

PARASHAT VAYECHI

SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

# We must not give up the path

Parashat Vayechi concludes the book of Genesis, the first of the five books of the Torah. The parasha tells us about the blessings Jacob gave his sons before leaving this world, about Jacob's death and the royal funeral he was given, and it ends with the death of Joseph, viceroy to the King of Egypt.

When Jacob felt his days were numbered, he turned to his sons and said: "Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. Gather and listen, sons of Jacob..." (Genesis 49:1-2)

We can understand from these verses that Jacob was planning on telling them about the complete redemption that would emerge in the world at the end of days. But when we read the following verses in which Jacob blesses his sons, we find no reference to the end of days. The Sages say this: "Jacob wanted to reveal to his sons the end of days, but the Divine Presence abandoned him..." (Pesachim 56:1)

Our Sages taught us that Jacob indeed planned to tell his sons about the end of days, when the troubles and exiles of the Jewish nation would cease and they would reach their "resting place and inheritance" and when the Divine light would appear in the world in all its glory. Jacob knew about the end of days because of Divine inspiration, but at the moment he opened his mouth, that Divine Presence abandoned him. Therefore, he gave up on his desire to reveal the "end of days," and



HUMAN NATURE often strives to know how things will end. (Karsten Wurth/Unsplash)

instead decided to bless his sons.

A close examination of these verses reveals another layer of this interpretation. Indeed, Jacob initially wanted to share with his sons how the complete redemption would happen, when it would happen, but when the Divine Presence abandoned him, he realized it would not be the right thing to do.

Human nature often strives to know how things

will end: to read the last page of the book right at the beginning, to know ahead of time how and when we will find our partner or how we can become financially well-off. But that's not how the world works. To reach the goal, we have to undergo a process of effort and growth.

The means to an end is necessary to guarantee that full and desired goal. If we read the last page first, if we know in advance what the last stop in our life will be, then both the goal and path to it will lose their value and will not achieve their purpose.

This is true also regarding the end of days and the complete redemption. If the world would know in advance how and when we will reach our destination, the path will lose its significance and the goal will be something from which we will be unable to draw strength and inspiration.

When the Divine Presence abandoned Jacob, he understood that God desired the means, not just the end. We must be unaware of our future if we are to create it ourselves. Therefore, Jacob blessed his sons with blessings that also served as road maps.

He showed his sons the path they should choose for each of the 12 tribes; the path that – with hard work and effort – could lead the world to redemption and completeness. ■

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

DAVID WOLPE

# A fractal pattern

When writing a Torah column, you naturally wonder how much you are repeating other columns, lectures and interpretations that have gone before. But I suspect that no commentator has started an explanation of Parashat Vayechi with a cauliflower.

Perhaps a pomegranate, and apple is always a popular choice, but cauliflower may be unique. (Of course I'm prepared to be wrong.)

Some time ago, the Jewish mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot developed the theory of fractals. Now I don't claim to have mastered the math, so my seeking to explain it in numbers would be fruitless. But not vegetableless – for the cauliflower is a fractal pattern, that is, a whole all of whose parts look the same as the whole. If you break my watch, the pieces look like a broken watch. But if you pull off a piece of cauliflower, the piece looks like an entire cauliflower, only smaller.

The idea that the small has the same shape as the larger is powerful in

religious and mystical traditions. The *sefirot*, which are the entire mystical universe, are often portrayed as a human being, as though the macrocosm and the microcosm were the same. Hence the medieval statement that "man is the measure of all things."

Just as each character in the Torah is supposed to embody one of the *sefirot*, the *sefirot* as a whole look like a person. God contains all, the *sefirot* represent that, and our world is a fractal pattern of the greater reality.

*Vayechi* means "and he lived." The Talmud tells us that "Jacob never dies." The rabbis offer many explanations of this enigmatic statement. Jacob's life is itself a spiritual fractal. What we see in him is what is true of the Jewish people; Jacob does not die because his life lives in us all.

This is what our tradition means when it says that the doings of the ancestors are signs for the descendants. That which happened to them, happens to us on a smaller scale over and over – some of the events beautiful and some painful.

THE TRADITION of exile and return is a spiritual fractal in Jewish history. It happened in the past; it is a part of the Jewish experience, and it happens again. The tradition of commentary grows and grows but keeps the same overall shape, which is why the generations of commentators are in dialogue with one another. When the rabbis tell us to turn the Torah over and over for everything is in it, then in a spiritual sense, the Torah is the shape of the world, it is a founding fractal.

Jacob is leaving his children to face the world that will change. So he must give them lessons that will not change. He must bless them enduringly, with patterns that they and their children and their grandchildren will be able to understand, and will recur in their lives.

As we review Jacob's life we recognize the patterns: young and ambitious and perhaps heedless of others; visionary and spiritually aspiring; eager and in love; a parent who made mistakes, suffered, lost people dear to him yet lived a full life. We see that those patterns indeed do not die, that we repeat them generation after

generation as if, like Russian dolls, our lives are nested inside one another.

The patterns are not perfect. The fractal is not so true to form as mathematical models, to be sure. The life of Abraham is not the same as that of Jacob, and so we cannot say they resemble the entirety of Jewish history in exactly the same ways. Nonetheless, each piece of Torah history can be seen as inhabiting the same shape as the whole. This is unsurprising even in our own lives: the older one gets, the more one sees that the patterns, even those we sought to escape, almost inevitably recur.

The book of Ecclesiastes embodies this lesson, that everything which happens repeats what has gone before. There is something beautiful and sustaining in knowing that, even as we live our own lives, our ancestors' live through us, and the deep messages of Torah are found even in a cauliflower. ■

The writer is Max Webb senior rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author of David: The Divided Heart. On Twitter @rabbiwolpe.

JUDAISM 3.0  
GOL KALEV

# Who has the Abrahamic Blessing?

New insight on reasons Esau did not kill Jacob



GENESIS'S FINAL parasha sheds light on a key theme of the book: The succession battle for the blessing. (Nik Shuliahin/Unsplash)

Jacob's sons assumed that their father's death would prompt Joseph to kill them. This is due to events that occurred more than 90 years earlier, and were since forgiven by Joseph.

This is not the first time such fear surfaced. It seems hard to believe that during the Judah-Joseph exchange some 70 years earlier, the brothers did not suspect that the person in front of them was Joseph. For one, Simeon was in an Egyptian prison where he was possibly told. At a minimum, Joseph suspects that the brothers suspect.

Joseph doubts the brothers' assertion that their father is still alive. Hence, he asks them immediately after revealing his identity: "Is my father still alive?"

Why would he think that the brothers might be lying to him about Jacob being alive?

A possible explanation is that just like Esau pledged to only kill Jacob after their father's death, Joseph might think that the brothers assume that he would not kill them as long as their father is alive.

This is supported by the brother's reaction. The mere question of Joseph scares them. If they suspected that this is Joseph, then they should not be scared by the confession, but rather by the consequences of the onerous question Joseph just asked – possible indication that Joseph is going to kill them if Jacob is no longer alive.

### Extrapolation to Esau's plans to kill Jacob

So why did Esau not kill Jacob upon Isaac's death as he planned? One simple reason could be that as Rebecca suspected, his anger subsided. But even if that is the case, it should not detract from Jacob's fear that Esau would kill him after their father's death. Indeed, extrapolating back from our parasha, the brothers knew that Joseph's anger subsided. Ninety years have passed, and they were still assuming that Joseph would kill them after the death of their father.

At the famed encounter of Jacob with Esau upon the former's return, Isaac was still alive. Hence, Jacob's fear and extreme precautions seemed at first premature. Like firing anti-aircraft missiles when the attacking jet is still on the runway.

Isaac only dies decades later – after Joseph is sold to Egypt.

Why would Isaac's death not trigger fear by Jacob that Esau would kill him? Possibly, because by that time, Esau feels

he already has the blessing!

### Esau has the blessing? Option 1

Joseph was the clear heir to Jacob. Perhaps internalizing the lesson of the succession battle of previous generations, Jacob chooses the heir early, and even prepares a special gown to make it clear. Moreover, as indicative from Joseph's dreams of Jacob bowing to him, it is even possible that Jacob already "abdicated" to avoid such succession battles later.

### By this read, at Isaac's death, Esau feels he has the blessing

Therefore, the presumed death of Joseph (who is childless at that time), can be interpreted by Esau as the end of the blessing lineage of Jacob, and the "return" of the blessing to him. Hence a few years later, when Isaac dies, there is no longer a reason to kill Jacob. E.g. the brothers' malice actions saved Jacob twice: from Esau and from famine.

We are also told that Jacob refused to be consoled and instead announced that he "plans to descend to his son's death." We are then told "his father cried over him," which could be read as Isaac crying over Jacob, who just

announced his own death. Such a reading can lead Esau to strengthen the conclusion that the blessing goes back to him. In addition, the sons of Jacob, recognizing that Joseph has the blessing, disqualify themselves by marrying a Canaanite (at least Simeon and Judah). This while Esau corrects that disqualifying faux-pas, and stunningly marries an additional wife – a Semite. Why would he do so, had he not thought he is still a contender for the blessing?

While this read is consistent with the textual description (*pshat*), there is another alternative that is simpler.

### Esau has the blessing? Option 2

Did Jacob forfeit his blessing to Esau at their encounter? It seems so: "Please take my blessing that was brought to you, because God gifted me and I have everything; and he urged him, and he took."

In addition, Jacob ceremoniously bows to Esau seven times, and refers to him as "my lord" and to himself as "your slave" – the mirror image of the blessing he received from Isaac.

Moreover, Jacob is aware that he obtained his wealth thanks to the blessing. If the blessing belongs to Esau, then so should this wealth. Indeed, Jacob seems to transfer his wealth to Esau.

He sends a massive amount of animals to Esau. Jacob "took of that which he had with him." This occurs after

the division of the camps that initially includes the animals. We are then told Jacob passed the family (now without the animals), and was left alone. The next time we hear of the two camps, it is no longer with the animals (those are en route to Esau). There is a supposed difficulty in the assertion that Jacob gave all his assets to Esau in Jacob's later reference of the "slow travel" of the children when talking about the risk of flocks and herds dying.

But extrapolating from other stories in Genesis such as Judah's encounter with Tamar (traveling without the herd), and the brothers' migration from Shechem to Dothan (possibly due to the herd exhausting the food supply), we can understand that the herd cannot move slowly or they would run out of food. Jacob's slow pace (due to children), would put the herd in danger. E.g. the herd is with Esau! (Jacob obtains new assets shortly thereafter as bounty).

And so by this reading, at Isaac's death, Esau feels he has the blessing, and hence there is no need to kill Jacob. But here comes a transformative twist.

### Jacob got a superior blessing

Right before Jacob's supposed forfeiting of his father's blessing to Esau, he encounters an angel. Jacob issues a startling demand: "I will not release you unless you bless me." Indeed, the angel proceeds to bless Jacob: A face-to-face Godly blessing now supersedes the "placeholder" human blessing given by Isaac.

The blessing that provided Jacob's wealth can now be forfeited to Esau. Indeed, we subsequently learn that Esau becomes enormously successful. This while Jacob becomes Israel!

Some 35 centuries or so later, Theodor Herzl engages in a similar struggle that he interpreted as an internal struggle within Israel against the opposition, who are addicted to exile and fail to recognize the transformation of Judaism. He too issues a demand: "I will not release you unless you bless me."

Like Jacob, Herzl passes on that blessing. He writes a farewell article to the Nation of Israel, titled "Our Hope." Right before he died, he retitled that article: "Journey's Blessing." ■

The writer's new book, Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's transformation to Zionism, is now available for pre-order on Amazon. For details and information on launch events, please visit [Judaism-Zionsm.com](http://Judaism-Zionsm.com) or [facebook.com/Judaism3.0](http://facebook.com/Judaism3.0)