

Standing on a Precipice

Leon Furchtgott and William Herlands | Text and the City | Vayechi

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This week's Torah portion, Vayechi, juxtaposes two different approaches to Judaism, each epitomized by a different Biblical figure: Yaakov and Yosef. The narrative begins with Yaakov's family standing on a precipice: the community of Israel, the land of Israel, and the Torah of Israel, those basic building blocks of Judaism, are all in danger of being subsumed by Egyptian culture, power, and religion. At this juncture, the Torah describes Yaakov on his deathbed, providing blessings to his sons, and making Yosef swear an oath to bury him in the land of Israel. As he considers his life and the lives of his forefathers in Canaan, Yaakov zeroes in on one singular event -- the death of his wife, Rachel.

48:7: And as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died unto me in the land of Canaan in the way, when there was still some way to come unto Efrat; and I buried her there in the way to Efrat--the same is Beth-lehem

וְאֲנִי בָבְאִי מִפָּדָן, מָתָה עָלַי רָחֵל בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן בְּדֶרֶךְ, בְּעוֹד כְּבַרְת-אֶרֶץ, לְבֵאֵת אֶפְרַתָּה; וְאֶקְבְּרָהּ שָׁם בְּדֶרֶךְ אֶפְרַת, הוּא בֵּית לְחֶם.

We know from parshat Vayishlach that Rachel died while giving birth to Binyamin in Beit Lechem. But Yaakov recounts this episode using a peculiar formulation: the phrase “meta alai”, “died on me”, seems

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to imply that Yaakov had a more active role in Rachel's death than the Torah's narrative suggests earlier. This draws the scrutiny of the rabbinic commentators, the most remarkable of which is the following comment of Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his Meshech Chochma:

ואולי יתכן לפי דברי רמב"ן
דנתעברה בחו"ל ומעת בואה בגבול
הארץ לא נגע בה. יתכן כי משום זה
לא היה זריז ומלובן (כאמרו סוף פרק המפלת) לכן קשתה בלדתה.

Perhaps this can be explained according to the words of the Ramban that Rachel conceived outside of the land of Israel and that Yaakov did not touch her once they entered the land. Perhaps it was because of this neglect that the fetus was not active and well-formed (according to Niddah 31a) and therefore Rachel had a painful childbirth.

The Meshech Chochma is basing his comment on the Ramban, Nachmanides (Lev 18:25), who argues that the land of Israel is central to all mitzvot. Based on this principle, Ramban explains that Yaakov was not prohibited from being married to two sisters when he was outside of Canaan, but it was problematic in Canaan. When Yaakov entered the land, he chose to distance himself from Rachel, who was the sister of his first wife and therefore, according to halacha, forbidden to him to marry. The Meshech Chochma's innovation is to connect this neglect of Rachel to the Talmud in Niddah 31a which states that sexual stimulation during the 3rd trimester eases childbirth.

Taken in this light, Yaakov's deathbed mention of the circumstances of Rachel's death is open to multiple interpretations. Is Yaakov stressing the importance of observing the mitzvot even outside of the land of Israel? Or is he regretting that he allowed Rachel to die by his too-rigorous adherence to halachah? Either way, his worldview strongly associates the land of Israel with the observance of mitzvot, which represent the core of Jewish identity and epitomize a religiously meaningful life.

Yaakov recounts Rachel's death to Yosef, who represents a different worldview regarding the relationship between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Whereas Yaakov, according to the

Ramban, cannot conceive of a religiously meaningful life outside the land of Israel, Yosef can only imagine a religious existence within the community of Israel. Yosef's sojourn in Egypt is marked by a deepening assimilation into Egyptian culture and alienation from his Jewish heritage. As part of the Egyptian ruling class he wears Egyptian tunics (Gen 41:42), bears the Egyptian name Zaphenath-paneah (41:45), and marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest (41:45). In naming his first-born son Menashe (which means literally forget) he claims to have forgotten "my afflictions and my father's house" - an indication of just how poorly he considered his heritage (41:51). Indeed, by the time he encounters his brothers they cannot even recognize him (42:8). Furthermore, he twice boasts of practicing snake divination (44:5, 15), a method of divination singled out for rejection by the Torah

Yet once his brothers commit to moving down to Egypt and Yosef gains a sustaining Jewish community, his behavior quickly changes. Instead of "forgetting his father's house", Yosef invites his father to live in Egypt and sends royal chariots to bring him there, an act epitomizing the mitzvah of kibud av - honoring one's father. Additionally, the revelation of Yosef's identity serves as a kiddush hashem, a sanctification of God's name, given Yosef's critical role in saving Egyptian society and the larger Middle Eastern region from starvation. Yosef becomes the leader of his community of Israelites (47:12).

The distinction between Yosef's and Yaakov's ideologies is highlighted by their dying requests. Yaakov, who cannot imagine a religiously meaningful life outside of the land of Israel, cannot bear alienation from the land in death. He makes Yosef swear never to bury him in Egypt but rather to bring him back to the land of Israel (47:29-30). In contrast, Yosef requests his bones to be moved only when the Israelites leave Egypt:

50:25 And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying: 'God will surely remember you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence.'

וישבע יוסף, את-בני ישראל לאמר: פקד פקד אלהים אתכם, ונעליהם את-עצמותי מזה.

Critically, when the Torah repeats his request in Shemot 13:19, the Torah adds the word "itchem" (carry my bones with you) at the end of the request emphasizing that Yosef believes a religious life or death exists only in the midst of his people:

13:19 And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying: 'God will surely remember you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you.'

ט ויקח משה את-עצמות יוסף, עמו: כי השבע השביע את-בני ישראל, לאמר, פקד פקד אלהים אתכם, ונעליהם את-עצמותי מזה אתכם.

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We thus see two approaches to Jewish identity in exile that are laid out in Parshat Vayechi. While both rely on Torah and mitzvot as critical to the core of Jewish existence, one situates the appropriate context for halacha as the land of Israel; the other, as the people of Israel. This dichotomy is brought to the next level in Shemot in Moshe, who begins to synthesize both approaches.

While Yosef and Yaakov lead their family down to Egypt, Moshe leads the nation back to their homeland. Moshe inherits both traditions: he is the leader of the Israelites towards the land of Israel, but he does so while carrying Yosef's bones each step of the way. Moshe embraces the religious approaches of both of these forefathers and brings them together to form a new approach to Jewish identity, one with which many of us still grapple to this day. Many of the laws Moshe teaches must be fulfilled specifically in the land of Israel, an approach which harks back to Yaakov, yet he, like Yosef, fundamentally understands the need for religious observance to flourish without boundary. He is a lawgiver to a wandering nation. Like Yosef he is a member of Pharaoh's house, marries the daughter of an idolatrous priest, and bears a foreign name. Like Yaakov, he dies outside the land he yearns for, but, like Yosef, he is content amidst a people dedicated to his Torah and God's laws.

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