

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayechi
January 3, 2026 *** 14 Tevet, 5786

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."

[Vayechi Haftarah in a Nutshell: I Kings 2:1-12](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/611890/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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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 haftarah 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 by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l \(5776\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/on-not-predicting-the-future/)
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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 is 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.

[Pictures at a Benediction: Envisioning Jacob's Blessing of his Sons: Vayehi by Eliezer B Diamond z"l \(1917\)](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/pictures-at-a-benediction-envisioning-jacobs-blessing-of-his-sons/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/pictures-at-a-benediction-envisioning-jacobs-blessing-of-his-sons/>

The Tanakh is notoriously parsimonious when it comes to providing visual details. They are supplied only when they are germane to the biblical narrative. Was Isaac good-looking? We are not told. But we are told that Joseph was, because it explains why Potiphar's wife cast her eyes upon him. Was Moses bald? We will never know. But it is made clear that the prophet Elisha was; because of this, he was taunted by jeers: "Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!" This is the beginning of the brief but horrifying story in which Elisha curses the children who mock him, who are then mauled by bears emerging from the forest (2 Kings 2:23-24).

Along these lines, one may wonder: what did Jacob's bedchamber look like when the brothers came to receive their final blessings—and curses? (Gen. 49) I have found numerous artistic renderings, but two in particular caught my attention because of how differently they paint the scene.

One is a miniature by the 15th century manuscript illuminator Francois le Barbier, also known as Maître Francois. He depicts the sons kneeling solemnly before Jacob. The sons are ranged on both sides of the bed, dressed in identical clothing. However, on one side there are four sons attired in a dark, monochrome fashion. There are also four sons on the

other side; two dressed in red, one in green, and the fourth in a dull purple. As opposed to the monochrome sons, whose gazes are modestly directed downward, two of the more colorfully dressed sons look toward Jacob with glances of supplication; one of the others is looking towards one of his brothers. The face of the fourth is hidden. As for Jacob, he reclines with his right hand raised in the iconic Christian gesture of blessing—index and middle fingers (and presumably thumb as well, though it is obscured) raised. Words literally scroll forth from his mouth, containing the request that he be buried in the cave of Mahpelah in Hebron. It is hard for me to infer the significance of the differences in clothing and expression. Are the sons in colorful attire Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah? Is Joseph the brother dressed in purple? No matter who is who, the scene is presented as a decorous one. Though the glance of the brother looking at his sibling may be anxious, as a whole the sons seem ready to accept whatever words issue from Jacob's mouth, good or bad.

Very different is the engraving by Gerard Hoet in the 1728 volume *Figures de la Bible*. Here we are in a riotous marketplace. Jacob's space is invaded by a horde of competing petitioners. One son has his head down upon the bed, his forearms raised and hands clasped in supplication. Others look toward Jacob in entreaty. One seems to be reasoning—or arguing—with his father. Another stands far from Jacob, leaning—or rather sagging—against the wall; his facial expression and body posture bespeak defeat and despair. There are even some women in the background and a disgruntled nurse in the foreground, obviously annoyed at being hindered in her ministrations. And in the midst of it all is Jacob. He sits upright; his right hand is open and extended, a

gesture that seems to be a plea for order and quiet.

The first depiction likely presents the scene as Jacob might have imagined it: “I will bless or curse each of my sons as is his due. Each will understand that my words are fitting and will accept them unquestioningly. I will then die in peace, be mourned by my sons, and be buried with my fathers.” The second depiction likely reflects more accurately how the sons would have experienced their last moments with their father. Some fear what will come; some await it eagerly. Some yearn for paternal compassion; some await blessing as their due. Some are hopeless and turn away despondent and angry. And all of them know that there are many others in the room, vying with each other for the limited attentions and affections of an old and dying man.

Those of us who are parents often think that we know our children and what is best for them. We see ourselves apportioning appropriate measures of praise and criticism to each of them—appropriate because we know them and what they need. And surely, we imagine, they all know that we love them equally and that there is no need for them to feel in competition with one another for our affections.

And then we remember that we, too, are children. Some of us may remember parental criticism that we felt was hurtful and undeserved. Some of us might recall how a father’s praise of one child can feel like an act of criticism or denigration for another. We may recollect that when great love and attention are showered upon one sibling, another may wonder how much love is left for her. And some of us might remember a sense of how much there is that our parents don’t know—or, perhaps, never did understand—about us.

Le Barbier’s depiction is an attractive but false one; Hoet’s is

dispiriting but truer to life. The world of children and parents is not neat and ordered. Love and jealousy live side by side; insight and ignorance dwell together. Whatever blessings parents seek to give their children, let them be given with humility and sensitivity, both toward them and toward any siblings who are looking on—and they are always looking on
(Eliezer Diamond (z"l) earned his doctorate in Talmud and was the Rabbi Judah Nadich Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics. He passed away in December 2025 after a long illness.)

[Vayechi: Our Souls, Bound up with Our Brothers'](https://truah.org/resources/hannah-ellenson-vayechi-moraltorah_2025/)
[by Rabbi Hannah Ellenson](https://truah.org/resources/hannah-ellenson-vayechi-moraltorah_2025/)
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[moraltorah_2025_ /](https://truah.org/resources/hannah-ellenson-vayechi-moraltorah_2025/)

While accompanying synagogue members and hospital patients at a loved one's death bed, I have witnessed declarations of love, hopes for the future, and the passing on of legacy. There is always an attempt at saying one more word, a desire to say one more sentence that could convey what the other person has meant, what their life has meant. Each of these experiences is both extremely unique to each person and each family and is also universal, as we will all eventually experience that moment, hopefully surrounded by loving family and friends.

This week's Torah portion, Vayechi, recounts Jacob's final moments of life. Reading it, I was struck by how lucky Jacob is to gather his family around him. He *"assembled [his sons] with the Divine Spirit."* (Bereshit Rabbah 98:3) Jacob knows this moment is important and holy. He wants them around him to make sure they know how he feels about them. They have hardly had easy relationships, but ultimately, he wants to be

honest with them, to explain what it has meant to him to be their father. If he is not going to be honest now, then when? Though it is rarely easy to speak or hear hard truths, true engagement requires honesty, and this, too, can be an expression of love. Jacob's final words teach us that honesty and interconnectedness are essential, even in moments of pain.

What Jacob recites, though, is a challenging and dense 25 verses that are a mix of blessings and what seem to be curses as he addresses each son individually. To Judah, he says, "You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise; your hand shall be on the nape of your foes; your father's sons shall bow low to you." (Genesis 49:8)

Judah's enemies and his brothers are mentioned in almost the same breath, blurring the line between kinship and conflict. The words used are also quite similar: *oyvecha* (your enemies) and *bnei avicha* (your brothers). What are we to make of this? Are our brothers really our enemies, and are our enemies actually our brothers?

Depending on a variety of circumstances, there are times when those whom we may perceive to be outsiders are our allies, and there are also times when those who are our brothers could not feel further away. Thinking of people as outsiders or as others is, of course, permissible, but perhaps Jacob is trying to convey that we are obligated to them nonetheless. In our current moment, we are extremely quick to name someone as our enemy and to keep them there. But perhaps we need to be open to dynamics being able to shift: Those we perceive as enemies could actually be our allies. I would be hard-pressed to think of a more meaningful deathbed lesson to impart.

It is all too easy to dismiss the pain of others, to say that I do not need to care about someone who is not my brother. That is the opposite of Jacob's message, though. "When suffering has hardened our hearts," writes Rabbi Susan Talve, "we have forgotten that our lives are all connected, one soul bound up with the other..."

Earlier in Jacob and Joseph's story, Joseph overhears Judah suggesting that if something were to happen to his brother, Benjamin, Jacob would surely die because his "soul is bound up with his." (Genesis 44:30) Joseph's heart then opens to forgive his brothers despite being in a moment of great despair. Even amidst deep pain, we can bless those around us by rejecting self-interest and working for the common good, embracing harmony and a vision of the world as it could be.

In the end, Jacob's words remind us that life's most sacred moments call us to speak truth and to recognize our deep ties with one another. Even when relationships are fraught, even when pain tempts us to turn away, we are bound together. If we can embrace that truth, then even in the shadow of death, we can choose blessing and connection and create a world where even former enemies can become brothers.

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[Blessing Our Children: Vayehi by Rabbi Dr. Rachel Posner](https://ajr.edu/parashat-vayehi-5786/)
<https://ajr.edu/parashat-vayehi-5786/>

In my new role as a congregational rabbi, I have the incredible honor of working with conversion students—people choosing Judaism. Yesterday I met with one of my students, Tom, who is nearing the culmination of the process and preparing to meet with the Beit Din. We met to talk about his choice of a Hebrew name. Tom decided to take the name Yaakov, because Jacob’s God-wrestling resonated deeply with him. Wonderful.

Once that question was resolved, I asked Tom to consider the names of his Jewish parents. In our tradition, after all, our name is never merely Jacob or Rachel. Every Jewish name includes the name of one’s parents—an acknowledgment of where we come from.

Traditionally, gerim assume the parental names of our first ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. I offered Tom the possibility that he might forgo that tradition in favor of honoring someone in his life who felt like a Jewish parent to him.

“Oh no,” Tom said. “Bearing the names of Abraham and Sarah has incredible meaning to me. It links me to a chain of tradition. It connects me to my adoptive ancestors.”

Vayehi, the parashah of endings and blessings, teaches us that blessing is precisely this act: linking a person to a lineage without erasing their individuality.

In Judaism, our ancestors abound. We invoke them in prayer. We study their words. Their names become our names. The shalshet dorot, the chain of generations, binds us to the past and to one another. Nowhere is this more tangible than in one of our most beloved home rituals: birkat hayeladim, the blessing of the children. In this ritual, parents step into the role of the Kohanim, offering blessings that link their children to ancestral hope.

While the core words of Birkat Kohanim come from Numbers 6:24–26, the opening formula of birkat hayeladim comes from this week’s portion, when Jacob blesses his grandchildren as he nears the end of his life:

וַיְבָרֶכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְאִמּוֹרְ בְרַךְ יִבְרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאִמֹּר יִשְׁמַךְ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם
וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה:

“So he blessed them that day, saying: ‘By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’”

Why Ephraim and Manasseh? It is striking that the blessing for boys invokes Joseph’s children, while the parallel blessing for girls names the matriarchs—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

Rabbi Mordechai Elon[1] suggests that Ephraim and Manasseh are held up because they are the first pair of biblical brothers who do not treat one another as rivals. After generations of fraternal conflict—from Cain and Abel through Jacob and Esau—these brothers model a relationship sustained by peace. In blessing our children, we pray that they, too, will forge relationships built on peace and sustained by peace.

Rabbi Shmuel Hominer[2] offers a different lens. Ephraim and Manasseh grow up as minorities within Egyptian society, surrounded by a dominant culture that threatens to engulf and flatten their distinctiveness. They face the pressures of assimilation and yet remain rooted in their people and their faith. In this reading, we bless our children to remain themselves—even when it is hard to do so.

After this initial blessing, Jacob goes on to bless each of his sons individually. Some of these blessings feel less like blessings and more like prophecies, or even moral reckonings.

Yet in each case, Jacob speaks to the specific nature of the son standing before him. Sforno (Genesis 49:28) comments that Jacob “gave an individual blessing to each one in accordance with what he perceived to be the son’s need in view of his eventual destiny.” Or HaHaim (Genesis 49:28) similarly notes that “each person received a blessing in keeping with his individual personality and achievements.”

Jacob, at the end of his life, models a theology of blessing that holds two truths at once: each child belongs to a shared story, and each child requires a blessing uniquely their own.

Birkat hayeladim infuses our hopes, fears, and love into our children—but more than that, it blesses the relationship between parent and child. It sanctifies the bond that links the generations. Even, or especially, when that relationship becomes tense or fraught, birkat hayeladim invokes the shalshet dorot to remind us of the common source we share, even as we honor the singular gifts of each child.

When it comes to family life, the days are long, but the years are short. Birkat hayeladim has taken on greater significance for me as I watch the number of Friday nights before our youngest leaves for college steadily dwindle. Most Friday evenings, when I bless my daughters, I try to remember to add a silent extra prayer that a rabbi friend taught me years ago: “God, please bless me to be the parent this child needs now.”

In a tradition so deeply concerned with transmitting faith across generations, birkat hayeladim gives us a moment—amid carpools, homework, doctors’ appointments, and handwashing—to pause and pray not only for our children, but for ourselves. It asks that the Blessed Holy One help us each become worthy links in the sacred chain of the Jewish people.

[1] HaravElon.co.il, [Commentary on Parashat Vayehi](#), and

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/blessing-the-children/>
[2] Eved HaMelech, Commentary on Parashat Vayehi, and
<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/blessing-the-children>

Yahrtzeits

David Rubin remembers his father Martin Rubin on Friday
January 9th