

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayechi
January 7, 2023 *** 14 Tevet, 5783

Vayechi in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3228/jewish/Vayechi-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Jacob lives the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Before his passing, he asks Joseph to take an oath that he will bury him in the Holy Land. He blesses Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of his own sons as progenitors of tribes within the nation of Israel.

The patriarch desires to reveal the end of days to his children, but is prevented from doing so.

Jacob blesses his sons, assigning to each his role as a tribe: Judah will produce leaders, legislators and kings; priests will come from Levi, scholars from Issachar, seafarers from Zebulun, schoolteachers from Simeon, soldiers from Gad, judges from Dan, olive-growers from Asher, and so on. Reuben is rebuked for "confusing his father's marriage bed"; Simeon and Levi, for the massacre of Shechem and the plot against Joseph. Naphtali is granted the swiftness of a deer, Benjamin the ferociousness of a wolf, and Joseph is blessed with beauty and fertility.

A large funeral procession consisting of Jacob's descendants, Pharaoh's ministers, the leading citizens of Egypt and the Egyptian cavalry accompanies Jacob on his final journey to the Holy Land, where he is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron.

Joseph, too, dies in Egypt, at the age of 110. He, too, instructs that his bones be taken out of Egypt and buried in the Holy Land, but this would come to pass only with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt many years later. Before his passing, Joseph conveys to the Children of Israel the testament from which they will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come: "G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/611890/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In this week's haftarah, King David delivers his deathbed message to his son and successor, Solomon, echoing this week's Torah reading that discusses at length Jacob's parting words and instructions to his sons.

King David encourages Solomon to be strong and to remain steadfast in his belief in G-d. This will ensure his success in all his endeavors as well as the continuation of the Davidic Dynasty. David then goes on to give his son some

tactical instructions pertaining to various people who deserved punishment or reward for their actions during his reign.

The haftorah concludes with David's death and his burial in the City of David. King Solomon takes his father's place and his sovereignty is firmly established.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

On Not Predicting the Future: Vayechi by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/on-not-predicting-the-future/>

Jacob was on his death-bed. He summoned his children. He wanted to bless them before he died. But the text begins with a strange semi-repetition:

“Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come.

Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel.” Gen. 49:1-2

This seems to be saying the same thing twice, with one difference. In the first sentence, there is a reference to “what will happen to you in the days to come” (literally, “at the end of days”). This is missing from the second sentence.

Rashi, following the Talmud,^[1] says that “Jacob wished to reveal what would happen in the future, but the Divine Presence was removed from him.” He tried to foresee the future but found he could not.

This is no minor detail. It is a fundamental feature of Jewish spirituality. We believe that we cannot predict the future when it comes to human beings.

We make the future by our choices. The script has not yet been written. The future is radically open.

This was a major difference between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. The Greeks believed in fate, moira, even blind fate, ananke. When the Delphic oracle told Laius that he would have a son who would kill him, he took every precaution to make sure it did not happen. When the child was born, Laius nailed him by his feet to a rock and left him to die. A passing shepherd found and saved him, and he was eventually raised by the king and queen of Corinth. Because his feet were permanently misshapen, he came to be known as Oedipus (the “swollen-footed”). The rest of the story is well known. Everything the oracle foresaw happened, and every act designed to avoid it actually helped bring it about. Once the oracle has been spoken and fate has been sealed, all attempts to avoid it are in vain. This cluster of ideas lies at the heart of one of the great Greek contributions to civilisation: tragedy.

Astonishingly, given the many centuries of Jewish suffering, biblical Hebrew has no word for tragedy. The word *ason* means “a mishap, a disaster, a calamity” but not tragedy in the classic sense. A tragedy is a drama with a sad outcome involving a hero destined to experience downfall or destruction through a character-flaw or a conflict with an overpowering force, such as fate. Judaism

has no word for this, because we do not believe in fate as something blind, inevitable and inexorable. We are free. We can choose. As Isaac Bashevis Singer wittily said: “We must be free: we have no choice!”

Rarely is this more powerfully asserted than in the Unetaneh tokef prayer we say on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Even after we have said that “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed ... who will live and who will die”, we still go on to say, “But teshuvah, prayer, and charity avert the evil of the decree.” There is no sentence against which we cannot appeal, no verdict we cannot mitigate by showing that we have repented and changed.

There is a classic example of this in Tanach.

“In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The Prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, ‘This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.’ Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, ‘Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.’ And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: ‘Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people: This is what the Lord, God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you.’” [2 Kings 20:1-5](#); [Isaiah 38:1-5](#)

The Prophet Isaiah had told King Hezekiah he would not recover, but he did. He lived for another fifteen years. God heard his prayer and granted him stay of execution. From this the Talmud infers, “Even if a sharp sword rests upon your neck, you should not desist from prayer.”^[2] We pray for a good fate but we do not reconcile ourselves to fatalism.

Hence there is a fundamental difference between a prophecy and a prediction. If a prediction comes true, it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true, it has failed. A prophet delivers not a prediction but a warning. He or she does not simply say, “This will happen”, but rather, “This will happen unless you change.” The prophet speaks to human freedom, not to the inevitability of fate.

I was once present at a gathering where Bernard Lewis, the great scholar of Islam, was asked to predict the outcome of a certain American foreign policy intervention. He gave a magnificent reply. “I am a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a retired historian, so even my past is passé.” This was a profoundly Jewish answer.

In the twenty-first century we know much at a macro- and micro-level. We look up and see a universe of a hundred billion galaxies each of a hundred billion stars. We look down and see a human body containing a hundred trillion cells, each with a double copy of the human genome, 3.1 billion letters long, enough if transcribed to fill a library of 5,000 books. But there remains one thing we do not know and will never know: What tomorrow will bring. The past, said L. P. Hartley,

is a foreign country. But the future is an undiscovered one. That is why predictions so often fail.

That is the essential difference between nature and human nature. The ancient Mesopotamians could make accurate predictions about the movement of planets, yet even today, despite brain-scans and neuroscience, we are still not able to predict what people will do. Often, they take us by surprise.

The reason is that we are free. We choose, we make mistakes, we learn, we change, we grow. The failure at school becomes the winner of a Nobel Prize. The leader who disappointed, suddenly shows courage and wisdom in a crisis. The driven businessman has an intimation of mortality and decides to devote the rest of his life to helping the poor. Some of the most successful people I ever met were written off by their teachers at school and told they would never amount to anything. We constantly defy predictions. This is something science has not yet explained and perhaps never will. Some believe freedom is an illusion. But it isn't. It's what makes us human.

We are free because we are not merely objects. We are subjects. We respond not just to physical events but to the way we perceive those events. We have minds, not just brains. We have thoughts, not just sensations. We react but we can also choose not to react. There is something about us that is irreducible to material, physical causes and effects.

The way our ancestors spoke about this remains true and profound. We are free because God is free and He made us in His image. That is what is meant by the three words God told Moses at the burning bush when he asked God for His name. God replied, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh. This is often translated as "I am what I am," but what it really means is, "I will be who and how I choose to be." I am the God of freedom. I cannot be predicted. Note that God says this at the start of Moses' mission to lead a people from slavery to freedom. He wanted the Israelites to become living testimony to the power of freedom.

Do not believe that the future is written. It isn't. There is no fate we cannot change, no prediction we cannot defy. We are not predestined to fail; neither are we pre-ordained to succeed. We do not predict the future, because we make the future: by our choices, our willpower, our persistence, and our determination to survive.

The proof is the Jewish people itself. The first reference to Israel outside the Bible is engraved on the Merneptah stele, inscribed around 1225 BCE by Pharaoh Merneptah IV, Ramses II's successor. It reads:

"Israel is laid waste, her seed is no more."

It was, in short, an obituary. The Jewish people have been written off many times by their enemies, but they remain, after almost four millennia, still young and strong.

That is why, when Jacob wanted to tell his children what would happen to them in the future, the Divine Spirit was taken away from him. Our children continue to surprise us, as we continue to surprise others. Made in the image of God, we are free. Sustained by the blessings of God, we can become greater than anyone, even ourselves, could foresee. [1] Rashi to Gen. 49:1; Pesachim 56a; Bereishit Rabbah 99:5. [2] Brachot 10a.

[Be Like Brothers In Every Place by Rabbi Scott Shafrin](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vayechi-scott-shafrin-moraltorah2023/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vayechi-scott-shafrin-moraltorah2023/>

As we start this new year, we read one of the most helpful, though often overlooked, stories in our Torah. As his life comes to an end in Parshat Vayechi, our ancestor Jacob gathers his family together and looks to connect with each of them, beginning with Joseph and, more importantly, his grandsons Ephraim and Menashe. He brings them close and gives them a blessing, saying:

By you shall [the People of] Israel invoke blessings, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.' (Genesis 48:20)

Even today, many families still use this blessing formulation to bless their sons, with similar blessing formulas for both daughters and gender non-binary children. But it is curious that the blessing of these two characters should be so powerful, since we know almost nothing about them. They do not speak anywhere in Torah, and this is the one scene where they even have a role to play. So what does it mean to be “like Ephraim and Menashe”? What qualities did these two possess and what deeds did they do that we should try to emulate?

In all of the commentaries and analyses, two ideas stand out powerfully to me. The first is that, of their family members who came down to Egypt, Ephraim and Menashe were the only ones born in Egypt. They were the first generation of our people to know that they were part of B'nai Israel, part of a Jewish people, but not live in a cloistered Jewish enclave. They were able to have identities that fit in with mainstream society, able to adapt and be part of their native land, while at the same time maintaining their connection to their family, religion, heritage, and sense of self.

Many of us feel that same tension today. It is hard to maintain a strong Jewish identity and still feel like we are co-equal citizens, especially here in America where the idea of who is a “real” American is so often thrown in the face of minority groups. It can often seem that to be fully a part of both our Jewish heritage and our American culture, we must give up parts of one or the other that we treasure. Ephraim and Menashe were both fully accepted by their family and by the society in which they lived. For so many of us, we long for the day where we do not feel othered by one facet of our identity, and we pray for the day when we can live in our world as Ephraim and Menashe lived in theirs.

Beyond the circumstances of their birth, Ephraim and Menashe teach us how to live. Rabbi Harold Kushner explains that they become a source of blessing “perhaps because they were the first brothers in the Bible to get along peaceably, after the conflicts that marred the lives of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers.” In fact, in all of Torah, there are precious few examples of siblings who do not hurt, deceive, steal from, and otherwise harm their siblings. Because of this, Torah tries to teach us repeatedly to treat our siblings better, establishing ethical rules and norms for us to live by throughout the ages.

It’s not just our blood relations with whom we need to create bonds of compassion, care, and understanding, but all people. We are told to love our neighbors as ourselves ([Leviticus 19:18](#)), that all of Israel cares for one another ([Talmud Shevuot 39a](#)), and that one who can prevent the misdeeds of another, or even of everyone in the world, and fails to do so is responsible for those misdeeds ([Talmud Shabbat 54b](#)). We are each connected, and no matter how we enter each other’s lives, we are responsible to care for one another and to create a better world by treating each other as sacred sparks, created in the divine image.

Maya Angelou once described the bonds of siblings thus:

“I don’t believe an accident of birth makes people sisters or brothers. It makes them siblings, gives them mutuality of parentage. Sisterhood and brotherhood is a condition people have to work at.”

Just as Ephraim and Menashe became the gold standard of siblings in the eyes of Jewish tradition, so too are we called to extend a loving hand to all the people we come across, no matter who they are, how they may differ from us, or what else may be going on in our own lives.

That is how we solve the giant ethical quandaries that confront our world: We build real relationships with others, we value and sustain people as the sacred and special individuals they are, and we work to create conditions where each person can live and grow and thrive. We bless our children to be like Ephraim and Menashe because we hope that they will not only treat their blood relatives well but also will endeavor to build the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood with everyone they meet. *Rabbi Scott Shafrin is currently the Associate Rabbi at Kol Rinah, a Conservative congregation in St. Louis, MO, as well as the founding director of the Kol Rinah Education Hub (KoREH). He also sits on the Rabbinical Assembly’s Social Justice Commission, where he is the RA representative to the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.*

[Parenting Lessons from the Parashah by Jonathan Milgram](#)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/parenting-lessons-from-the-parashah/>

Parashat Vayehi, the final parashah in the book of Genesis, presents the Israelites on the cusp of a major transition. While Genesis highlights family relations, Exodus introduces the idea of peoplehood. Genesis closes with a family gathering and, by next week, the Israelites will be described as a nation. What lessons does Genesis, and Vayehi in particular, offer about effective parenting? And what can the Torah teach us about the relationship between family and nation?

A look at the relationships between fathers and sons in Genesis as a whole reveals a progression: with each subsequent patriarch, the relations between fathers and sons improve. Abraham did not bless his sons at all; Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, but separately. Only with Jacob are sons gathered and blessed together (and not only sons, but even the grandsons, Ephraim and Menashe, too!). This progression is the perfect prelude to the unification required to be called a nation. The sequence from Genesis to Exodus reminds us that strong families are the backbone of a strong people.

The description of Jacob's sons in Vayehi highlights their diversity. But the differences between Joseph and Judah in particular sealed for each one a place and purpose in the greater narrative of Israel's peoplehood. Joseph, irrefutably Jacob's favorite son, is exemplary on the moral front and pious in every way. As a young man alone in a strange land, he resists temptation and rejects his sexual urges brought on by the advances of Potiphar's wife. His moral compass is too strong. Judah, on the other hand, is a moral failure. He readily hires a harlot whom he later discovers to be his daughter-in-law! He is out of control, directed by instinct and not by the right intuition.

Joseph, when finally meeting up with his brothers after years of suffering from their original treacherous deed to abandon him, forgives, forgets, and lovingly embraces his brothers. When we think back to that original act against Joseph, how did Judah behave? True, he opposed murdering Joseph; however, he did not suggest freeing him. His words were telling: "Mah betza ki naharog et ahinu?"—"what profit will we gain by killing our brother?" ([Gen. 37:26](#)). Let's sell him instead [!], he offers, his words ringing vulgarly of materialism.

For Joseph, piety and the righteous path were seemingly a part of his genetic make-up. Judah, to put it bluntly, had problems. Like so many of us observe from our own parenting experience, some kids just always make the mark and others—as hard as it is to admit—disappoint. We should never overlook, however, when our children strive and improve. Judah puts forth great effort to overcome his character deficiencies. In both instances—after hiring the harlot and selling his brother—Judah admits guilt, repents, and strives to transcend the limits of his inclinations.

As we know, the Israelite kings are descended from Judah. On his deathbed, despite all of the difficulties with Judah, Jacob saw the leadership potential in

Judah and blessed him with the line of kingship. And this, even though without a shadow of a doubt Joseph was his favorite. I would like to suggest that the potential for leadership Jacob saw was based on Judah's humanity. The best leaders are the people who not only conceptually grasp the frailties of the human experience, but who also experience them. Jacob's calculus was that a personality such as his son Judah, who had sunk to the depths of immoral and uncompassionate behavior, who had wrestled and now repented and returned—was better equipped to lead. As Maimonides reminds us in the Laws of Repentance: “those who repent stand on a higher level than those who are completely righteous. For, those who repent have applied a higher degree of control.” To Jacob, Judah the son and the sinner had now surpassed his initial limitations and was fit for leadership. Joseph, the primordial tzaddik, by virtue of his moral perfection, was not.

Ironically, the same traits of purity and righteousness, trust and humility, that encouraged Pharaoh to appoint Joseph to be his right-hand man, struck Jacob as weaknesses when considering the future kingship of Israel. Indeed, Jacob insightfully observed that the qualities required of the assistant are never the same as those demanded of the manager.

Jacob's wisdom is telling. The end of the book of Genesis is about the beginnings of how we learn to live together. The family provides the unit in which we strive and struggle, grow and grieve. The biblical family dynamics, presenting constant challenges, can still speak to us when we step back and take a close look at our own families. Jacob's lessons for parents remain important. Encourage and embrace the diversity amongst your children. Learn to appreciate the inherent differences in each of them. Respect the decisions children make that may not entirely square with your own values. As a parent, learn to be flexible and capitalize on the important qualities that each child has and can help them contribute to the world. Joseph certainly played a crucial role in the developing narrative of the family and the people Israel. Jacob, in his eternal wisdom, however, also saw the potential in Judah, a son he could have written off because of real concerns about his character and ability. Jacob teaches us to look deeper and be more open—to nurture, encourage, and trust. By blessing Judah with the line of kingship, Jacob reminds us what parenting can really be. (*Jonathan Milgram is Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS*)

[Why One Should Create a Will Today: Vayechi by Rabbi Miriam Berkowitz](https://schechter.edu/why-one-should-create-a-will-today-rabbi-miriam-berkowitz-on-parashat-vayechi/)

<https://schechter.edu/why-one-should-create-a-will-today-rabbi-miriam-berkowitz-on-parashat-vayechi/>

This parasha is fertile ground for any chaplain, social worker, nurse, physician, family member or friend who helps older people reflect on their life, tie up loose

ends, and make peace with family members in their golden years or toward the twilight of life, whenever that may be.

In this parasha, both Jacob and Josef show a clear awareness of their mortality and, by speaking openly about it with their children and grandchildren, create opportunities for blessing, closure and passing on their last wishes.

Indeed, we can consider Jacob the first author of an ethical will.

In Genesis 48:21 just after blessing his grandsons Manasseh and Ephraim,

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף הֲנִי אֹנֶכִי מֵת:

“Israel says to Joseph, here I am about to die:”

They go back to calling him Israel, not Jacob, and he says to Joseph he is about to die, but promises God will be with you and will bring you back to the land of your ancestors.

By showing he is aware of his mortality he is creating the opportunity for this important discussion. Then he called his sons around him and told them what will happen in the future and he blessed them, each according to his personality and what he wished for them.

The parasha goes to the blessing of each and tells him where he wants to be buried.

The scene is very poignant and has been portrayed in many famous paintings.

Here is one from Rembrandt van Rijn [completed in 1656] the famous Dutch painter. You see the sons of the family and the fancy bed and of everybody gathered around listening and comfortable with the open conversation.



Jacob Blessing Ephraim and Menasseh; Oil on Canvas; Rembrandt 1656

Jacob goes on to explain exactly where he wants to be buried, in the ancestral cave of the Machpelah. He begins to talk very fondly about his wife and parents and grandparents.

So this is what I consider saying what you would want for your funeral wishes. It helps the people know what you would want and have less stress when they are trying to carry out your wishes. This would lead to fewer disagreements. So for no other reason than that, I recommend being honest about, not being afraid to talk about death.

In my experience as a chaplain the person who is dying really knows it and often other family members try to sugar coat everything. But, I think that honesty

enables a much better family conversation.

So we hear about the cave that the family bought from Ephron the Hittite.

Genesis 49:28-33

שָׁמָּה קָבְרוּ אֶת־אֲבֹרָהֶם וְאֶת שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ שָׁמָּה קָבְרוּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וְשָׁמָּה קָבַרְתִּי אֶת־לֵאָה׃
“There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah.”

When Joseph is at towards the end of his life he also gives instructions to his descendants, that he does not want to remain in Egypt so he has to be embalmed there temporarily but when the Israelites leave Egypt he makes them swear to bring up his bones to Israel.

The Biblical word for burial is “being gathered unto one’s ancestors,” and the expression is:

וְהוּא נֹאסֵף אֶל אֲבוֹתָיו

You can just imagine the sort of liminal time and remembering your ancestors and you hope that maybe in the future you will be reunited with them.

The practice of ethical wills was very popular in the Middle Ages with famous rabbis and people writing long missives to their children. We are seeing a renaissance now. Rabbi Jack Reimer and Rabbi Elana Zaimen wrote books about Jewish ethical wills, and really anyone can do it.

The goal is not to compel your descendants to live according to your wishes but to give them a letter or video or book to keep and cherish.

It is never too soon to start writing this document, but if people are scared by the word ‘will’ and are reluctant to think of their own mortality, they can call it a ‘Legacy Letter’ or, as Rabbi Zaimen calls it, a ‘Forever Letter.’

If you do not like the part about reflecting on your life, you may at least give them some words of wisdom. It may avoid difficult decisions for your survivors and give them the satisfaction of knowing that they are carrying out your wishes.

You do not have to be a great writer or scholar to write an ethical will, just sit down in a quiet place, take out a good old fashioned pen and paper and write a few lines. This could be the greatest gift you ever give your children or if you don’t have children other relatives, friends, or who knows, maybe even people thousands of years from now will be reading your words like we are reading about the patriarchs in Parashat Vayechi. (*Rabbi Miriam Berkowitz is an Israel-ordained Conservative rabbi and certified chaplain. She co-founded Kashouvot: Pastoral Care and is currently the International Coordinator of the Spiritual Care Association, promoting chaplaincy around the world.*)

[Parashat Vayechi: Eating Holy Food in a Holy Way by Rabbi Julian Sinclair](https://www.growtorah.org/breisheit/2021/12/8-parshat-vayigash-lessons-from-yosefs-foresight-and-restraintteaching-for-the-western-environmentalist-jgfh-nwmh5)

<https://www.growtorah.org/breisheit/2021/12/8-parshat-vayigash-lessons-from-yosefs-foresight-and-restraintteaching-for-the-western-environmentalist-jgfh-nwmh5>

Do we know who grows our food? Does it matter?

This question was first raised for me years ago when I was the Campus Rabbi at England's Cambridge University. Invited to High Table dinner with the professors at one of the colleges, I was surprised to discover that most of the conversation among some of Britain's leading minds revolved around the food.

"This venison's inedible," complained an irascible professor of physics.

"Absolutely," agreed an elderly Nobel Laureate. "We had a cook here in the seventies who would never serve an animal he didn't know personally."

"Quite right too."

As I smugly ate my triple-plastic wrapped kosher airline meal, the idea of having a relationship that is in any way personal with one's food or the people who grow it seemed quaintly ridiculous. However, the preeminent Torah commentator, Rashi, on this week's Torah portion of Vayechi suggests otherwise.

When Yaakov blesses his sons on his deathbed, he highlights characteristics that are unique to each of them and to the tribes of their descendants. According to Rashi, five of these blessings focus on the specific economy and agriculture of each tribe's territory in Eretz Yisrael.

For example, in Yehuda's blessing, "Binding his foal to the vine...he washes his garments in wine," [1] Rashi comments based on the Midrash, "It was prophesied about the land of Yehuda that it will gush forth wine like a fountain." [2]

On the promise, "Zevulun shall dwell at the edge of the sea. His will be a shore for ships..." [3] Rashi remarks, "He will always be found on the shores by the ports to which ships bring merchandise." [4]

Similarly, interpreting the blessing to Yissachar, "He saw a resting place, that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant," [5] Rashi writes, "He saw that his part of the land was blessed and would produce good fruit." [6] Yissachar, whose tribe's destiny was traditionally understood as immersion in Torah learning, rejoiced in a portion where ready-to-eat food grew in abundance and devotion to study would be practical.

Asher is blessed with fat bread, which Rashi explains is on account of the tribe's many olive trees. [7] Naftali is likened to "a hind let loose," and Rashi tells us that this means that just as a hind let loose runs very quickly, so too will the valley of Ginosar (in Naftali's territory) have rapidly ripening fruit. [8]

Other rabbinical sources underscore this point. The Talmud Megillah tells how the beaches of Zevulun were home to the molluscs from which tekhelet dye could be extracted. [9] His territory was agriculturally poor but a lucrative resource for snail-farming. The Talmud Ketubot also abounds in sensuous descriptions of the grapes and wine grown in the lands of Yehuda: "Any palate that tastes it says, 'Give me! Give me!'" [10]

Two points stand out from Rashi's comments. Firstly, Biblical food production is regional. Each part of Eretz Yisrael is known for the particular kinds of crop and produce native to it. Secondly, it is personal. We know that the members of the tribe of Yehuda grow our grapes, those in Asher make olive oil, those in Yissachar harvest fruit, etc. A biblical Jew could, if he or she chose, easily trace the short and transparent journey of each item from the ground, via the grower, to their plates.

Looking at our modern food system, it is hard to really sympathize with the system of Eretz Israel. We buy our industrially produced and packaged food in supermarkets that are identical from Brooklyn to Brookline and from Skokie to Silver Spring. As consumers, we have lost connection to the people who grow our food and to the places where it is grown – the typical item of food on an American dinner plate has traveled 1500 miles. [11]

Does this matter? In The Omnivore's Dilemma, Michael Pollan argues that it matters very much. Pollan claims that the industrial food chain relies on a thick veil of ignorance being cast between us and the process of production. From meat raised in CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), to methane-belching corn-fed cattle, to the raising of monoculture fruits, vegetables and grains, to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on our produce, we simply do not want to know too much about how what we eat arrives on the supermarket shelves. If we were fully aware of the cruelty frequently involved in raising our food, the environmental degradation caused by growing it, the health risks to consumers in processing and preserving it, and the immense expenditure of fossil fuels in transporting it, we would be troubled, if not repulsed. Pollan's disturbing achievement is to rip away the veil of ignorance and rub our faces in the raw facts about our food.

How should we exercise the ethical responsibility that comes with knowledge about the sources of our food? Pollan writes about Polyface Farm, a pesticide and fertilizer free farm where the animals are all free-range. Its owner, Joel Salatin, believes, "The only meaningful guarantee of integrity is when buyers and sellers can look one another in the eye." Knowing the people who grow our food, we can take a measure of responsibility for how it reaches us.

Rashi's description of a localized, personal agriculture may serve as a proper model for us. It offers direction in how to claw our way back from the tortured complexity of the industrial food chain towards a healthier relationship with what we eat. Maybe the crusty Cambridge professors were right: the degradation of our food is a worthy subject of conversation for anyone's dinner table. [1] Bereishit

49:11 [2] Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 98:9; Rashi, Bereishit 49:11, s.v. osri lagefen iryo

[3] Bereishit 49:13 [4] Rashi, Bereishit 49:13, s.v. vihu...lichof aniyot [5] Bereishit 49:15

[6] Rashi, Bereishit 49:15, s.v. vayar minucha ki tov [7] Rashi, Bereishit 49:20, s.v. masher

shmeina lachmo [8] Rashi, Bereishit 49:21, s.v. ayalah shelucha [9] Talmud Bavli Megillah 6a [10] Talmud Bavli Ketubot 111b [11] Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma, New York, Penguin, 2006. p.239

Yahrtzeits

David Rubin remembers his father Martin Rubin on Friday Jan. 13. (Tevet 20).