

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Vayechi 21 “The End is Near” (Tribute to Dr. Rebbetzin Aviva Weisbord zt'l)

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's sermon is sponsored by Julia Rafsky, in memory of Dr. Rebbetzin Aviva Weisbord zt'l, who passed away this week from complications due to Covid-19. May her memory be a blessing. I considered Rebbetzin Weisbord to be one of my mentors when I studied in Ner Yisroel, and I was very saddened about her sudden passing.

Fitting to the week of her passing, Parshat Vayechi is about endings. It closes the book of Bereisheet, and it is usually read at the end of the secular year. Moreover, the parsha's narrative is focused on the end of our forefathers' era, with the death of Yaakov and then Yosef, who is considered by more recent philosophical works as the 4th of our forefathers. In another reference to ending, Rashi in our Parsha tells us that Yaakov wished to educate his sons about the end of days, the Messianic Era, but God wiped out those details from Yaakov's memory.

I think a clue to understanding the Torah's conceptualization of endings is to be found in Parshat Mikeitz, which we read 2 weeks ago.

Because the title means *ending* and refers to the end of the 2-year period in which Yosef languished in jail, until the butler finally remembered him. The same root word as *mikeitz* – *keitz* -- is used to say that Pharaoh's dream ended when he awoke *Vayikatz Paroh*. Employing similar language In *Hilchot Teshuva*, the Rambam characterizes Yom Kippur as the ending, *keitz mechila u'slichah*, the *conclusion* of the term of absolution and forgiveness. That seems strange. To be sure, Yom Kippur is the end of the period that begins with Rosh Hashana, but in the larger context, we think of that period as a beginning -- a time when we prepare ourselves at the beginning of the new year. I think the answer is that in Judaism, the concept of *keitz* is not the simple idea of finality. Instead, the Torah presents each ending as part of an ongoing process.

We're not supposed to be like kids riding in the backseat of a car, asking repeatedly, *Are we there yet?* Or like those who jubilantly sing, *We want Moshiach now, we don't want to wait*. God does not want us to view this life as a series of episodes to get over with as quickly as possible. He wants us to view each *keitz/ending* as an experience that's part of a continuing process, the way we experience Yom Kippur.

According to the Zohar, that's why Vayechi refers to Yaakov being alive during his exile – because he became most fully alive during his time in Egypt. Like his thwarted attempt to reveal predictions about the Moshiach, the entire experience Yaakov endured was certainly an ending, but it was also an incredible story fit for a Broadway musical :) – a story with tremendous significance for the Jewish people. And that is also why Torah tells us that Yaakov appreciated exile at end of his life.

I've always viewed Bereisheet in that context as well. I see it as a book about unique individuals, culminating with Yosef, who was arguably the most developed in his individuality. But together these individuals laid the groundwork for the Jewish people as a nation, and so the end of Bereisheet captures not only an ending, but also the transition to the nation-building events in the book of Shemot.

No doubt, many people are glad to see the end of 2020, because it has been such a trying year. They joke that in 2021, no one will make the common mistake of forgetting to change the year when they date their checks. But Vayechi, like the life of Rebbetzin Weisbord, offers a different perspective to bring into this new year.

Dr. Weisbord followed in the footsteps of her iconic mother Rebbetzin Chana Weinberg z'l, whom I also consider a mentor. Despite their elevated status as matriarchs of Baltimore's most famous Jewish family, they did not seek honor for themselves. They both devoted their lives to humbly assisting the downtrodden and disadvantaged, in a way that lifted people's spirits and made each person feel special - like the most important individual in the world.

So, instead of simply celebrating the ending of 2020, we should take a cue from these inspirational women who lived the lesson of our parsha. We should ponder the experience of this past year and how it contributes to the ongoing process of our lives. If we are able to view this year's ending with this positive perspective, we will all have a more fulfilling and accomplished 2021 to come. Shabbat shalom.