

# ויחי Vayechi

## Overview

The name of this *parashah*, *Vayechi*, means “he lived,” referring to how Jacob lived the last years of his life in Egypt. Since we know that the name of a *parashah* expresses the contents of the entire *parashah*, we would think that a *parashah* entitled “He Lived” would be devoted to an account of the major events of Jacob’s life. In fact, however, *parashat Vayechi* is devoted to the exact opposite: the events leading up to and following Jacob’s death. In this *parashah*, Jacob bestows his parting blessings on his children and grandchildren, breathes his last, and is buried by his sons in the Machpelah Cave; all this is then followed by the account of the death of his favorite son and designated successor, Joseph. *Parashat Vayechi* is thus reminiscent of *parashat Chayei Sarah*, whose name means “the life of Sarah” even though it focuses on the events that occurred in the wake of her death.

As we explained with regard to Sarah, we only attain true life when our ideals live on in those who come after us. Paradoxically, then, as long as we are physically alive, it is not at all clear if we are truly “alive”; the test of true life comes only after death. If our descendants remain true to the ideals we have imparted to them, it then becomes retroactively clear that we were also “alive” during our lifetimes. If not, then it follows that even while alive, we were essentially “dead.”

This perspective helps explain why here, in *parashat Vayechi*, the Torah’s mention of Jacob’s age when he died is prefaced by the phrase “Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt.” In *parashat Chayei Sarah*, there is no such prefatory phrase with regard to Sarah—we are simply informed how old she was when she died. The fact that Jacob lived seventeen years *in the land of Egypt* before he died—years that, as we are told, were the best years of his life, filled with true satisfaction at seeing his children and grandchildren loyal to his ideals—proves that he was truly “alive” during his lifetime. The fact that he succeeded in maintaining his own spirituality in the corrupt and idolatrous environment of Egypt, as well as in raising his children and grandchildren to do the same, testifies to the fact that he was indeed truly “alive” during his lifetime.

In fact, Jacob lived on so tangibly in the lives of his progeny that the Torah does not even employ the term “die” in recording his death; he is only referred to as having stopped breathing,<sup>1</sup> and the Talmud therefore asserts that, in essence, Jacob did not die!<sup>2</sup>

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1. Below, 49:33. 2. *Ta’anit* 5b.

## OVERVIEW OF VAYECHI

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Furthermore, as we shall see, Jacob's death signaled the beginning of the descent that would conclude with the physical enslavement of all his descendants. The fact that the Jewish people remained loyal to Jacob's heritage even under such antagonistic circumstances is further proof that his death was the truest indication that not only was he was "alive" during his lifetime, but continued to remain so afterwards, as well.

As we have seen, from his youth, Jacob was the consummate Torah scholar.<sup>3</sup> Together with absorbing the knowledge embodied in the Torah, Jacob absorbed its quality of transcendence, its unchanging, Divine essence that renders it intrinsically, universally, and eternally relevant to all facets of life. This is what enabled him to weather all the vicissitudes of life, to raise all his children to be righteous despite their diverse personalities, and to ensure that the years he spent in Egypt would be his best. The Torah, being the embodiment of God's will and wisdom, is truth; the study of the Torah is thus the pursuit of truth; and therefore, by extension, devotion to the Torah means uncompromising devotion to truth. The Torah was Jacob's key to eternal life, for truth, by definition, is eternal.

As such, the lesson of *parashat Vayechi* is that we, too, can weather all the remaining tribulations of exile, raise our children to be loyal to their heritage, and enjoy all the blessings of spiritual and physical abundance—essentially tasting the sweetness of the messianic future—even while still in exile, through studying the Torah and fulfilling its commandments.

**I**t is thus fitting that the first book of the Torah ends with the message of *Vayechi*, "he lived." As the curtain closes on the groundwork laid by the patriarchs and we prepare to witness the maturation of their progeny into a full-fledged people who will assume the role of "a kingdom of nobles and a holy nation,"<sup>4</sup> *parashat Vayechi* serves to remind us that the Book of Genesis is not simply literature, a sentimental or partisan tribute to our national ancestors who, impressive though they may have been, are dead and gone and therefore no longer relevant. No, they are alive, truly alive, and it is only by identifying with their aspirations and by internalizing and remaining loyal to their heritage that we, too, can be truly alive. As long as we remain in exile, we will continue to be beckoned by the dazzling enticements of the pseudo-life around us (and within us). But the Torah is "a Torah of life,"<sup>5</sup> eternally challenging us to remain above these temptations and "choose life"<sup>6</sup> by fulfilling God's commandments,<sup>7</sup> thereby making our lives and the world around us into a home for God, the true<sup>8</sup> "source of life."<sup>9</sup>

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3. Above, 25:27, etc. 4. Exodus 19:6. 5. Liturgy, *Amidah*. *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, chapter 34. 6. Deuteronomy 30:19. 7. Leviticus 18:5. 8. Psalms 36:12. 9. *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 15, pp. 427-430; *Sefer HaSichot* 5749, vol. 1, pp. 164-172; *Sichot Kodesh* 5741, vol. 1, pp. 763-766; *Sefer HaSichot* 5751, vol. 1, pp. 225-227.