

Parasha Vayechi – 14 Tevet 5782; 18 December 2021

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I want to start with a confession. When Cynthia asked me to give a drash, I specifically chose this parasha because it describes the death of Jacob and Joseph. And also because many of you know of my work with the Gamliel Institute and the national organization called Kavod v'Nichum. So today I want to speak about a *Chevra Kadisha* – a *chevra* that is unique, special – and specifically about our *chevra*.

Vayechi: “and Jacob lived.” The verse continues:

וַיִּקְרָבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹתוֹ וַיִּקְרָא
לְבָנָו לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם־נָא מְצָאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שִׂים־נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי
וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֶל־נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם.

And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt.”

In this parasha we learn many of the rituals and customs that we do even today when someone dies. [but that’s for another more textual study]

Let’s begin with a very startling question: What is a good death? Pause for a moment and think: have you ever asked this question of yourself, or been in the position of asking the question about someone else?

This is the final parasha in the book of Bereyshit which began with creation, birth, and appropriately, ends with the death. And yet, the first word is VAYECHI – because it’s not really about death – it’s about how our ancestors LIVED. How did they make use of their short time on this earth? What was the quality of life that they made for themselves? That’s our question, too. Not will we die, for we know the answer to that, but what will we make of our time on this planet.

Here we are: Jacob is about to breath his last, and he summons his children to his bedside. Picture the scene:

The verse says: וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל־בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאִסְפוּ וְאִגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים:

“When the time approached for Israel (Jacob) to die, he summoned his sons [missing is Dinah and the other women - again, another text study]: “gather together that I may tell you what is to happen to you in days to come.” Picture Jacob lying on his bed surrounded by most of his family in the presence of the Shechinah - about to address each of his sons individually (kind of a verbal ethical will). The Midrash fill in some of that moment: Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: what happened at that very moment when he said that he would tell the future [btw, it’s the immediate future, not a distant prophecy). What happened: at that moment, the midrash says, the *Shechina* abandoned him, and Jacob was alone, unable to offer his chosen words to his sons. Maybe, continues R Shimon ben Lakish, just maybe the *Shechina* departed because, thinks Jacob, maybe one of my sons is unworthy of what I have to say? Just maybe, one (or more) of my children, will stray from the path that I have tried to show them. At that very moment, all the sons said in unison: *Shma yisrael - Hear o Israel (Jacob), Adonai is our God, Adonai alone*. Immediately, ALL the sons together say the *shma*.

What is one of the concerns that every parent has on his or her deathbed? That the life and values that they stood for, will be neglected. The inheritance, that which they wish to pass on to their heirs, their belief system and values, will be forgotten. It’s not about money, it’s about a deep and profound yearning about life lived.

And the sons continue: “the same way that there is only one God in your heart; so too there is only one in our hearts.” At that at very moment, Yaakov responds: “*baruch shem kvod malchuto l’olam vaed*” - Blessed be the name of God’s glorious kingdom for ever and ever.” The shechina returns and Jacob is able to continue speaking to each child individually.

Again, the question: was this a good death? Jacobs family is present so they can be with him in this precious moment, and Jacob lays out his concern to them and they show loyalty to him in their univocal response. And the verse continues:

וְעֵשֶׂת עֵמֶדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֶל־גֵּא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם

Chesed v’emet -translated variously as truest act of kindness; lovingkindness; lovingkindness and truth – or as Rashi says: this mercy of truth shown to the person who has died is true kindness because it cannot be paid back. This is the mitzvah that can’t be repaid. But think about that line. Are we doing a mitzvah for the deceased? Or is the deceased allowing us to do a mitzvah?

Chesed shel emet – that’s actually another name for a *chevra kadisha*

What a story - Vayechi.

This may be the first instance of a group of people visiting one who is ill (see v.48:1), standing by one who is *goses* – on the brink of death; composing an ethical will in the form of a testament [not a blessing] to each of his male children individually; reciting a short *vidui*, listening to final wishes, covering the body at the moment of death; and insuring that the wishes of burial at Machpelah with his ancestors, be observed.

I hold a strong belief that the *chevra* is not simply the responsibility of a small group of people who volunteer to do *tahara* or *shmira*, but the obligation of everyone in the synagogue. You all have already signed up to be a member of our *Chevra Kadisha*! Put simply: everyone is part of the chevra in one way or another. What are those ways as we define the work of our *chevra*:

1. *TAHARA* -There are people who do prepare the body (a men's group and a women's group (new. issue: transgender) Traditionally, all was binary - men do a *tahara* for men and women for women. Now, it's a new world
2. *SHMIRA* -not guarding as it was defined in the past; but being with the *meit/meitah* the deceased. No one should be alone at a time like this, especially the deceased. It has become a time for saying goodbye. Technology has given us the gift of being able to do this mitzvah from a distance. Everyone can say goodbye whether you live near or far. We can now have a video or picture of the casket and we can sit *shmira* at home or in the funeral home, and be present with that *neshama*- with that soul.
3. *GEMILUT CHESED* - What about helping the family with those many tasks that need to be done – *gemilut hesed* - acts for which there is no reward except that of doing a mitzvah – from preparing a *seudat havraah*, the first meal for the family after burial, or providing food during the week; or babysitting, or helping with the myriad of papers and people, or helping them with the computer – endless acts of *gemilut chesed* - and we all can do them
4. *MINYAN* - coming to a shiva minyan, praying, listening to stories about the life of the deceased, or leading it, or simply shlepung the siddurim to the house of mourning.
5. *NECHAMA* -And then there is the realm of the emotional. In our *chevra*, we have asked and often trained one individual to be with the mourner for the course of a year - to talk if the mourner wishes; to have coffee if the mourner wishes; to get reading materials if the mourner wishes. The frequency of getting together ranges enormously. These *menachamim* (comforters) are not expected to be professional health workers, they are merely *menachamim*) and their task begins AFTER shiva is over, when quiet and

loneliness sets in to a greater extent. 64% of American adults say that the Covid 19 pandemic has underscored the need for increased bereavement support – 64%.

6. *ZIKARON* - And memory: through the efforts primarily of Diane Bernbaum, Lee Bearson, Blaire Prentice Helen Schneider, z:l, and others, we've created a *sefer zikaon*, a book of memories in the bullpen – that book of remembrance contains a picture and short bio of every member of our congregation who has passed away. No one will be forgotten. Help with the memorial plaques also in the foyer is another way in which we as a congregation remember. And certainly, another way of being part of the *chevra*.

History: we here at Netivot Shalom saw the need for end-of-life support and ritual, and so in the early '90s, soon after came into being, we established, through the hard work of Celia Concus and others, a *chevra kadisha*. There were some 75 people at that first gathering at the Y! The need was there, and the need is there. Currently Mary Breiner and Shari Rifas are the chairs. Talk to them, email them or me or Rabbi Chai. Look at the books we've written for this shul on the subject. And thanks to Claudia Valas for publishing these and other books about end-of-life. Everyone is part of the *chevra* – if we define it not as simply *tahara* and *shmira*.

Once you do engage in an act of *chesed shel emet*, you change the culture of the synagogue. Everyone has a place in the *chevra*.

Today I believe that there are 12 *chevras* in the east bay alone. We are at the forefront of a national movement to create synagogue *chevras* – as R. Yehudah Hanasi said: “Do not let a stranger carry my bier. Let those who attended me in life attend me in death”. We are bringing the subject of death to the front of the stage and teaching our Jewish way of responding.

So, I want to invite you, to hear about our *chevra* and trends nationally. January 3 – 7 pm. on zoom. The whole congregation is invited because I think, at least, you've all signed up! Hear about the ways in which you can fulfill this mitzvah.

A colleague, R. Rebecca Schatz, pointed me to the commentator Chizkuni and his comments on *chesed v'emet*. He says it refers to giving someone more than they are entitled to expect, or asking them to do something beyond what they are entitled to demand.

A fitting conclusion to this drash

Shabbat Shalom