

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayechi
December 30, 2023 *** 18 Tevet, 5784

Vayechi in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Vayechi," means "And he lived" and it is found in Genesis 47:28.

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:I Kings 2: 1-12

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

Grandparents: Vayechi by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/grandparents/>

Every Friday night we re-enact one of the most moving scenes in the book of Bereishit. Jacob, reunited with Joseph, is ill. Joseph comes to visit him, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob, with deep emotion, says:

"I never expected to see you again, and now God has shown me your children as well."

Gen. 48:11

He blesses Joseph. Then he places his hands on the heads of the two boys.

He blessed them that day and said, "[In the time to come] Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

Gen. 48:20

So we do to this day, with these very words. Why this blessing above all others? One commentator (Yalkut Yehudah) says it is because Ephraim and Manasseh were the first two Jewish children born in exile. So Jewish parents bless their children asking God to help them keep their identity intact despite all the temptations and distractions of Diaspora life.

I heard however a most lovely explanation, based on the Zohar, from my revered predecessor Lord Jakobovits of blessed memory. He said that though there are many instances in Torah and Tanach in which parents bless their children, this is the only example of a grandparent blessing grandchildren.

Between parents and children, he said, there are often tensions. Parents worry about their children. Children sometimes rebel against their parents. The relationship is not always smooth.

Not so with grandchildren. There the relationship is one of love untroubled by tension or anxiety. When a grandparent blesses a grandchild they do so with a full heart. That is why this blessing by Jacob to his grandchildren became the model of blessing across the generations. Anyone who has had the privilege of having grandchildren will immediately understand the truth and depth of this explanation. Grandparents bless their grandchildren and are blessed by them. This phenomenon is the subject of a fascinating difference of opinion between the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud Yerushalmi. The Babylonian Talmud says the following:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "Whoever teaches their grandchildren Torah is regarded as if they had received the Torah from Mount Sinai, as it is said, 'Teach your children and your children's children.'"

Deut. 4:10-11; Kiddushin 30a

The Talmud Yerushalmi puts it differently. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi used to listen, every Friday, to his grandson reciting the weekly parsha. One week he entered the bathhouse, and after he had begun bathing he remembered that he had not yet heard the weekly parsha from his grandson. So he immediately got up to leave the bathhouse... They asked him why he was leaving in the middle of his bathing, since the Mishnah teaches that once you have begun bathing on a Friday afternoon, you should not interrupt the process. He replied, "Is this such a small thing in your eyes? For whoever hears the parsha from his grandchild is as if he heard it directly from Mount Sinai" (Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:2).

According to the Talmud Bavli, it is a great privilege is to teach your grandchildren Torah. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, the greatest privilege is to have your grandchildren teach Torah to you. This is one argument about which no grandparent will have the slightest difficulty saying that both are true.

My late father, of blessed memory, had to leave school at the age of 14 to begin working to support his family, and as a result he never had the full Jewish or secular education that he would have wanted. I remember from my childhood that – as we walked home from shul on a Shabbat morning – I would be full of questions. "Dad, why do we do this?" "Why did we do that?" My father always gave me the same answer, and that was the answer that changed my life. He said, "Jonathan, I didn't have a Jewish education, so I can't answer your questions. But one day, you will have the education that I didn't have. And when that happens, you will teach me the answers to those questions."

The greatest gift you can give a child or a grandchild is what you empower and allow them to teach you. As parents, we strive to give our children everything. There's one thing we sometimes forget to give them which is the chance for them to give something to us. And that, frankly, is the most important thing there is.

Give your children and your grandchildren the space to give to you. Let them become your teachers and let them be your inspiration. In doing so you will help them become the people that they were destined to be, and you will help create the blessings God wants them to become.

With an exquisite sense of symmetry, just as we begin Shabbat with a grandparent's blessing so we end it, in Maariv, with the words:

May you live to see your children's children – peace be on Israel.

Psalm 128:6

What is the connection between grandchildren and peace? Surely this, that those who think about grandchildren care about the future, and those who think about the future make peace. It is those who constantly think of the past, of slights and humiliations and revenge, who make war.

Jacob lives a life fraught with conflict and troubles. He knew of revenge and war, of grudges and strife. But he died serene, and full of blessings. And before he died, he blessed his children and grandchildren.

To bless grandchildren and be blessed by them, to teach them and to be taught by them – these are the highest Jewish privilege and the serene end of Jacob's troubled life.

[Is it Heretical to Ask God for Protection? By Marcus Mordecai Schwartz](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/is-it-heretical-to-ask-god-for-protection/)

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Jacob's words of blessing to Joseph in chapter 48 surprise me every time that I read them. Though putatively an attempt to bless his son, they are primarily directed at his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and gain authority from Jacob's fathers and from the shepherding and redeeming God he has known so intimately throughout his life:

*And he blessed Joseph, saying,
May the God in whose ways walked
My fathers Abraham and Isaac,
God who has been my shepherd
Of old to this day
The Angel redeeming me
From all evil—
Bless the lads
And call my name upon them
And the names of
My fathers Abraham and Isaac,
And may they grow as
Fishlike multitudes
In the land. (48:16)*

Just as God protected Jacob from physical harm and granted him many children, Jacob asks that “the lads” (not Joseph directly) be blessed and wax in number like fish. Verbs from the Hebrew root “ה .ג .ד” usually mean “to fish”, i.e., to take fish from the water. But here, with poetic license, this verb illustrates the idea of being like fish, swift and numerous in reproduction. Structurally, the poem places Jacob’s fathers both before and after the moment when the blessing is transferred, but also places God in the first paragraph as the active subject. Appositionally, Jacob’s descendants become like fish in the final concluding lines, the passive recipients of the requested Divine blessing.

But most interestingly, God is described as “The Angel redeeming me from all evil.” To me, this seems like demotion of the Divine role bordering on heresy, with its focus on the instrumental power of God to ward and protect rather than God as the object of our devotion and service. Jacob seems audacious and bold, calling on God—as an angelic protector—to prevent harm from coming to his children so that they may produce countless schools of Israelite offspring.

Yet Jacob’s invocation of heaven’s protection, while spiritually daring, is not as heretical as it may at first seem. My argument derives from an ancient Rabbinic ritual that remains in Jewish religious practice, *birkat hagomel*, a blessing recited publicly in synagogue by those who have recently survived danger: “Blessed are you, ADONAI, Ruler of the universe who grants good things to those deserving punishment.” In a bold-faced admission, we Jews regularly assert our unworthiness as candidates for Divine protection. In truth, we say, we deserve to have perished in whatever recent crises we faced. Yet, somehow, perhaps because of the merit earned by our ancestors, God has instead chosen to ward off the jeopardy we face and prevent harm from coming to the children of Israel. This idea—that those who have faced danger should publicly say a blessing of thanksgiving for undeserved Divine protection—has its origin in another poetic text, a psalm from which we have been quoting of late to appeal for the swift release of hostages taken by Hamas on October 7th:

*Let them praise ADONAI for this lovingkindness,
For granting these wonders to human beings. (Psalm 107, refrain at v. 8, 15, 21,
and 31)*

The liturgical resonance with *birkat hagomel* (and its attendant demand for Divine prophylaxis) is unmistakable to the initiated ear. The Talmud expresses the requirement for *birkat hagomel* this way: *Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: Four classes of people must offer thanksgiving: Those who go down to the sea, those who journey in the wilderness, the invalid who recovers, and the prisoner who has been set free. (B. Berakhot 54b)*

The four categories are directly taken from four narratives presented in [Psalm 107](#). In each of these four cases the undeserving subject—whether lost in the wild, held captive, deathly ill, or in crisis at sea—calls out to God in their distress and lovingkindness and wonders follow on from heaven saving them. Between each of these narratives we hear the refrain at v. 8, 15, 21, and 31 exhorting these survivors to praise the God of Israel “. . . for this lovingkindness, / For granting these wonders to human beings.”

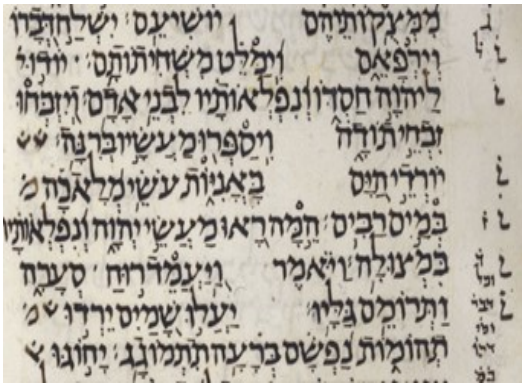
Calling out to God for protection is far from heretical in either the eyes of the Psalmist or the Sages of the Talmud. They seem unconcerned that we may change the Divine plan when we entreat the Divine will. However, the idea of an angelic God who grants good things and lovingkindness to some individuals while denying others does trouble my modern sense of what constitutes Divine justice. When I hear birkat hagomel my mind recalls a passage in Primo Levi's 1959 book *If This Is a Man* (also published in English as *Survival in Auschwitz*) describing the aftermath of a selektion, the survivors now back in their bunkroom:

Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen. Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas-chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer.

Do such abominations in modernity wipe out the legitimacy of propitiatory prayer? Does God now spit with disgust on our small prayers of thanksgiving when we (intuitively, I think) reach out with praise for our perception of lovingkindness and wonders?

Amazingly, the Talmud already seems to consider a similar question in [Tractate Rosh Hashanah \(17b\)](#) the Talmud asks what value crying out to God can have if all judgment is determined at the High Holidays. If the Divine mind is made up at Yom Kippur, how can our prayers for protection have any effect at other times of the year? Isn't such a prayer illegitimate, a waste of breath when our fates are already set? The Talmud turns to a set of odd graphical signs commonly written in Bible manuscripts of the day next to the portion of [Psalm](#)

107 that deals with those lost at sea (and still written in printed Hebrew bibles and even some of those online). A series of backwards Hebrew letters Nun appear at the start of each of these verses, as illustrated in the following image of a tenth-century Bible manuscript.



These signs may have had their origins in marking a piece of a text that was moved from its original location. But the Talmud uses these signs to solve another problem of dislocation: When we are alone, as individuals, we cannot change our set fates. But when we come together in community, we are no longer alone and powerless before the great sea of our troubles. When we come together, the Talmud claims these backwards letters indicate, we have a greater voice. We become numerous and powerful (like fish, can we say?) and the great sea is not the realm of our troubles, but the living waters of our lives, our home and even the light and length of our days. So we ask for Divine protection while pursuing our safety as a community and a nation in as many ways as we are able. Am yisrael hai. (*Marcus Mordecai Schwarts is Ripps Schnitzer Librarian For Special Collections and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS*)

[Vayechi: Blessing Israel to Be a Levi by Rabbi Daniel Plotkin](#)

https://truah.org/resources/daniel-plotkin-vayechi-moraltorah_2023/

In Parshat Vayechi, in the midst of blessing his sons, Jacob utters what seems to be a curse to his second and third sons, Simeon and Levi. Alluding to the wholesale slaughter of the town of Shechem for the terrible individual indiscretions of its prince, Jacob says to them, "Let not my person be included in their counsel, let not my being be counted in their assembly, for when angry they slay men." (Genesis 49:6) As Ibn Ezra put it in the 12th century, Jacob wants no part of their schemes and does not want them associated with his name.

Yet despite these words of rebuke and curse, the two tribes descended from Simeon and Levi take very different directions. Levi is the tribe of Moses and Aaron, serving as the keepers of the Ark of the Covenant and the caretakers of the Temple in Jerusalem. Those descended from the tribe of Levi still have their own knowledge of tribal identity to this very day. Simeon, on the other hand, is barely

mentioned after the time of Joshua and is eventually assimilated by the tribe of Judah.

So what is the difference between these two tribes that start with violence and are rebuked, if not condemned, for their wanton destruction? The only significant mention of Simeon in the wilderness involves a Simeonite, Zimri, being killed by Pinchas (a Levite) for the sin of Baal-Peor in Numbers 25. For Levi, however, we can see a redemption arc, a path away from violence to embracing peace, including when they stood by Moses' side in the incident of the Golden Calf.

As the tribe of Moses and Aaron, Levi takes on special leadership roles, and while there is backsliding (like Korah's rebellion and the aforementioned violent reaction by Pinchas), they become faithful servants of God in the wilderness. Perhaps because of Levi's violent past, they are excluded from war in order to take on their sacred duties. They are able to hear Jacob's rebuke to Levi and take to heart the necessity of pursuing peace. Simeon does not and, as a result, eventually disappears from the narrative.

Today the choices in war and peace are extremely nuanced and complex as we look at our fellow Jews in Israel. There is no doubt that Hamas is a seemingly irredeemable Simeon, committed to terror with a goal of expanding violence. They will not hear or heed a rebuke. The Israeli government, however, has the chance to be a Levi, stepping back from a widespread violent response to extreme wrongs committed against Israel and figuring out how to pursue justice instead of vengeance. While I cannot support any solution that falls short of redeeming those still captive to Hamas, it is time for us — diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews alike — to ask questions of the Israeli government and to issue a loving rebuke. The current path is not working and only will result in more death and destruction. Peace earned through this path will be fragile and temporary at best.

We can be that modern day Jacob, saying to the Israeli government — and to the members of our own government who have the ear of Israeli leaders — that the course of wanton violence is a dead end. Such widespread destruction will not achieve the stated goals of this war, and in fact is likely detrimental to the stated goals of freeing the hostages and neutralizing Hamas.

The violence wrought by Simeon and Levi, for which Jacob rebukes them, was motivated by sheer revenge. Even as the anger motivating it was understandable, it ultimately solved nothing and caused potential problems in the future (see Genesis 35:5). So too, there are those in Israeli society, enabled and encouraged by (often Islamophobic) elements both within and outside of diaspora Judaism, who seek only revenge. They desire to continue on the path of Simeon, the path of continued violence that ended in the disappearance of the tribe.

Instead, by using our voices, we can try to rebuke — or bless — Israel to be a Levi, turning away from wanton violence in order to create an opening for peace. It would be easy to simply bomb Gaza until nothing is left standing, but then what? Peace is difficult. It requires understanding, listening, and a great deal of courage. May we have the courage to speak this truth to power, and may those in power have the courage to hear our message. *(Rabbi Daniel Plotkin is Rabbi-Educator at Temple Isaiah in Fulton Maryland. Ordained in 2002 from HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, Rabbi Plotkin has served pulpits in Texas and Missouri before shifting to educational work and settling in Maryland.)*

Vayechi: Gifts From God from The Accidental Talmudist

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2023/12/26/vayechi-gifts-from-god/>

Table for Five: Vayechi

In partnership with the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles

Edited by Salvador Litvak, The Accidental Talmudist

Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God gave me here." So he said, "Now bring them near to me, so that I may bless them." – Gen. 48:9

Bracha Goetz, Author of 42 Jewish children's books

Joseph comes before his father, Jacob, with his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, and his father, Jacob, seems to be uncertain who these two young men are. Why? Jacob's eyes are failing in his old age, but he is able to see two approximately 19-year-olds accompanying Joseph, dressed like Egyptian officials in royal clothing. They are not wearing the kind of clothes that the people in Jacob's family wear. Joseph explains to his father that this is because Joseph and his family work closely with the Egyptian monarchy so they are dressed in Egyptian garb out of respect for the Egyptian royalty. Joseph then further explains that God gave him these sons with his wife, Dina's exiled daughter, Asenath. Joseph shows his father the Ketubah which proves he is married to the daughter of Dinah. So Asenath was born from a Jewish mother and is therefore not only Jewish herself – but she is Jacob's own granddaughter!

What is also wondrous is that even though his sons grew up in this Egyptian Diaspora, a corrupting and immoral atmosphere, they have been able to remain moral individuals living in awe of God's ways. When Joseph explained this to his father, Jacob was immediately able to give his grandsons his full-hearted blessings. And to this day, we continue to give our offspring the blessing that they will be like Ephraim and Menashe – able to remain moral individuals, living in awe of God's ways – withstanding the corrupting and immoral atmosphere in their midst.

[Dini Coopersmith, Educational Director, Orot HaTorah, www.reconnectiontrips.com](http://www.reconnectiontrips.com)

Yaakov's question "mi eileh" (who are these?) that pre-empted this verse is strange- does he not recognize his own grandchildren? And what does Yosef mean by his answer: "These are the sons God gave me here"? Where else would they have been given?

Netivot Shalom gives a chassidic answer regarding this interchange. There are 2 approaches to service of God. One is through fear, avoiding evil, and the other is through love, a passionate pursuit of good deeds and learning Torah. Yaakov, whose main trait is "Tiferet" (Torah, Truth, Balance) saw Yosef's children and wondered why they seem to be serving God out of fear, a defensive Judaism, and not out of love, which is a higher form of relating to Hashem.

The words "mi eileh" in Hebrew have the same letters as "elohim" which is God's name associated with fear and judgment, as opposed to Hashem which denotes Compassion and Love. Yaakov, who is the paradigm of balance, is asking: why don't your sons relate to Hashem with love as well? Yosef answers: these are children who grew up here, in Egypt, "ervat haaretz" a den of iniquity and sexual immorality. In this environment, with evil rampant, and desires beckoning on every street corner, the way to serve God is only through awareness that God is watching, that there will eventually be Judgment, and that one needs to avoid evil at all costs. This approach is necessary in a permissive society such as this, where there are no boundaries.

[Rabbi Jon Leener, Prospect Heights Shul](#)

Joseph's most endearing quality is his capacity to center his life around God, demonstrating complete God-consciousness. In this verse, he makes it clear that he understands his children to be a gift from God. For Joseph, everything is connected and given by God. In Parshat Vayigash, when revealing himself to his brothers, he says, "Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you."

In Parshat Vayeishev, when interpreting the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker, Joseph again evokes God by saying, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" If Abraham discovered God, it's Joseph who manifests God, who is intoxicated with God. To be Joseph is to see God's invisible hand in every aspect of his existence. This is why he has the distinguished title of "Yosef HaTzaddik" (Joseph the Righteous). In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The pious man is possessed by his awareness of the presence and nearness of God...He feels embraced by God's mercy as by a vast encircling space." This is most inspiring because despite Joseph's traumatic life, he still has the capacity to see everything as a blessing. This seems like the most relevant Torah of the current moment.

Nicholas Losorelli, Fourth Year Student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Approaching the end of his life, Israel has the trial of losing and finding Joseph, and the rest of his sons' bad behavior weighing on his heart, while also meeting his grandsons Manasseh and Ephraim, for the first time. Emotions and stakes are high, perhaps with the fear that his grandsons might be in danger when he dies, at the hands of the rest of his sons. Israel brings his own baggage regarding receiving a blessing from his father, one that led to so much strife between him and his older brother Esau. Taking what power and life he has left, he makes a different choice from the one that was made for him. He brings both Manasseh and Ephraim under the protection of his blessing and subverts the very practice that favored the older brother over the younger that led to the needless strife with his brother. The practice he subverted was one that his father Isaac and his mother Rebecca felt themselves trapped by. Rebecca out of deep love feared that her son Jacob would be left with nothing by this system, and protected him. Isaac felt stuck, and unable to alter the rules of blessing-giving, with Esau also falling victim along the way, creating a winnerless situation. With his final moments, Israel decided it was time to make a new choice, to stop the cycle of pain, and imagine a new reality. May we follow Israel's example and may we all be so brave, bold, and loving.

Rabbi Sofia Zway, Base Rabbi, Base LA

The first time I witnessed my father-in-law bless his grandchildren, my nieces and nephew, I cried. I teared up not only because it was the first time in my life that I'd seen the ritual blessing of children, but because I knew that my future children would never receive a blessing from my father, z"l. Every Shabbat I spend with my in-laws, I cherish this moment.

The ritual of blessing children and grandchildren on Shabbat originates in this scene from Parashat Vayechi. This intergenerational encounter acts as a bridge between the past and the future. Joseph's children, born in Egypt, represent the future of Israel. Jacob, as the last surviving patriarch, represents the past, the history, of this troubled biblical family. As the future meets the past, the past bestows blessings on the future. What is this blessing? "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." Rabbi Laura Geller suggests that we bless our children in the name of Ephraim and Manasseh because they are the first two siblings in the Torah that never fight (The Torah: A Women's Commentary, p. 299). Jacob's grandsons represent the possibility of a future transformed by the lessons of the past. With his blessing, Jacob ensures that his descendants will continue to thrive, always cognizant of where they have come from and what it means to be Bnei Yisrael. May God make my children like Ephraim and Manasseh, bridges between

past and future, and may they know the blessings of both their grandfathers.

Yahrzeits

David Rubin remembers his father Martin Rubin on Monday January 1

Treasure Cohen and Rachel Rose Siwoff remember their father Abraham L. Levin on Tuesday January 2