

Parsha Vayechi

Genesis 47.28-50.26

Today's parsha was last presented in 2010. This portion tells us of the final period of Jacob's life. In the last chapter, when queried by Pharaoh about his life, Jacob answered that it had not been enjoyable. First he stole his brother Esau's birth rite. Then he was forced by his uncle Laban to work seven years before he could marry Rachel, instead marrying her sister Leah. So he then has to work another seven years before he could marry Rachel. Then Rachel dies in childbirth as Benjamin is born. And finally, his favorite son Joseph has been killed, or so he thought.

But this parsha discusses the happiest years of his life. He and his entire family have settled in Egypt at the invitation of Joseph, and he has been welcomed openly by the Pharaoh. They have dwelt in the land of Goshen in Northern Egypt and prospered through the five-year famine that befalls the rest of Egypt. His family has lived together in peace for the last 17 years.

But Jacob is now an old man. He will soon die and, unafraid, he knows that his life is coming to an end. He asks all of his sons to gather together for a final message and blessing. But before he blesses his sons, he blesses Joseph's sons, Ephrayim and Menasseh. As he speaks to each of them, he points out their strengths and weaknesses.

1. Reuben: though he is Jacob's first-born and should stand at the head of all his brothers, he is undependable.
2. & 3. Simeon and Levi: these brothers have been violent men. If you recall, after their sister Dinah was raped, they slaughtered a huge number of recently circumcised men who were from the tribe whose king's son was responsible for the rape. They must guard their tempers or there will be trouble for them in the future.
4. Judah: he is courageous and blessed with the strength of a lion. His descendants shall be rulers someday (and this does come to pass).
5. Zebulun: his descendants shall be a seafaring tribe.
6. Isaachar: his descendants shall be a hard-working tribe living peacefully on the land.
7. Dan: his descendants shall be judges among their people.
8. Gad: his descendants shall have to battle against enemy peoples around them.
9. Asher: his descendants shall be happy, prosperous farmers.
10. Naphtali: his descendants shall be spokesmen for their people, and they shall carry out successful military missions.
11. Joseph: he is outstanding among them all and many blessings shall come upon his descendants.
12. Benjamin: his descendants shall be warriors who love battle.

Note that Dinah does not receive an inheritance as she is a woman in a man's world. Other than the episode of her rape, we do not know who or if she marries and what, if anything, becomes of her.

After he concludes the blessings for all his sons, Jacob makes a last request that his body be taken back to Canaan to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah. There he can lie with his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, his parents Isaac and Rebekah, and his wife Leah. Recall that the Old Testament does not discuss the deaths of either Rebekah or Leah. It is noteworthy that while Jacob wanted to be buried in Machpelah and not in Egypt, his favorite wife Rachel was never taken from Bethlehem to Machpelah after she died, a distance of less than 25 miles. Jacob then dies and is taken back to Machpelah for burial, and all of Egypt mourns for 70 days.

After Jacob's death, Joseph again reassures his brothers of his forgiveness and love, saying, "Am I God that I should judge you?" They are to live in peace among themselves. Joseph honors his promise to help them for the rest of his life. Having lived a full life, he now dies at the age of 110, asking to be taken out of Egypt eventually. He is mummified and Moses honors the request when the Israelites leave Egypt. No mention is made of the death of any of his brothers and no mention is made where Joseph is buried.

Bimbam.com reviews what I have just said, but adds a moral: Do not worry about life's ups and downs. Take every day in stride and make the best of it. God has a plan for each of us, and in the cases of Jacob and his sons, things worked out well in the end.

Thus ends the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

The Haftarah is from the First Book of Kings, and tells of the King David's final blessing to his son Solomon. The chapters share the highlights of David's life, including the slaying of Goliath, his problems with King Saul, his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan, their deaths in battle with the Philistines, his rule as king, and the revolt and death of his son Absalom. He warns Solomon about his enemies, and reminds him to "Be strong . . . show yourself to be a man . . . walk in God's ways . . ."

Thus the comparison is made between the blessings of their children by Jacob and David.