

What gives us life?

Today we are going to focus on one verse from our Torah portion. Let's start with the first two words of this week's Torah portion - *Vayechi Yaakov* – and Jacob lived – that's how our Torah portion begins and marks the final parashah for the book of Genesis this year. The part we are reading marks the deaths of both Jacob, at the fine old age of 147, and the death of Joseph – two men who had lived through so much – the end of an era – the end of the matriarchs and patriarchs, looking towards the birth and leadership of Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Rabbi Alan Lew z"l, an American rabbi and writer, writes (in 'Be Still and Get Going') – 'Genesis begins with the creation of all humankind but then quickly funnels down to the particularity of individual human beings, the members of a single family. It describes the individual spiritual path in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel – their twists and turns, their sufferings and the vicissitudes, all of it quite recognizable to us from our own lives. Generations concerned with the personal spiritual journey with everything they entail'. Lew points out that we then move, with the book of Exodus, to the journey of our people.

As we close the book of Genesis, and alongside the theme we've had today, we can reflect on how we live our lives – what gives us life?

How do we connect with the aliveness in us and around us? What time and energy do we give to our own personal spiritual lives? As the news roars around us, the uncertainty screams at us and the planet cried out in pain, the hard work – *avodah* – that we do here together matters more and more.

וַיִּכַּל יַעֲקֹב לְצַוֹת אֶת-בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ רַגְלָיו אֶל-הַמֶּטֶה וַיִּגָּע וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-עַמְיָו:

When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people. *Genesis 49:33*

Our medieval commentator Rashi draws our attention to the word - וַיִּגָּע - which literally means he expired – death is not mentioned and in fact Rabbi Yochanan, in the Talmud, is recorded as surprising the other rabbis by stating that 'Jacob, our father, is not dead.' (Bavli Taanit 5b). What could this mean – he expired, without a mention of death? In the next two verses, as the other rabbis point out, we see that Jacob is embalmed so how could Rabbi Yochanan say he hadn't died!! Perhaps we can look at this in more detail with a piece by the naturalist

Richard Nelson in his book *The Island Within* which is his memoir of life in the Inside Passage of southeastern Alaska.

Rabbi Lew reflects on this piece by Nelson and gives us the context – ‘Nelson writes of watching the end of the salmon’s cycle of life, death on a massive scale – dead and dying fish drifting past him in huge numbers as he stands along the shore. At first he finds himself lapsing into tragic memories, depressed by so much naked death. But as he watches, he begins to realize that something besides simple death is taking place.

The dead fish are decaying, dissolving in the current, and then filtering into the rock and the sand and becoming part of the stream, the island, the ocean, and the earth itself. Hatchling fish will feed on nutrients left by all this death’.

Nelson writes:

A new generation of fish will ripen from the bodies of the old, flow out into the sea, grow there by feeding on other life and then return. Like all else that lives, the salmon are only bits of earth, shaped for a moment into fish, then taken back again to emerge as other life. This same transformation has repeated itself in Bear Creek each fall for thousands of years, and on the island since the first organisms scuttled in the depths of the Paleozoic era....The salmon are not independent organisms but tiny parts of one great organism that contains them all, the living flesh that grows from earth and covers its surfaces...How can there be a final, absolute death if life as a whole, or earth itself, is the organism? What I’ve dreaded about death is the prospect of leaving, of lapsing into a nothingness beyond life. But in this endless process of metamorphosis, there can be no final death, only a transmutation of life. A flowing through. A constantly changing participation in the living community. And the fate of all living things is an earthbound immortality.

Nelson and Rabbi Lew alert us to something we all know – that nothing ever truly disappears. We are all part of something much bigger than ourselves. We are connected to everything, before us, within us and after us. As we breath in and out, breathing the same air, we recognise all that is alive and connected.

In fact, Shabbat is our greatest tool in remembering the aliveness, our breath and our connection. Shabbat marks the end of creation – we see everything in

creation was spoken into being. Humankind was the exception as it was breathed into life – our breath holds us and grounds us.

We recognise the ever-flowing life and breath that we are connected – this is why Rabbi Yochanan can say that Jacob did not die – he simply breathed out – breathing life back, which we in turn breath in. And we've spoken here before about the tradition of reading or saying or sounding God's name as breath following the story of the burning bush where God gives – *ehyeh asher ehyeh* – as God's name – Hebrew is not time bound – I will be as I was, am and will be. Ever flowing life.

Perhaps this is what the verse means when it says – 'Jacob was gathered to his people'. Rabbi Lew describes this as the 'great stream of spiritual consciousness' where time ceases to flow one way – time flows in every direction in this great stream. Waves come and lap at us, we breath in and breath out.

May we continue to find, in every moment, a chance to connect to the great stream of spiritual consciousness – to be held by knowing and feeling aliveness and connection. May this work give us strength and contentment to do the work which we are called to do in our lifetime.

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