

Parashat Vayechi וַיַּחֲיוּ

Torah: Genesis 47:28–50:26

Haftarah: 1 Kings 2:1–12

Advice to the One Left Behind

General Overview

There is a plethora of books that tell people how to do everything successfully. One can learn how to succeed successfully, how to fail successfully, how to have a successful marriage, and how to have a successful divorce. In short, they all tell one how to live successfully. However, is there a book about dying successfully?

The reader may protest at this point and say; “Don’t you think you are treating such a serious subject rather lightly?” Though it may seem to be, in reality this is not the case. All this commentator intends to do is introduce the reader to a subject that many people find difficult to discuss.

The subject of death dominates this week’s Torah portion which records the passing of two of the most important characters in the history of redemption: Jacob and Joseph. This commentary will present from this portion several principles that can help one to face and deal with death. The points will not be fabricated. Though this is not an exercise in exegesis, nevertheless the principles will be exegetically and expositively drawn from the text itself, as they always should be.

Exposition

In this commentary we shall discuss the subject of death from both the standpoint of the one dying, as well as from those who are left behind. Hence, our outline will be simple, the two main points will be:

- I. Advice to the One Facing Death
- II. Advice to the One Left Behind

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayechi, we will focus on section II, Advice to the One Left Behind.

II. Advice to the One Left Behind

A. Reconcile Fully with the Dying Person

This point was touched on previously from the standpoint of the one who is dying, but it is even more important for the ones who are left behind. They are the ones who must live with any potential guilt from a broken relationship.

We see an example of this principle in the account of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers in chapter 50. After Israel (Jacob) died, the brothers started worrying whether or not Joseph really forgave them. Verse 15 states, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” This statement from them indicates that reconciliation needed to take place between the two parties. The issue here is not whether Joseph or the

brothers were right or wrong. The point is that more needed to be taken care of before anyone else died.

In the end, Joseph told his brothers the same thing he told them when he first revealed himself to them in chapter 45. He said that it was really the will of God that he had had to endure the past trials and experiences. Then, as he had done before, he cried with them (verses 17–19).

Through Joseph's relationship with his brothers, we see how important it is to heal relationships when a wrong (or even a perceived wrong) has been done.

B. Respect the Wishes of the Deceased

The rabbis tell us that the greatest form of loving-kindness is the kindness shown to one who is dead.¹ It is a form of respect. This is why Jacob's and Joseph's requests were diligently followed after their deaths. Both requested to be buried in Eretz Yisrael rather than in Egypt, the place of their deaths. For Joseph and Israel, their requests were an encouragement to their families that they fully believed in the promises God had made to their forefathers. For their survivors, it was an opportunity to show respect by following their requests.

C. Fully Mourn and Grieve

The Patriarchs had little trouble expressing emotions. When it was time to laugh, Abraham laughed. When it was time to cry, there was great weeping. This becomes especially evident at the funeral of Jacob. There was a funeral entourage from Egypt to Hebron. When this entourage was observed by the Canaanites, 50:11 says,

When the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning in Goren HaAtad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning for Egypt." Therefore it was named Avel Mizraim, which is across the Jordan (NASB).

1. Cry!

From this we can see from Scripture the intense mourning that was experienced by the sons of Jacob. How was this mourning handled? For one thing, there were lots of tears. More specifically, it says concerning Joseph's grieving in 50:1, "Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him." Joseph, like others of his generation, was not afraid to express outwardly his emotion of grief over a loved one who passed away.

How often in modern western cultures does one hear when someone dies: "Oh, don't cry, be strong. It will be all right"? Or, perhaps worse, "Don't cry. Just trust God." We must realize why God made tears. Some physicians will tell us that the tears of grief are actually healing tears designed by God to begin to wash out some of the toxins created in the body because of the stress of internal emotional grief. There have been studies done which indicate that the best and most lasting healing of a grief-stricken person occurs when that person expresses grief outwardly, especially by crying.

2. Take Time

A second way to express grief in a healthy way is to take the time necessary for the required emotional healing. In Vayechi, the text describes how there were several time periods devoted for mourning after Jacob's death. It says, for

example, in 50:3 “the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.” Again, in verse ten it says that after Jacob’s funeral Joseph “observed a seven-day period mourning for his father.”

The seven-day mourning period mentioned in verse 10 provides the biblical basis for the traditional Jewish custom of mourning for a seven-day period (or *shiva*) after a funeral. Having personally experienced such a tradition after the death of my Orthodox Jewish father, this writer can testify concerning the wisdom of such a mourning period.

The *shiva* is a time when the whole community bands together and makes it physically possible for the grieving family to take time to begin the healing process necessary as the result of the trauma of losing a loved one. During this period there is freedom to cry over the recent loss, but there are also lighter moments when someone may recall an incident in the deceased’s life that was memorable, inspiring, or praiseworthy. In addition, there are friends who come to express condolences or to relate fond memories of the deceased. There is also worship in the mourner’s own home. Congregates from the synagogue come to the mourner’s home and prayers are said there. Finally, there is more than ample food provided by the community, so that the mourners need not take time or energy away from what their emotions and souls are crying out to do — mourn!

Just as one would not deem it healthy to walk on a broken bone, so likewise, is it not healthy to walk with a broken spirit. When the bone cries out “Pain! Pain!” we rush to its aid and provide the necessary relief. Should it not also be the same for the hurting mourner? Too often society judges strength by how soon the mourner can come back to work. However, real strength comes when, by the grace of God, one takes time out to nurture the deep wounds of missing a loved one.

3. Be Strong

The Patriarchs knew a secret. It is the secret of taking time to live life and to mourn death. At the end of this parasha, the rabbis have inserted the following words at the end of the text (as is the case for the end of all the books of the Torah): “Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!” This can only happen when one takes the necessary time to follow the Lord according to His Word, which has just been studied, and by letting the Lord minister to one in life’s most difficult moments, such as death. When one learns to do this then one can say, “Not only have I learned to be successful in my vocation, but I have also learned to both live successfully and to die successfully. Because for me, to live is Messiah and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21), and “whether we live or die we belong to the Lord” (Romans 14:8).

¹ J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 180.