

Parashat Vayekhi 5781

Shabbat Shalom. This Shabbat's Parasha, Vayekhi, is the last Parasha of the book of Genesis. Genesis begins with the creation of the universe. The creation story ends with the creation of human beings. By the time the book of Genesis reaches Abraham, it begins to focus on his extended family. The rest of the book focuses on the extended family ending with Joseph. Vayekhi literally means "And he lived" - in this case referring to Jacob. The book ends with the extended family living in exile from the Promised Land. At this point, things are very good for our ancestors in Egypt. It's now four generations – Abraham and Sarah, Rebecca and Isaac, Jacob and Rachel and Leah, and now Joseph and his brothers and their children.

There's a very interesting scene near the beginning of the portion in which Jacob is near his death and Joseph brings his two sons, the first born Menasheh and his younger brother Ephraim, to be blessed by their grandfather, Jacob, before he dies. The words that Jacob says are the words we use to this day when blessing a son on Friday night or on a holiday night: May G'd make you like Ephraim and Menashe (*Y'simkha Elokim K'Efraim v'kh'Menashe*).

With all four of the major generations of Jewish people at this point there is a struggle to remain connected to the land of Israel. Abraham is uprooted from his land, from his birthplace, from his father's house to go to this unknown land – the land of Canaan. Shortly after settling there, a famine forces him to go down to Egypt. The three successive generations have a similar relationship to the land of Canaan. At the same time, every generation longs to return. At the beginning of this Shabbat's Parasha, Jacob makes Joseph vow to bury him in the land of Canaan. He doesn't want to be buried in exile in Egypt. Even though they are dwelling in the land of Egypt in order to survive the long famine, for Jacob the sojourn in Egypt is only temporary. Even at the very end of the Parasha, Joseph also asks that he be taken back to the land of Israel to be buried. He believes that one day his descendants will return.

The remaining four books of the Torah end at the border of the land of Israel, with the people about to return to the land of their ancestors, four hundred years later. Our ancestors dwell there for the next thirteen hundred years or so, before the destruction of the Second Temple and the expulsion from the land by the Romans. For most of the next 2,000 years our people have lived in exile from the land of Israel, but always with a fervent desire to return to the land.

Joseph is an interesting figure in part because he has been an enormous success in the diaspora. Could he have returned earlier in his life, had he desired to? Circumstances seem to keep him in Egypt. When Jacob is going to bless Ephraim and Menashe, Joseph's sons, he precedes the blessing by exclaiming to Joseph, that these two boys are like Reuven and Shimon i.e. his own two first born sons, to him. Then when Jacob sees Ephraim and Menashe he asks "who are these?" Is this because they looked so Egyptian in their dress and manner or is it because his vision is so impaired? The text explicitly says that his vision is dim, but he nevertheless knows which boy is which. So more than likely it is their dress and manner that is so Egyptian, in other words, so assimilated into the majority culture.

We are living in a time quite different from most of the last two thousand years of Jewish history. We are living in a time of a reborn state of Israel, when Jews can fulfill that two-thousand-year long dream, that hope of living in our ancestral land. It's true that during the course of the long diaspora individual people did return to the land, there were Jewish communities there in Tzfat, Acco, Jerusalem, Tiberius, etc. When Jews began to return in larger numbers beginning in the 1880s through the early 1900s, the conditions were very difficult for surviving on their own. A group of a couple of hundred Chassidim went to Israel from Poland/Russia in the late 1700s. Most of these communities relied on economic help from the diaspora. But now we're living in very different times. Israel is a well-off country. It still is dependent on U.S. military aid, but we are living in a unique situation. However, unlike the longings of our ancestors to return, most of us don't. We may go to visit or even to live there for some years, but we more than likely consider ourselves at home in the diaspora. Is that because the United States has mostly been a less oppressive diaspora for us than any other? Also, the connection of Jews with Israel has been changing over the decades, especially in the United States.

The turning point was the Six-Day war. Until then Jews around the world felt that Israel was in peril for its existence. Many of us retain that feeling, but the generation known as millennials, who are the future of our people in the United States, don't feel that way at all. As a whole, Jewish millennials tend to be quite liberal and what they perceive as the occupied territories of the West Bank since 1967 makes them to a large degree either indifferent to Israel or turned off to Israel.

Our connection to Israel, in my opinion, should not be dependent on which political party is in power. Israel has clearly been changing dramatically over the years beginning with Menachem Begin's becoming Prime Minister in 1977. It's a long story that I don't have time to go into now. So much changed with Menachem Begin becoming the Prime Minister of Israel. He was the first Prime Minister not from the Labor Party, not raised with socialist ideals. For most of his political life he was the leader of the main opposition party. He wasn't even close to being able to form a government coalition. With his ascension to Prime Minister many things began to change in Israel that had been longtime hallmarks of the State. Begin diminished support for kibbutzim who were vital to Israel's existence from long before the establishment of the State; he took away subsidies from basic foods like milk, eggs, bread, and butter. Over the years there grew an increasing disparity between rich and poor in the country. Begin ramped up to a great degree support for the settler movement giving it a disproportionate influence in the country.

Even though the Israel that we all "grew up with" has changed dramatically, I strongly believe that Israel is still a beacon of light for the Jewish people around the world and for our future. Shabbat Shalom.