

No Time For Fussing Or Fightin g: Jacob Reflects

Stephen Rutman '09 | Bronfman Torah | Parshat Vayigash 2015

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Joseph is the central figure of Parshat Vayigash—the one propelling the story of the Jewish people forward. However, it is Jacob who provides one of the most compelling contradictions of the penultimate reading of Bereshit.

The Parsha presents two conflicting narratives for Jacob's reflection on his own life and his mortality.

In the first instance, Jacob is portrayed as an older man who is able to come to terms with his impending death, following the unexpected fulfillment of a dying wish. Upon his reunion with his most adored son, Joseph, who he believed to be dead, Jacob declares that he is prepared for death. We are told:

And Israel said unto Joseph: 'Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, that thou art yet alive.'

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יֹסֵף אֲמוּתָהּ הַכֶּעָם אֶחָר לִי רָאוּתִי אֶת-פְּנֵיךָ כִּי עוֹדָךְ חַי:

(Bereshit 46:30)

Jacob appears content—prepared to die in peace—with the knowledge that Joseph lives and that his legacy is intact. This is a familiar trope. Whether at funerals or in fiction, we hear often that someone "is ready to die" after having lived a complete and fulfilling life.

Not long after, however, Jacob confronts the meaning and length of his life much more bitterly. When asked his age directly by Pharaoh, Jacob offers a bleak response:

And Pharaoh said unto Jacob: 'How many are the days of the years of thy life?'

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יַעֲקֹב כַּמָּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

And Jacob said unto Pharaoh: 'The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojournings.'

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-פַּרְעֹה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי מְגוּרַי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה מְעֻטְרוֹתִים הָיוּ יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיִּי וְלֹא הִשְׁיִגוּ אֶת-יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבוֹתַי בְּיָמֵי מְגוּרֵיהֶם:

And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from the presence of Pharaoh.

וַיְבָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב אֶת-פַּרְעֹה וַיֵּצֵא מִלְּפָנָי פַּרְעֹה:

(Bereshit 47:8-10)

Not having even been asked about the quality of his life, Jacob here volunteers his sense of disappointment—a decidedly different perspective on his life than the one he expressed some verses earlier.

How do we account for this apparent contradiction in Jacobs's retrospection? Why

does Jacob reverse his description of his life?

Contemporary Torah scholar, Robert Alter's commentary on the latter passage offers useful insight into the duality of Jacob's reflection:

Jacob's somber summary of his own life echoes with a kind of complex solemnity against all that we have seen him undergo. He has, after all, achieved everything he aspired to achieve: the birthright, the blessing, marriage with his beloved Rachel, progeny, and wealth. But one measure of the profound moral realism of the story is that **although he gets everything he wanted, it is not in the way he would have wanted, and the consequence is far more pain than contentment.**

(The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary, Robert Alter, 2008. P. 273)

Alter continues to explicate how Jacob's life from the time of his "clashing" with his twin in his mother's womb has been rife with struggle. Jacob succeeds in attaining the birthright by means that leave him eternally fearful and guilt-ridden. He weds Rachel, but only after enduring the domestic difficulties he assumes when Leah is bestowed upon him, followed by the loss of his true love in childbirth. His fight with an angel provides him a new name, but also leaves him permanently disfigured. He is blessed with twelve sons, who live in a perpetual state of strife—for which he may be partially culpable. And finally, he spends his old age distraught, under the mistaken belief that his favorite son is dead.

Alter concludes, "This is, in sum, a story with a happy ending that withholds any simple feeling of happiness at the end."

Even though Jacob has accomplished his goals, the conflict that accompanied his achievements has left him unfulfilled. Even his final reunion with Joseph cannot provide him the sense of completion or closure he seeks.

Indeed, the Parsha laid the groundwork for this revelation earlier—before Jacob offers either interpretation of his own life.

When he sends his brothers off, Joseph—Jacob's true descendent in the narrative—warns his brothers of the danger of conflict:

So he sent his brethren away, and they departed; and he said unto them: 'See that ye fall not out by the way.'

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת-אֶחָיו וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיֹּאמְרָאֲלֵהֶם אֶל-תְּרֵזֶנֹּי בְּדֶרֶךְ:

(Bereshit 45:24)

Joseph knows the ruinous effect conflict has had on his father, and is trying to make sure that his brothers do not spend their remaining days consumed by contention.

The lesson not to waste one's life in conflict is reiterated in the Beatles' 1965 hit *We Can Work It Out*. A true Lennon-McCartney collaboration, John was quite proud to have contributed the more pessimistic, impatient lyric in the song. John penned the lines that apparently echo Joseph's (and by proxy Jacob's) admonition from Vayigash: "Life is very short, and there's no time / For fussing and fighting, my friend."



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