. The Torah section of *Vayeitzei* relates how Jacob left the holy environment of his father's home and the study houses of Shem and Eber, where he had spent the first half of his life in “the tents of Torah,” to journey to pagan Charan and the manipulative Laban, where he had to contend with a hostile and materialistic world for twenty toilsome years. But it was here that Jacob attained the peak of his personal growth and where he founded the nation of Israel.

Vayishlach (“and he sent,” from that Parshah's opening verse, “And Jacob sent angel-messengers to his brother Esau”) connotes the next step in our efforts to make the world a home for G-d. What are we to do when we have extended ourselves to the utmost of our capacity? When we have reached out to those individuals and places that are at the very extremity of our communication skills and our ability to impact the world? We should then extend our reach even further by delegating and empowering others as our agents. Our influence upon others should not be limited to affecting their lives, but also to transforming them into teachers and developers who will in turn affect people and places that we ourselves could never reach.

In Torah law, this concept is known as the principle of *shelichut*. In the words of the Talmud, “A person's *shaliach* (agent) is like himself,” and the *shaliach*'s actions and accomplishments are attributed to the one who empowered him to act in his stead.

Integration

When a thief is breaking into your home, goes the Chassidic saying, there are basically two things you can do. You can holler, “Thief! Thief!” and drive the thief away; or you can capture the thief and teach him an honest profession.

On the more elementary level, we can make the world a more G-dly place by chasing the thief away. We can stimulate the positive in ourselves so that it overpowers our own negative instincts, and work to similarly bring out the good in others; we can seek to

impose a divine harmony upon a basically divisive and belligerent world.

But like the banished thief, the world has not really changed. A better, holier, more peaceful world has been imposed upon it, but underneath this new order, the “old” world remains. It has been vanquished, not transformed; suppressed, not elevated.

After a person has gone through the “production,” “excursion” and “delegation” phases of his mission in life, the next step is to integrate these gains into the fabric of reality.

Vayeishev (“And he settled down in tranquility,” from *Vayeishev*'s first verse “And Jacob settled down in tranquility in the land of his father's dwelling”) is the “settling in” of our G-dly deeds to become the permanent, intrinsic state of our world.

End, Union, Life

The completion of the “integration” phase marks “the end” (*Mikeitz*, the name of the tenth section of Genesis) — the realization of the end-goal of creation. The divine home is now complete; the world has become a harmonious abode for its Creator.

The “end” itself has three stages, as successively deeper dimensions of the world's divine harmony come to light. In the first stage, the world is a perfect “vessel” or vehicle for G-d. A further stage reveals its union (*Vayigash* — “And he approached” — the name of the eleventh section) with its divine source: not only is the world completely receptive to its Creator, but it is revealed to be one with the divine reality, an expression of G-d's all-embracing truth.

The highest expression of creation's fulfillment is the eternal life (*Vayeichi* — “And he lived”) that is the hallmark of the final phase of the Messianic Age. Death is a most natural phenomenon in the world in which we live today — an imperative of the finite and temporal nature of the physical. But the physical was not always mortal. The world, as G-d created it, had the capacity for eternal life — death came only with the first sin of man, with the first breach between G-d and His creation. In a world that is one with G-d, a world that is in complete harmony with its source, there is nothing to disrupt the flow of vitality from the Creator to creation.

The Torah section of *Vayeichi* describes Jacob's demise: his parting words to his children, his passing, and his funeral. Yet the section's name — the one word that conveys its essence — means “And [Jacob] lived.” *Vayeichi* expresses the axiom that, in truth, “Our father

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Jacob did not die.” **Jacob’s life is immutable, because it is a life in the ultimate sense of the word: life as an exercise of harmony with the divine.**

Bereishit to *Vayechi*, the Parshah names of Genesis chronicle the most basic truths of our existence: that life is purposeful, its purpose being to satisfy the divine desire for a home on earth; that the soul descends to earth furnished with a vision of G-d and the capacity to integrate this vision into its self and character; that man must sanctify his life with acts of goodness, extend himself beyond his “natural” environment, further extend himself by delegating of his powers to others, and labor to not only command but also transform reality; that our efforts will invariably result in a world united with its G-d; that life — pure and eternal — is the ultimate expression of the divine in man.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe
www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber,
editor@chabadonline.com*

FOOTNOTES

1. Indeed, according to the laws of Hebrew grammar, the word *bereishit* is not ideal usage; the more correct term for “In the beginning” is *barishonah*. This leads even a commentator such as Rashi, who always interprets the Torah according to its most elementary meaning, to offer the acronymic interpretation of *bet reishit* (“two firsts”) related in the text.

2. The word for “desired” used by the Midrash in the statement “G-d desired a dwelling in the lowly realms” is *nit’aveh*, from the root *taavah*, which connotes a supra-rational desire. There is no logical explanation as to why G-d desired “a dwelling in the lowly realms”; we only know that He desired it, and that the satisfaction of this desire is the ultimate purpose of creation.

3. The Torah section of *Toldot* opens with the birth of Isaac’s two literal progeny — Jacob and Esau — representing the two basic categories of mitzvot: mitzvot whose object is to “do good,” and mitzvot whose objective is to “turn away from evil” (see Jacob and Esau).