



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayechi 5771

By Shira Fischer

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At points of transition, particularly at the end of life, it is natural to look back at what we have accomplished and ahead to what we are giving the next generation. Some of us will bequeath money—directed towards a specific cause, through a foundation or in a building. Others will pass on our ideas through the institutions we found or the books we publish, or through the memories of our students and children. These are the ways that we hope our legacy—the things we lived for in life, our values and commitments—will live on.

So seemed to be Jacob's mindset as he lay on his deathbed, reviewing his life. He knew his children would be his legacy, already a large number and Divinely destined to grow.¹ He therefore proceeded with what is arguably the most poetic portion of B'reishit, his description of what will happen to each son "at the end of days." Some sons he praised for living his values. For example, he noted Judah's leadership among his brothers and other peoples, and he praised the tenacity of Gad and Dan by sneaking the root of his own name—*akeiv*, "ankle,"—into their blessings. Others he critiqued for failing to embody his values, as with his rebuke of Simon and Levi for their violence in the city of Sh'chem. His blessings to other sons suggest a reflective hope that his children's lives will be better than his own: he blessed Asher with agricultural plenty, perhaps remembering the famine his own family endured; and when he blessed Naftali with the speed of a doe, he might have hoped to spare him the burden of travel, like the slow migration he made from Laban's home with four wives, 11 children and a lot of livestock.²

And yet, this account of praise, critique, values and aspirations was probably not enough of a legacy for Jacob. He wanted his children not only to know his values, but also to live them out in the world, to carry on the ethical trajectory of his life. Perhaps this is reflected in Jacob's parting utterance: more command than wish, he instructed all his sons that he desired to be buried not in Egypt, but with his ancestors—"Where Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife, where Isaac was buried, and Rebecca his wife, and where I buried Leah."³ By asking his sons not to leave him in Egypt, he was forcing them to take action, to stay connected to their ancestors, and ultimately, to leave Egypt and return to the land of Israel.

The rest of the Torah can be viewed as the story of the Children of Israel attempting to fulfill Jacob's—Israel's—legacy. As we follow the story, we may ask ourselves the same questions that the Children of Israel face: What legacy was left to us? What are we doing with what we have inherited to move our story forward, to make the world a better place than the one into which we were born?

It is not easy to answer this question, as we have each inherited multiple legacies from the many people who have come before us and inspired us. As children, we must ask: what have we inherited from our ancestors, and how can

¹Genesis 28:14.

²Genesis 49:1-28.

³Genesis 49:31.

we move their values forward? And as people who want to actively effect change in the world, we must ask: what work have we inherited from the activists before us, and how are we doing our part to move these causes forward?

A difficult but effective way to answer these questions is to put ourselves in Jacob's place: what do we want our own legacy to be to those whom we will leave behind? Will each of us be remembered as someone who worked to make the world a better place, who worked to help the vulnerable, who advocated for justice? If not, what might we do differently so that when we get to that point in our lives, we will be able to look back and say, I have lived out the legacy left to me, and I leave behind a legacy of my own?

Legacy is thus as much about looking forward as it is about looking back. Indeed, as this *parshah* brings us to the end of B'reishit, the first book of the Torah, it is interesting to note that each book ends with a hint about where the Children of Israel are headed. B'reishit, Genesis, ends with the word "Egypt," as the Children of Israel become the Nation of Israel and begin their extended stay in Egypt. Sh'mot, Exodus, ends with "on all their journeys," as they depart Egypt for the desert. Vayikra, Leviticus, closes with "at Mount Sinai," leading us into the Israelites' travels through the Sinai Desert, chronicled in B'midbar, Numbers. Its closing words are "the Jordan near Jericho," where the Israelites stay through the final book of the Torah. And D'varim, Deuteronomy, closes the Torah with the word "Israel," propelling the Jewish people into the Land. With this literary forward momentum, it is as if the Torah is leaving us with its legacy: the command to apply what we have learned as we move forward on our journey.

The last *parshah* of the whole Torah, *V'zot Hab'rachah*, references the legacy of Jacob once more, calling the Torah the "legacy of the community of Jacob."⁴ As Rashi comments on that phrase: "We have taken hold of it, and we will not forsake it!"⁵ So too, the legacy of our ancestors and predecessors is not something simply left to us as a memory or keepsake, but rather, it is an impetus to action—to take hold of, to live out and to pass along to those who come after us.



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⁴Deuteronomy 33:4.

⁵Rashi on Deuteronomy 33:4.

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