

# Life and Death and Life in Egypt: The End of Genesis and the Genesis of Jewish Eternity

*Parashat Vayechi*, Genesis, Chapters 46-50 | December 16, 2021

One of the most famous paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is Jacques-Louis David's "The Death of Socrates." The great philosopher sits atop his deathbed discoursing on the meaning of life, and why he is prepared to die. Meanwhile, a disconsolate disciple holds the hemlock that will end the life of his teacher. While the disciple is sad, Socrates is not; as he described in the Platonic dialogue known as the *Phaedo*—which inspired this scene—Socrates believed this world to be one in which his soul was imprisoned in his body, and that death would release him to the realm of truth. Studying the canvas, it is easy to miss the weeping woman being led away on the left; this is Xanthippe, Socrates' wife, and she will not be present for the final moments of her husband's life. It is not a part of the painting to which much attention is usually paid, but it is an aspect of great importance, for it tells us that even as the artist gives us one of the most famous death scenes in the history of the West, it is also one of the least Jewish images you will ever see.

Joseph sends his brothers back to Canaan to inform Jacob of the astonishing news that the patriarch's long-lost son lives. Father and child are reunited in a most moving scene, and then Jacob and several of his sons are brought before Pharaoh. But Joseph has coached his family before they appear:

*And Joseph said unto his brethren, and unto his father's house: I will go up, and tell Pharaoh, and will say unto him, My brethren, and my father's house, who were in the Land of Canaan, are come into me.*

*And the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have.*

*And it shall come to pass, when Pharaoh shall call you and shall say: What is your occupation?*

*That ye shall say: Thy servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth, even until now, both we, and our fathers; that ye may dwell in the land of Gosben; for every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians. (Genesis 46:31-34)*

Joseph here seeks to ensure the social separation of the Israelites from all of Egypt, and so he suggests that they stress a vocation that will mark them as pariahs. And this separation is just what was achieved:

*And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Gosben, and they had them possessions therein, and were fruitful, and multiplied exceedingly. (Genesis 47:27)*

Joseph from the outset prevents Israelite assimilation, ensuring thereby covenantal continuity and culture. The worldviews of Israel and Egypt are at odds and must be kept separate. As we have discussed, Egypt is not only pagan, but is obsessed with staving off old age, defeating death, and achieving physical immortality and eternal youth. The Egyptians, in other words, seek their own twist on the lyrics of Bob Dylan from his album *My Back Pages*, later lyrically sung by the Byrds:

Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.

But embracing eternal youth is inimical to the Israelite way of life; for us it is the elderly who are revered as the repositories of the wisdom of the past; they are the mediators of the *mesorah*, the Hebrew word for tradition. As Leon Kass stresses throughout his book on Genesis,

unlike Egypt, we Jews do not deny death but prepare for it by transmitting Torah to the next generation. This Israelite approach to immortality is the theme of the last chapters in Genesis. The text's focus on the physical infirmity and ultimate passing of the patriarch is traditionally referred to by Jews as "Vayechi," "and Jacob lived." For how Jacob dies will tell us a great deal about Jewish life. Two scenes are most prominent in the final chapters of Genesis, and both involve a dying leader, Jacob. In this, we may instinctively compare what unfolds to the death of the great philosopher who Jacques-Louis David asks us to imagine. The first biblical scene involves Joseph's children—Jacob's grandchildren—and it is described in Chapter 48:

*And it came to pass after these things that one said to Joseph, Behold thy father is sick: and he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. (Genesis 48:1)*

Jacob asks Joseph to swear that following his own death, he, Jacob will be buried in Holy Land, along with his ancestors. Then Jacob, assured that he will be interred with his predecessors, suddenly focuses on the future and gratefully gathers his grandchildren unto him. He places his right hand on the younger boy, Ephraim, and his left on the elder child Manasseh, explaining to the astonished Joseph that it will be Ephraim from whom truly important leaders will descend. Jacob, however, emphasizes that both sons are blessed, and we cannot help but realize as we read that here the patriarch is creating a mirror image of his encounter with Esau. Here too the patriarch is blind, yet here the two children are joined as one, without animosity or rivalry.

*Israel's eyes were fading because of old age, and he could hardly see, so Joseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. (Genesis: 48:10)*

And while I still believe Jacob's actions with Isaac to have been a tragic necessity, here there is no need for one child to wrap himself in goat skin in order to deceive his father or grandfather. Strikingly, if you look at Rembrandt's exquisite depiction of Jacob blessing his grandchildren you will see a hint to the previous tale of blessing. As Simon Schama put it:

Rembrandt has given the dying Jacob a shawl of animal skin wrapped around his neck and falling down his back as a further reminder of the earlier story.

Brining the two boys together, Jacob informs their father that Jewish parents will forever bless their children that they live in imitation of these two boys:

*And he blessed them that day saying: By thee shall Israel bless, saying God make thee as Ephraim and Manasseh... (Genesis 49:20)*

Why would we wish our children to emulate Joseph's? What do we even know about Jacob's famous grandchildren? The answer perhaps lies in the realization that this is the first grandparent-grandchild interaction that we are seeing in the Bible. Such a relationship lies at the heart of Jewish culture to this day. During the pandemic, an Israeli article interviewed a senior citizen named Amnon Frank, who expressed what drove him to be vaccinated as soon as it was possible:

A grandchild without a hug is half a grandchild. We haven't hugged them since March.

As important as grandchildren have always been to Jews, we do not see Abraham with his grandson Jacob, or Isaac with his grandson Judah. Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik tells us that

Abraham and Isaac transmitted their spiritual heritage to their sons, not to their grandsons. The latter received it from their fathers, but there was no communication between Abraham and Jacob or between Isaac and Reuben and Simeon. Jacob, however, related directly to his grandchildren; he did not need an intermediary or an interpreter; his was a direct dialogue. He leapt over the gulf of generations and transmitted the great *Mesorah* [tradition] of Abraham directly to Ephraim and Menashe. Despite the discrepancy of years, the *Zaken* [the elderly individual], the carrier of the old tradition, succeeded.

How appropriate, therefore, that our people is called Israel or Jacob, for it was he who created the Jewish community which ensures Jewish continuity.

Thus, the bond between Jacob and his grandchildren embodies the bond between generations, and when parents echo their ancestor Israel, their blessing to their progeny is “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh,” essentially asking that we share with our children what Jacob shared with his grandchildren. We are expressing: may you be worthy of the hopes and dreams that your parents, grandparents, and all your ancestors have invested in you; may you embody our immortality.

The second central scene at the conclusion of Genesis comes as Jacob gathers his children about him and prepares to die. He criticizes some, praises others, and predicts the future. Special focus is given to Judah and Joseph, the two heroes of the tale, who will most profoundly influence the future of biblical Israel. But all of Jacob’s sons are there: unlike Abraham and Isaac, all of them continue his covenant. This unity is emphasized by Jacob himself:

*Gather together and hear, ye sons of Jacob, and hearken unto Israel your father. (Genesis 49:2)*

With all his sons around him, Jacob passes away. Or does he? The Talmud tells us that “*Yaakov Avinu lo met*,” “Jacob, our forefather, never died.” This may seem a strange thing to say, for we know that he will be buried in Hebron in the cave of Machpelah. The meaning of the statement by the rabbis is that in this familial unity, joined by both children and grandchild, the patriarch embodies for Jews the essence of immortality.

In a moving traditional Talmudic tale, the sons of Israel all affirm their faith around their father’s deathbed before their fathers passing by saying:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

In this moment, in this story, the reference “Hear, O Israel” is not to the *nation* Israel but to their *father*

Israel, assuring him of their own unity in covenantal commitment to the God of Israel. The death of Jacob thus provides an interesting contrast to that of Socrates. Jacques-Louis David shows the wife of Socrates being led away weeping because that is exactly how Plato describes the scene in his dialogue about the death of his teacher:

On entering we found Socrates just released from chains, and Xanthippe, whom you know, sitting by him, and holding his child in her arms. When she saw us she uttered a cry and said, as women will: “O Socrates, this is the last time that either you will converse with your friends, or they with you.” Socrates turned to Crito and said: “Crito, let someone take her home.” Some of Crito’s people accordingly led her away, crying out and beating herself.

There are many Talmudic death scenes where rabbis pass from this world surrounded by their students. But unlike those rabbis, Socrates appears utterly uninterested in having his wife and child near him at this moment. Even Xanthippe herself, in the *Phaedo*, seems sad specifically because Socrates will converse with his friends for the last time, not because he will not be able to raise the child that she now holds, and transmit some of his wisdom to his own son.

Jacob seeks to join body and soul in imitating Abraham and fathering a family, whereas Socrates ignores his family. Socrates welcomes the release from his body and describes the physical world as a prison for his soul, whereas Jacob commands his children to bear his own body to the Holy Land, rooting it in sacred soil to prepare the way for his own peoples’ ultimate return to their national home. The *Phaedo* is stirring, and more detailed in every way than the tale of our patriarch’s passing, but which death scene speaks more profoundly to us as human beings, and as Jews? For my friend Eric Cohen, the choice is clear:

...for all its renown, the death of Socrates seems less fully human than the death of Jacob, which unites the private drama of father and sons with the public drama of Israel’s beginnings as a nation. Jacob’s

speech, if less grand than the apology of Socrates, seems truer to what it means to live in time, called to a purpose, remembered through the fidelity and perpetuation of one's offspring.

Cohen's contrast between these two very different deaths picks up on one of the central differences between Jerusalem and Athens. And here too the central point lies not only in philosophy but also in family. Where, for the Greeks and the Jews, can true human excellence be discovered? For Jews, it is first and foremost the family—where the physical bond and spiritual bond are joined, where transmission takes place—that is the realm of the truly sacred, and the truly human. For Aristotle, in contrast, as scholars note, the family merely provides preparation for service to the *polis*, where the great-souled man embodies excellence in politics. Plato, meanwhile—though how literally he means this is debated by scholars—goes even further, having Socrates declare in his *Republic* that in the truly just city-state, the philosopher-king must spurn parenthood, producing progeny without actually raising his offspring, in order to ensure the universal compassion for all citizens that justice requires. This strange and terrifying vision could not be more different than the biblical explanation for God's choosing of Abraham:

*For I have known him, that he will his command his children and household after him, to keep the ways of the Lord, to perform righteousness and justice... (Genesis 18:19)*

The Book of Genesis comes to a close with the end of Joseph's life. He is buried like an Egyptian but and dies like an Israelite, proclaiming the ultimate Jewish return to the Holy Land.

*And Joseph made the Children of Israel swear, saying, God will surely remember you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence.*

*So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. (Genesis 50:25-26)*

The mummification of Joseph, an Egyptian affectation,

highlights the vizier who dominated the political world like a colossus, but Joseph himself knows that one day he too will return to Israel to be buried the land of his ancestors, and that the faith of his fathers to which he pledged loyalty at Jacob's deathbed will continue through him and his children. And so too do we Jews pledge to this day—for therein lies Judaism's secret.

The Jews and the Greeks, Jerusalem and Athens, have impacted the world profoundly. Ideally, our search for wisdom can integrate teachings from both. But in history, Hellenism has also clashed with Judaism and we Jews mark this clash, and the miracle of Jewish eternity, by lighting Hanukkah candles every year. Strikingly, the Talmud tells us that the Hanukkah lights are meant to burn every evening "until the passersby leave the market." Ostensibly this means that the menorah should be lit until the public leaves the street so that as many people can see it as possible.

But a deeper meaning can be found if one tours ancient Athens itself, and visits what was once the *Agora*, the Athenian market, center of Greek civilization, where Socrates walked and talked. The *Agora* is, like the Roman Forum, a ruin, a tourist site, not the great center it once was. Meanwhile, the ancient Jerusalem of Israel has been to a great extent rebuilt. The passersby have left the *Agora*, the market, but the light of Jerusalem still burns. Only Israel is eternal. In Jerusalem, just as millennia ago, descendants of Israel, members of the nation Israel, in the State of Israel, not only light Hanukkah candles during the holiday, but gather daily to remember their ancient ancestor Jacob, remember his death, and say the words embodying his life, "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*" Greek wisdom has profoundly impacted civilization, perhaps more than any other Western culture, but even Athens is not Israel, and cannot come close to embodying Israel's eternity. And we may do well to wonder why. The answer begins with the story of Jewish covenantal commitment founded in family, and the way the man named Israel chose to die is profoundly linked to the reason that the nation of Israel still lives.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. When blessing his grandchildren, Jacob elevates the younger over the older—a theme we have seen consistently throughout Genesis. But in this instance, there is no jealousy between the brothers. Why do you think this generation breaks the familial pattern of fraternal strife?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik notes that Jacob is the first patriarch whose sons all remain a part of the covenant. Why might that be? Is this a credit to Jacob as a father? A credit to Judah or Joseph's leadership? Or something else?