

5780 – Genesis 47-50 - Vayechi (And he lived)

With *Vayechi*, the book of Genesis, full of conflicts within the family, comes to a serene end. Jacob, reunited with his beloved Joseph, sees his grandsons, the only such scene in the Torah. He blesses them, then, on his death-bed, blesses his twelve sons. He dies and is buried in the cave of Makhpelah with his parents and grandparents. Joseph forgives his brothers a second time, and he himself dies, having assured his brothers that God will eventually bring the family back to the Promised Land. The long patriarchal narrative is at an end and a new period—the birth of Israel as a nation—is about to begin.

The first of the following essays looks at the values of truth and peace in Judaism, and which takes priority when they clash. The second analyzes the names of Joseph's sons and what they tell us about his state of mind when he named them. The third looks at the paradoxical idea that, through *teshuvah*, we can change the past. The fourth shows how forgiveness is an essential part of the life of freedom, for it alone liberates us from being held captive by memory and resentment. Jewish time, defined by repentance and forgiveness, is the defeat of tragedy in the name of hope.

*Jewish Time*¹

Different cultures tell different stories. The great novelists of the nineteenth century, for example, wrote fiction that is essentially ethical. Jane Austen² and George Eliot³ explored the connection between character and happiness. In this, they were greatly influenced by the Bible, and there is a palpable continuity between their work and the book of Ruth. Charles Dickens,⁴ following in the tradition of the prophets, wrote about society and its institutions, and the ways in which they can fail to honour human dignity and justice.

1 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 349-353.

2 Jane Austen (1775-1817) was an English novelist known primarily for her six major novels, which interpret, critique and comment upon the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century. Austen's plots often explore the dependence of women on marriage in the pursuit of favourable social standing and economic security—*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*.

3 Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880) ...known by her pen name George Eliot, was an English novelist, poet, journalist, translator and one of the leading writers of the Victorian era. She wrote seven novels ... most of which are set in provincial England and known for their realism and psychological insight.

4 Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) was an English writer and social critic. He created some of the world's best-known fictional characters and is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. His works enjoyed unprecedented popularity during his lifetime, and by the 20th century, critics and scholars had recognised him as a literary genius. His novels and short stories are still widely read today—*A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*.

By contrast, today's fascination with stories like *Star Wars*, *Batman*, *Spiderman* and their many variants is conspicuously dualistic. There is a force of evil, separate from and independent of God and the good. Evil is “out there” in the universe, not just “in here” within the human heart.

These stories are closer to myth than monotheism.

Jack Miles, in his *God: A Biography*, draws the distinction by way of a comparison between Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*⁵ and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.⁶⁽¹⁾ **Oedipus is doomed from the beginning of the story.** The Delphic oracle has spoken; Oedipus's fate is sealed; the more he acts to avoid it the more tightly enmeshed in it he becomes. **Watching Oedipus is cathartic. We are purged of our emotions of fear, sorrow and grief and become reconciled to our mortality.**

The drama of *Hamlet*, however, lies within the mind, the soul, of Hamlet himself. **The conflict is not between human intention and blind fate, but between the two forces at work in Hamlet's character, “the native hue of resolution” versus “the pale cast of thought.”** Hamlet's battle, like Jacob's wrestling match with the angel, is with himself. *Tanakh*, as Miles concludes, “is far nearer in spirit to Hamlet than to Oedipus Rex.” **It is a literature, not of fate but of freedom.**

There is, however, one aspect of *Tanakh*, systematically evident in the narrative of Genesis, that is rare to the point of uniqueness. **It is a story without an ending which looks forward to an open future rather than reaching closure.** This defies narrative convention.⁽²⁾ **Normally we expect a story to create a tension that is resolved in the final page.** That is what gives art a sense of completion. We do not expect a sculpture to be incomplete, a poem to break off halfway, a novel to end in the middle. Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* is the exception that proves the rule. Yet that is what the Bible repeatedly does. Consider the *Chumash*, the five Mosaic books. The Jewish story begins with a repeated promise to Abraham that he will inherit the land of Canaan. Yet even when we reach the end of Deuteronomy, the Israelites have still not crossed the Jordan. The

5 Prior to the start of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus has become the king of Thebes while unwittingly fulfilling a prophecy that he would kill his father, Laius (the previous king), and marry his mother, Jocasta (whom Oedipus took as his queen after solving the riddle of the Sphinx). The action of Sophocles's play concerns Oedipus's search for the murderer of Laius in order to end a plague ravaging Thebes, unaware that the killer he is looking for is none other than himself. At the end of the play, after the truth finally comes to light, Jocasta hangs herself while Oedipus, horrified at his patricide and incest, proceeds to gouge out his own eyes in despair.

6 The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, often shortened to Hamlet, is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare sometime between 1599 and 1602. Set in Denmark, the play depicts Prince Hamlet and his revenge against his uncle, Claudius, who has murdered Hamlet's father in order to seize his throne and marry Hamlet's mother.

Chumash ends with the poignant scene of Moses on Mount Nebo (in present-day Jordan) seeing the land—to which he has been journeying for forty years but is destined not to enter—from afar.

Nevi'im, or Prophets, the second part of *Tanakh*, ends with Malachi foreseeing the distant future, understood by tradition to be the messianic age:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers ... (Malachi 3:24).

Nevi'im, which includes the great historical as well as prophetic books, thus concludes neither in the present or the past, but by looking forward to a time not yet reached. *Ketuvim*, Writings, the third and final section, ends with King Cyrus of Persia granting permission to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. **After thirty-nine books, and more than a thousand years in real time, we are almost back where we began, with Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees about to begin his journey to the Promised Land.**

Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim: **none concludes with an ending in the conventional sense. Each leaves us with a sense of a promise not yet fulfilled, a task not yet completed, a future seen from afar but not yet reached.** The paradigm case—the model on which all others are based—is the ending of the book of Genesis in this *Parashat Vayechi*.

Recall that the story of the people of the covenant begins with God's call to Abraham to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to a land which I will show you" (12:1). Yet no sooner does Abraham arrive than he is forced by famine to go to Egypt. That is the fate repeated by Jacob and his children. **Genesis ends not with life in Israel but with a death in Egypt:**

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land He promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place." So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt. (40:24-26)

Again, a hope not yet realised, a journey not yet ended, a destination just beyond the horizon.

In great works, form and content work together, each reinforcing the other in an indissoluble whole. The unfinished nature of Genesis links to the theme which ends the Joseph story: *forgiveness*. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, offers a profound insight into the connection between forgiveness and time. Human action, she argues, is potentially trag-

ic. We can never foresee the consequences of our acts, but once done, they cannot be undone. We know that:

... he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous the consequences of his deed, he can never undo it ... All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom.⁽³⁾

What transforms the human situation from tragedy to hope, Arendt argues, is the possibility of forgiveness:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover ... Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.⁽⁴⁾

Atonement and forgiveness are the supreme expressions of human freedom—the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation. Only those who can forgive can be free. Only a civilization based on forgiveness can construct a future that is not an endless repetition of the past. That, surely, is why Judaism is the only civilization whose golden age is in the future.

It was this revolutionary concept of time based on human freedom that Judaism contributed to the world. Many ancient cultures believed in cyclical time, in which all things return to their beginning. The Greeks developed a sense of tragic time, in which the ship of dreams is destined to founder on the hard rocks of reality. Europe of the Enlightenment introduced the idea of linear time, with its close cousin, progress.

Judaism believes in something else, neither endless repetition nor inevitable progress, but covenantal time, the story of the human journey in response to the divine call, with all its backslidings and false turns, its regressions and failures, yet **never doomed to tragic fate, always with the possibility of repentance and return**, always sustained by the vision with which the story began, of the Promised Land, the new society, the place where justice and compassion triumph over the evil that lurks within the human heart, where human virtue and divine blessedness meet in the consummation of the covenant that we call redemption. As Harold Fisch has put it: "The covenant is a condition of our existence in time ... We cooperate with its purposes never quite knowing where it will take us, for 'the readiness is all.'" In a lovely phrase, he speaks of the Jewish imag-

ination as shaped by “the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled.”⁽⁵⁾

Tragedy gives rise to *pessimism*. Cyclical time leads to *acceptance*. Linear time begets *optimism* (*positivity*). Covenantal time gives birth to *hope*. **These are not just different emotions. They are radically different ways of relating to life and the universe.** They are expressed in the different kinds of stories people tell. **Jewish time always faces an open future.** The last chapter is not yet written. The messiah has not yet come. Until then, the story continues—and we, together with God, are its co-authors.

(1) Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 397-98.

(2) See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

(3) Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

(4) *Ibid.*, 237, 241.

(5) Harold Fisch, *A Remembered Future: A Study in Literary Mythology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11. 19.

1. *Normally we expect a story to create a tension that is resolved in the final page.*

a. Luke 15:11-32

¹¹Yeshua continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ **So he divided his property between them.**

¹³“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there **squandered his wealth in wild living.** ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything ...

1) By dramatizing a family tragedy, (this) parable ... focuses on the crisis of broken relationships between a human being and God.⁷

a) The **person living without God** is like the younger son running away to a far country.

b) The elder brother ... is no better off—he is much like a **religious person who misunderstands** the divine nature and **lacks a meaningful relationship with God.**

c) The elder son does not show love for his father and struggles, perhaps unsuccessfully, to forgive his brother—he cannot share the joy of his father over the return of the runaway.

⁷ Brad H. Young, *The Parables, Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Hendrickson Publishers), pp. 130-131.

2) The plot ... involves a **father and his two sons—it begins and ends with all three of them.**

a) Traditional interpretations tend to focus on **the younger son**—the one who “squandered his wealth on wild living” and **the character of the father** who forgives the repentant young man and welcomes him back into the family.

b) However, **the parable is about a man with “two sons”**—both sons have needs and, **they are both lost**, but in different ways.

c) The story, then, is (about) a loving father who had two boys, one of whom walled himself off from his father’s love by doing evil, while the other walled himself off from that same love by doing good ... In both cases the sons were prodigals, for they were estranged from their father, and the love relationship between them and him was broken.⁸

3) The value of family relationships sets the stage for a parable that reaches out to the most irreligious sinner as well as to the one who is outwardly pious while deficient in true religion.

a) The relationship the brothers have with each other influences their relationship with their father.

b) Genuine faith begins by developing a solid relationship with God—but, the one who loves God must also love other people.

c) In every scene of the story, the father plays the role of the compassionate parent—he loves his sons enough to let them make their own decisions—even bad ones.

d) When they make a bad decision, the loving father is always there waiting to help.

4) Neither son really understands the father—he is like a banker who has the money to supply their needs and pay their wages.

a. **The audience is challenged to respond by reconsidering their (own) relationship with God.**

b. Acts 28:30-31

³⁰For two whole years Paul stayed (in Rome) in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Yeshua the Messiah—with all boldness and without hindrance!

2. *The Jewish story begins with a repeated promise to Abraham that he will inherit the land of Canaan. Yet even when we reach the end of Deuteronomy, the Israelites have still not crossed the Jordan. The H-mash ends with the poignant scene of Moses on Mount Nebo (in present-*

⁸ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *In Quest of a Kingdom* (Abington Press, 1944), p. 87.

day Jordan) seeing the land—to which he has been journeying for forty years but is destined not to enter—from afar.

a. Hebrews 11:1-40

¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for.

³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁴By faith Abel ... ⁵By faith Enoch ... ⁷By faith Noah ...

⁸By faith Abraham ... ¹¹And by faith even Sarah ...

¹³**All these people were still living by faith when they died.**

They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth ...

²⁰By faith Isaac ... ²²By faith Joseph ...

²³By faith Moses' parents ... ²⁴By faith Moses

²⁹By faith the people ...

³²And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets ... ³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹**These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,** ⁴⁰since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

3. Each leaves us with a sense of a promise not yet fulfilled, a task not yet completed, a future seen from afar but not yet reached.

a. Avot 2:21

21. He (R' Tarfon⁹) used to say: You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdrawal from it ...

1) R' Tarfon comments on his own statement in the previous mishnah regarding man's overwhelming spiritual tasks in this world. One may feel, "Why should I begin when I will never be able to complete all my duties? Since the day is short and the task abundant, it is useless to try." Therefore, R' Tarfon tells us that we are not absolved of our tasks, even though they seem too heavy for us (*Midrash Shmuel*¹⁰).¹¹

2) Acts 20:22-24

²⁴However ... **my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task** the Lord Yeshua has given me—the task of testifying to **the good news of God's grace.**

3) 1Corinthians 3:5-9

⁹**For we are co-workers in God's service;** you are God's field, God's building.

4. *Atonement and forgiveness are the supreme expressions of human freedom—the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation.*

a. Psalm 119:41-49

⁴¹May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise; ⁴²then I can answer anyone who taunts me, for I trust in your word. ⁴³Never take your word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws. **⁴⁴I will always obey your law, for ever and ever. ⁴⁵I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.** ⁴⁶I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame, ⁴⁷for I delight in your commands because I love them. ⁴⁸I reach out for your commands, which I love, that I may meditate on your decrees. ⁴⁹Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope.

b. Galatians 5:1

¹It is for freedom that Messiah has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

9 Rabbi Tarfon or Tarphon, a Kohen, was a member of the third generation of the Mishnah sages, who lived in the period between the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and the fall of Betar (135 CE).

10 A collection of commentaries on Pirkei Avot by Rabbi Shmuel Di Uzeda, one of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria's senior disciples and author of the works *Iggeret Shmuel* (*Epistle of Shmuel*) and *Lechem Dimah* (*Bread of Tears*).

11 Rabbi Moshe Lieber, Ed., *The Pirkei Avos Treasury* (Mesorah Publications, Ltd), p. 125.