



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Vayechi (וַיַּחֲיִי, "and he lived")**
- **Chapters: Genesis 47:28-50:26**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Portion Synopsis

In last week's Torah portion (Vayigash), Joseph continued to test his brothers to see if they were the same kind of people who had once spitefully cast him into the pit. After Judah offered to take the place of Benjamin as a slave, however, Joseph was convinced that they had genuinely changed and decided to finally reveal his identity to them. After his emotional disclosure, the sons of Israel finally reunited, and Joseph then brought his father Jacob to dwell in the "fat of the land" of Egypt, where God had promised to make them into a great nation.

This final portion of the book of Genesis begins 17 years after Jacob's arrival in Egypt, when he was 147 years old. Knowing that he was nearing his last days on earth, Jacob sent for Joseph and asked him take an oath that he would bury him in the cave of Machpelah (the burial place of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah) rather than in Egypt.

Sometime later, Joseph was told that Jacob was ill and went to visit him, bringing his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him. Jacob then declared that the two men would be counted as his own sons, as "Reuben and Simeon they shall be to me" (i.e., as Jacob's first two sons). Joseph then brought his sons to Jacob's bedside to receive the blessing, with Ephraim to Jacob's left and Manasseh (the firstborn) to his right, but Jacob prophetically crossed his arms and laid his right hand upon Ephraim and his left hand upon Manasseh.

Joseph thought that his father did not realize that the elder son was to his right, but Jacob reassured him that he knew what he was doing, and prophesied that while both sons would be great, Ephraim would become greater, indeed "a multitude of nations." He then blessed them and promised to give Joseph an extra portion in the Promised Land, namely, Jacob's hometown area of Shechem near Hebron (where Joseph's bones were later buried).

After this, Jacob summoned all his sons to hear his final words. Among other things, he foretold that the Messiah would come from the line of Judah and affirmed that the descendants of Joseph (i.e., Ephraim and Manasseh) would be blessed beyond the other tribes. After giving these parting words to his sons, Jacob said he was about to die, and (again) instructed them to bury him in the Cave of Machpelah in Canaan. When he finished these final instructions, he died. Joseph then fell upon Jacob's face and wept, and immediately called the Egyptian physicians to embalm his father.



After learning of his death, the people of Egypt mourned for Jacob for 70 days in honor of his status as a great prophet. With Pharaoh's permission, Joseph, along with his brothers and various dignitaries of Egypt, formed a funeral procession and returned to Canaan to bury Jacob in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron. After the funeral, they returned to Egypt, but Joseph's brothers feared that he would now punish them for their former betrayal, and threw themselves on his mercy. Joseph reassured them that they had no reason to fear him and reminded them that God had overruled their earlier intent by making him be a blessing to the whole world. Joseph further promised to fully support the brothers and their families in the days to come.

The portion ends with the account of the death of Joseph, who made the sons of Israel promise to take his bones with them when the LORD would bring them back to the land of Canaan (alluding to the great Exodus to come). Joseph's faith in the Jewish people's return to the Promised Land is summarized by his statement: "God will surely remember you." He died at age 110, was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt, full of faith that he would be raised from the dead in the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

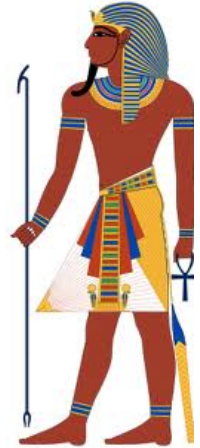


Marc Chagall: Jacob's Ladder



Parashah Questions

1. What does the word *vayechi* (וַיַּחֲיוּ) mean? (Gen. 47:28) ¹
2. How old was Jacob when he came down to Egypt, and how long did he live there? (Gen. 47:28) ²
3. What special favor did Jacob ask of Joseph before he died? ³
4. What did Joseph say in response to his father's request? (47:30-31) ⁴
5. Why did Jacob ask Joseph for help and not his other sons? ⁵
6. Why do many Jews want to be buried in the promised land? ⁶
7. When Jacob fell ill in Egypt, what did Joseph do? (48:1-2) ⁷
8. What did Jacob first say to Joseph when he visited him? (48:3-4) ⁸



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- ¹ The verb *vayechi* (וַיַּחֲיוּ) means “and he lived,” from the verb *chayah* (חָיָה), “to live,” “revive,” etc. The sages say that since Jacob had suffered so much in his life, the 17 years in Egypt were the happiest years of his life, and therefore Jacob truly lived, happy and content.
 - ² Jacob was 130 years old when he came to Egypt and lived there for 17 years until he died at age 147 (upon his death the exile of the Jewish people began). Jacob had supported Joseph 17 years before he was abducted from the family, and Joseph repaid the care while Jacob was in Egypt.
 - ³ Jacob asked Joseph for *chesed v’emet* – “a true kindness” – that he be buried with his fathers in the land of Canaan instead of in Egypt. When he first realized he was going to die, Jacob prayed that God would allow him to live longer so that he could return to the promised land and not die while in Egypt, but his request was denied. He therefore summoned Joseph and reminded him that he came to Egypt out of love for him, and after he had seen his face, said, “Now I can die” (46:30). However, Jacob would soon die and needed his son to perform the mitzvah of “true kindness” by burying him in the promised land.
 - ⁴ Joseph did not consider it proper to “place his hand under his (father’s) thigh” and therefore only said, “I will do as you say.” Note that Jacob nonetheless insisted that Joseph would make a vow to do so, and Joseph complied. According to the sages, Jacob made Joseph swear the oath so he could make his case before Pharaoh that he was bound by an oath to bury his father in the land of Canaan.
 - ⁵ Jacob realized that only Joseph would have the power to fulfill his request, since he was a ruler in Egypt, and had he asked any of his other sons, they might have been unable to keep their vow.
 - ⁶ Burial in the land of Israel is considered a blessing because the “abode of souls” is said to be closer there than any place else on the earth. According to various Jewish superstitions, when a Jew dies outside the Holy Land, “denouncing powers” from Sitra Achra (the “other side”) are said to oppose the soul’s ascent. During the time of the coming resurrection, God will provide “underground passages” by which people will be transported to Israel, though traveling there will be very difficult (those buried in Israel will not need to tunnel back to the land).
 - ⁷ Joseph took his two sons (Manasseh and Ephraim) to go visit him in performance of the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*, “visiting the sick.” For his part, Jacob sat up in bed to show honor to his son as the ruler of Egypt.
 - ⁸ He recounted the vision he had at Luz (i.e., Bethel) and said that God Almighty (אֱלֹהֵי שְׁרָי) had promised to make him *both* into the father of a nation (גֵּוִי) and into a “company of nations” (קְהָל עַמִּים) (see Gen. 31:11). The “nation” referred to Israel, and the “company of nations” referred to Joseph’s offspring (Ephraim-Manasseh).



9. Why did Jacob adopt Ephraim and Manasseh? (48:5) ⁹
10. Did Jacob adopt *all* the sons of Joseph? (48:6) ¹⁰
11. Where did Joseph's mother die? (48:7) ¹¹
12. How could Israel see Joseph's sons and then ask, "Who are these?" ¹²
13. Why does the Torah first say that Jacob was blind and then immediately goes on to say that Jacob *saw* Joseph's offspring? (48:10-11) ¹³
14. Why does the Torah say that Joseph "brought them out from between his knees" when both Manasseh and Ephraim were full grown men? ¹⁴
15. What did Jacob do before he blessed his grandsons? (48:13-14) ¹⁵
16. Why did Jacob bless Ephraim over Manasseh? (48:14) ¹⁶
17. Exactly who received the blessing – Joseph or his sons? (48:15) ¹⁷



⁹ According to midrash, Jacob was supposed to have 14 sons. Ephraim and Manasseh were supposed to be his sons, born to him as twins by Bilhah, but Reuben's incest caused these souls not to descend, and providence then decreed that they would later be fathered by Joseph. Another explanation is that Jacob wanted to confer the blessing of the firstborn on Joseph, and Ephraim and Manasseh were considered a "double portion" for him.

¹⁰ No, any children Joseph fathered after them would be his (i.e., not given the status of a tribe of Israel). The other children of Joseph and Asenath would share in the inheritance of Ephraim and Manasseh, however.

¹¹ After Jacob and his family fled from Padan Aram (Laban), Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin on the side of the road that approached the village of Bethlehem. According to midrash, Jacob did not bury Rachel at the Cave of Machpelah because he was commanded by God to bury her there (Jer. 31:15). Discuss why you think that Jacob brought this subject up when he was talking with Joseph...

¹² Jacob was nearly blind with age (48:10) as was his father Isaac when Jacob had stolen the blessing, and yet the Torah says that he "saw Joseph's sons." The midrash says he was confused because they were dressed in Egyptian clothes, and Jacob did not recognize them, though another explanation is that he simply wanted confirmation that they were Joseph's sons. Discuss how Isaac was confused after Jacob had stolen the blessing and later asked Esau, "Who are you?" when he returned from the hunt to receive the blessing.

¹³ Jacob was seeing with the prophetic spirit, not with his physical eyes.

¹⁴ It is uncertain how old Jacob's grandsons were at this time. Jewish tradition claims Manasseh was Joseph's chief steward, which would have made him a full grown man before the time of the brothers' arrival in Egypt. At any rate, the pronoun here can refer to Jacob – i.e., Joseph took them from between *Jacob's* knees (they were still there after Jacob kissed and hugged them), perhaps this was a symbol of adoption. After positioning his sons (Manasseh to Jacob's right, and Ephraim to his left), he prostrated himself on the floor in anticipation of the blessing.

¹⁵ Jacob deliberately crossed his hands so that his right hand was upon Ephraim (the younger grandson) and his left hand was upon Manasseh. Jacob did this to avoid humiliating Manasseh, since otherwise the men would have had to change places before the blessing could be given. It was almost as if Jacob was replaying how the blessing of his father Isaac would have been performed had both he and Esau come together for the blessing...

¹⁶ The text says that he was *ha-tza'ir* (הַצֶּעִיר), the "smaller" or "insignificant" one, and because Ephraim made himself small and humble, he received the primary blessing of Jacob. Another explanation is that Jacob foresaw that Joshua would come from Ephraim to lead the nation of Israel out of their coming bondage in Egypt.

¹⁷ The text says the blessing was given to Joseph, though the content of the blessing was directed to his sons.



18. How did Jacob invoke the Divine Name when blessing his grandsons? ¹⁸
19. What specific blessings were given to the Ephraim and Manasseh? (48:16) ¹⁹
20. Why did Joseph try to correct his father during the blessing? (48:17-18) ²⁰
21. What did Jacob prophesy regarding Ephraim? (48:19) ²¹
22. Of whose merit were Israel's sons to be blessed? (48:20) ²²
23. What gift did Jacob give to Joseph? (48:21-22) ²³
24. Name at least five cases where the younger brother was preferred to the elder. ²⁴
25. When Jacob first called his sons together, what did he want to share? (49:1) ²⁵



- ¹⁸ Jacob identified God as 1) the God of Abraham and Isaac; 2) the One who had been his Shepherd (הֹרֵעָה) all his life; 3) the Angel who redeemed him from all evil (הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּדֹל אֲתִי מִכָּל-רָע).
- ¹⁹ Jacob asked God to let the lads “bear his name” (along with the names of Abraham and Isaac) and to multiply them as fish, “becoming many within the land.”
- ²⁰ At first Joseph assumed his father was going to bless them equally, giving Ephraim the blessing of the right hand but mentioning Manasseh first. However when Jacob said, “May He [God] bless the lads...” without saying their individual names, he grew concerned at the apparent violation of the law of the firstborn (bechor). The Torah literally says that it was “evil in his [Joseph’s] eyes.”
- ²¹ Jacob foresaw that Ephraim would become *melo ha-goyim* (מְלֵא-הַגּוֹיִם), a “multitude of nations,” which has been interpreted by advocates of “two house” theology to mean that Ephraim represents the “ten lost tribes” of Israel that were sent into exile (Ephraim became another name for the Northern Kingdom). The phrase *zaro yeyeh melo hagoyim* is thought to mean that Ephraim would literally become a multitude of “goyim” (nations). In the end, the southern kingdom of Judah will be joined with the northern kingdom of Ephraim to form a single house or people of God...
- ²² Israel’s sons would be blessed in the merit of Joseph (a type of Messiah). The text reads, “Israel will use you (singular, referring to Joseph), as a blessing, saying: “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh” (יִכְמְנְשֶׁהוּ וְיִשְׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וּכְמָנַשֶׁה). Jacob said “through you (*bekha*, singular) Israel will bless” rather than *bakhem*, plural, to indicate that the blessing said over Israel’s sons really comes from the merit of Joseph.
- ²³ Jacob gave Joseph the region of Shechem as an additional portion than that of his brothers. Shechem first appears in the Torah in Genesis 12:6-8, which records how Abraham reached the “great tree of Moreh” at Shechem and offered sacrifice nearby. Shechem then represents the “first of the land,” the very first place Abraham and Sarah stopped upon their entry to the Promised Land. Jacob’s well was later located there and eventually Joseph would be buried there (Joshua 24:32). Note that the word “Shechem” means “shoulder,” referring to the extra portion that was given to the priests of Israel...
- ²⁴ Abel (Cain), Isaac (Ishmael), Jacob (Esau), Moses (Aaron), Joseph (Reuben). In light of these examples, why does the Torah later state a law that the portion of the firstborn must not be disregarded (Deut. 21:15-17)?
- ²⁵ Although Jacob wanted to explain what would happen in the “end of days” (אַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים), that is, the time of the final redemption and rectification of the world, he was forbidden from doing so, since God does not want this mystery revealed. No man may know the day or hour when the Messiah will come since people would suffer great grief of heart knowing that he could not come before the set time. Note that in Jewish tradition, the following are all hidden from man’s eyes: 1) the day of one’s death; 2) the time of the Messiah’s coming; 3) the time of the end of Edom’s dominance; 4) the complete depth of the Torah.



26. When Jacob began giving prophecy to his sons, why did he said that Reuben was “unstable as water” and would lose his preeminence? (49:3-4) ²⁶
27. Why should Joseph rightly be regarded as Israel’s firstborn son? ²⁷
28. Why did Jacob reprimand Simeon and Levi together? (49:5-7) ²⁸
29. What special blessing was given to Judah? (49:8-12) ²⁹
30. What blessing was given to Zebulun and to Issachar? (49:13-15) ³⁰
31. Why didn’t Jacob follow the birth order of the sons as he blessed them? ³¹
32. What was so special about the blessing given to Dan? (49:16-18) ³²



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- ²⁶ Reuben lost his status as the “firstborn son” of Israel (through Leah) because he committed incest with Bilhah, Jacob’s wife and the mother of Dan and Naphtali. Later Moses prayed that Reuben’s tribe would not become extinct (Deut. 33:6). Note that 1 Chron. 5:1 reads, “The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son.”
- ²⁷ When Jacob married Leah, he thought he was marrying Rachel but was deceived (Gen. 29:25). Had this deception not occurred, Joseph would indeed have been the firstborn son.
- ²⁸ They are described as partners in crime who used their swords as instruments of violence. Undoubtedly Jacob was thinking of the massacre at Shechem which risked the existence of the entire family. Prophetically Jacob understood that they were primarily responsible for the kidnapping of Joseph, though he also foresaw the rise of Zimri, a prince of Simeon who led the rebellion at Baal Peor, as well as the rise of Korah, a prince of Levi who defied Moses’ authority. Note that though he said they would be “scattered” in Israel, Jacob did not curse the tribes, but rather their anger. Levi later “sanctified” its anger by becoming zealous for God and therefore they were given the role of attendants at the Tabernacle. The tribe of Simeon, however, was virtually lost in Israel.
- ²⁹ Judah would become the leader of the other tribes who would exercise authority in Israel. All his brothers would be called by his name (i.e., Yehudi - Jew). He is likened to a young lion – an “awesome lion” – whom no one dares to rouse. The scepter (שֵׁפָטָה) will not depart from Judah, nor the lawgiver from “between his feet,” until “Shiloh” comes, which is thought to refer to the Messiah, i.e., that which (שֵׁפָטָה) belongs to Him (לֵוִי), i.e., “to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.” In other words, Shiloh is the Messiah, the coming King of Israel, who will rule over Israel and before whom the nations shall submit. Since Yeshua was of the tribe of Judah, His scepter indeed will never depart from Judah, and upon His return to earth He will establish the kingdom of Zion. The statement that Judah would wash his clothes in wine, his cloak in the blood of grapes, etc., refers to second coming of Yeshua, when He will tread the winepress of the fury of God’s wrath when He comes in vengeance.
- ³⁰ Zebulun would become a maritime trader and a harbor for trade in Israel; Issachar was likened to a strong beast of burden who would persevere. According to Jewish tradition, Zebulun financed Issachar’s Torah study and both tribes benefited thereby.
- ³¹ Jacob wanted to bless all the sons of Leah in order (though he still placed Zebulun before Issachar) and that meant he temporarily passed over the sons of the concubines (Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher). Finally Jacob blessed Joseph and Benjamin.
- ³² Dan would represent judgment and would judge Israel (there is a play on words here, since “Dan” means judge). Dan would be like a serpent (nachash) on the road or a viper that bites the heel of a horse so that a rider falls backward. At this point Jacob says, “I wait for your salvation [yeshuah], LORD.” Note the keywords judgment, serpent, and salvation all occur in the blessing here.



33. Why did Jacob skip over Naphtali to bless Gad? (49:19) ³³
34. Describe the blessings given to Joseph. (49:22-25) ³⁴
35. What blessing was given to Benjamin? (49:27) ³⁵
36. How many were the tribes of Israel? (49:28) ³⁶
37. What was Jacob's final request to his sons? (49:29-32) ³⁷
38. Who was buried at the Cave of Machpelah? ³⁸
39. How old was Jacob when he died? ³⁹
40. Why did the Egyptians mourn for Jacob for 70 days? (50:3) ⁴⁰
41. Why do the sages say that the 400 year exile began with the death of Jacob? ⁴¹



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- ³³ Jacob had just said, "I wait for your salvation [yeshuah], LORD" and saw through prophetic vision that Elijah the prophet would come to herald the Messiah (Elijah was from the tribe of Gad).
- ³⁴ First Jacob blessed him by saying he was a fruitful son, and a "fruitful son over the eye" (בן פֶּרֶת עַל־עֵינַי), suggesting that Joseph would possess the good eye of faith. Though the archers shot at him (i.e., his brothers rejected him) and harassed him severely (i.e., cast him into the pit), his power was established by the Mighty One of Jacob (אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב), the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel (אֶבֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל). In the Name of the God of his father, El Shaddai, Joseph was blessed with both "the blessings of heaven above and the blessings of the deep beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb" (i.e., all spiritual and material blessings). Jacob invoked all the best blessings to be on the head of Joseph because he is the consecrated one (nazir) of his brothers. And since the blessing of Joseph extends to Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob's adopted sons, his blessing provides a prophetic picture of how Gentiles (those "adopted" into ethnic Israel) would later partake of "all spiritual blessings in the Messiah" (Eph. 1:3).
- ³⁵ Benjamin would be a warrior of Israel, and later the Temple was destined to rest in Benjamin's territory. The "eating of portions" mentioned alludes to the tamid sacrifices offered at the altar.
- ³⁶ The Torah states there were twelve tribes, though Joseph represents the two adopted tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, which therefore means there were a total of 13 tribes of Israel. Though Jacob appeared to have scolded Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, at the end of Jacob's talk he gave them additional blessings as well. Likewise Moses blessed all the tribes of Israel before his death (see Zot Haberkhah).
- ³⁷ He instructed his sons to bury him at the Cave of Machpelah in the land of Canaan and instructed them to carry his coffin in a particular (which corresponded with the order of the tribes around the Tabernacle).
- ³⁸ Adam & Eve; Abraham & Sarah; Isaac & Rebekah; and Jacob & Leah are all buried there.
- ³⁹ He died at the age of 147. On the day that Jacob died, the Egyptian exile is said to have begun (see below).
- ⁴⁰ They had seen that after Jacob arrived in Egypt the famine came to an end and the Nile began to overflow. Therefore he had attained a very high reputation among Pharaoh and his aristocracy in Egypt.
- ⁴¹ Because after the death of Jacob, Joseph had to subjugate himself to Pharaoh and no longer could do whatever he desired. Therefore he had to go ask permission to bury his father in Canaan and was permitted only with an accompanying chariot brigade and horsemen that would attend the official procession. Moreover, after the death of Jacob the brothers desired to return to Canaan, but the Pharaoh required that the cattle and the children must remain behind in Egypt (as hostages to insure their return).



42. Explain the basic steps for mourning the dead.⁴²
43. After their father was buried, why did the brothers think that Joseph would seek revenge for their earlier betrayal?⁴³
44. What did the brothers say to Joseph to allay their fears? (50:16-18)⁴⁴
45. How did Joseph respond to his brothers' appeals for mercy? (50:19-21)⁴⁵
46. How old was Joseph when he died? (50:22)⁴⁶
47. What was Joseph's last request of his brothers? (50:24-25)⁴⁷
48. How does the Book of Genesis begin and end?⁴⁸
49. Can you list the Hebrew names of the twelve portions of the Book of Genesis – in their correct order?⁴⁹
50. What does "Chazak Chazak Ve'nitchazek!" (חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזֵּק) mean?⁵⁰

⁴² After the burial, the immediate mourners return to a home called the "shivah house," designated for observing a seven day period of intense mourning. Shivah is from the word sheva, which means seven. The first 30 days following the burial (which include the shivah period) are called *sheloshim*, from the word meaning "thirty," which is a general mourning period for everyone related to the deceased. Mourning lasts for an entire year if the deceased is a parent (or a very close relative) with *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of the date of death) observed each year on the date of death according to the Hebrew calendar.

⁴³ Jewish tradition says that the brothers never confessed their sin to Jacob, and likewise Joseph never told his father that his brothers betrayed him. The midrash says that on the way to bury his father, Joseph passed by the place where he met his brothers when his father sent him to Shechem to check on their welfare. While he was there, Joseph stood near the pit where he was thrown and silently prayed to God, thanking Him for his deliverance. The brothers interpreted this to mean that Joseph was revisiting his wound and awakening his resentment and therefore they became fearful.

⁴⁴ The brothers lied by saying that Jacob had instructed them to go to Joseph and apologize for their spiteful deed and the evil they had done to him. In addition they prostrated themselves before him and offered to be his slaves.

⁴⁵ Joseph told them not to be afraid since he was not in God's place to be their judge, and besides, even though they meant to do him harm at the time, God intervened and turned their betrayal into the means for providing salvation for the fledgling nation. Therefore he comforted them and spoke kindly to them...

⁴⁶ Joseph lived to the age of 110.

⁴⁷ Joseph made the brothers swear to take his bones back to the land of Canaan to be buried at Shechem.

⁴⁸ It begins with an account of the creation of the universe and ends with Joseph being put into a coffin in Egypt. Note that the word translated "coffin" is the Hebrew word *aron* (אֲרוֹן), a word used elsewhere in the Torah to refer exclusively to the Ark of the Covenant. Parashat Vayechi functions as a transition between the theme of key individuals (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, etc.) in the Book of Genesis and the theme of the "children of Israel" in the Book of Exodus. Discuss the "greater narrative" of the Scriptures.

⁴⁹ Bereshit, Noach, Lekh Lekha, Vayera, Chayei Sarah, Toldot, Vayetzei, Vayishlach, Vayeshev, Miketz, Vayigash, and Vayechi.

⁵⁰ The phrase means "Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!" and is chanted after completing a book of Torah. A related phrase is *yasher koach* (יֵשֶׁר כּוֹחַ), which means "May your strength be firm," sometimes said to congratulate someone for performing a mitzvah (such as finishing a Torah reading, etc.).



Discussion Topics:

1. Before he died, Jacob “adopted” Joseph’s sons and elevated their status to be equal with his own sons. Some commentators suggest that Jacob did this because Rachel, who had died an untimely death, would have bore him more children. At any rate, Joseph’s wife (Asenath) was a Gentile, so technically Ephraim and Manasseh were not ethnic Jews. Indeed, when Jacob saw the boys arrayed in Egyptian dress, he asked, “Who are these?” (Gen. 48:8). What implication might this have regarding the question of Jewish identity?
2. Jacob stated that though Manasseh would become a great tribe, Ephraim would become greater still: וְרַעַי יִהְיֶה מְלֶאכֶת הַגּוֹיִם / “his offspring shall become a *multitude of nations*” (Gen. 48:19). If you look at a map of the ancient tribal inheritances, you will see that Ephraim settled north of the territory of Judah, in the center of the Promised Land. Indeed, Joshua first settled the Ark of Covenant there (Josh. 1:18), and the ancient city of Shiloh became the religious capital of Israel for 369 years (Zevachim 118). Later, after the kingdom was divided, Ephraim became synonymous with the northern tribes (i.e., Northern Kingdom or “Israel”), though this term was never used to refer collectively to a multitude of nations. When the LORD said, “I am Israel’s father and Ephraim is my firstborn son” (Jer. 31:9), Ephraim is thought to refer to something more than a general term for the northern tribes, and this has led some to regard “spiritual Ephraim” as a picture of followers of Yeshua from “every tribe and tongue.” In other words, Ephraim represents those among the nations who are grafted in to Israel by means of Yeshua, whereas Judah represents those ethnic Jews who will one day be restored to the covenantal blessings at the end of the age. As the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the “two sticks” suggests, one day the House of Judah and the House of Joseph will be joined together to become “one stick” (read Ezek. 37:15-28). Do you agree or disagree with the analogy that the church represents spiritual Ephraim? Why?
3. When Jacob scolded Simeon and Levi, he said, “Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company” (Gen. 49:6). How are we to understand this given that both Moses and Aaron were Levites whom God used to deliver Israel from Egypt?
4. Jacob refers to Joseph as being attacked by archers who shot at him and harassed him severely, “yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (אֱבִיר יַעֲקֹב), the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel” (49:23-24). He then proceeded to bless Joseph in a remarkable way: “by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty (שַׁדַּי) who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb” (49:25). Jacob stated that his blessing was more powerful than the blessing of his fathers, “extending to the farthest of the everlasting hills; they will be on the head of Joseph, on the crown of the head of the prince among his brothers.” The phrase “prince among his brothers” (i.e., *nazir achav*: נָזִיר אַחָיו) suggests that Joseph’s spiritual legacy was *distinct* and separate from that of his other brothers. Do you see a connection between Joseph’s legacy and Yeshua here?



5. Where were Bilhah and Zilpah buried? Ellen Franken (The Five Books of Miriam, 89) has them answer from the grave: “Like so many of our sisters, mothers, daughters, and countless other women in our lives, we lie buried in the white spaces of the holy scroll. And like Joseph’s bones, we still wait for you to carry us home from Egypt.” Do you think that the Torah is essentially patriarchal in its orientation, and if so, how do you explain this? Why wasn’t Dinah mentioned in the blessing that Jacob gave to his sons?
6. Joseph’s statement: *pakod yifkod Elohim etkhem* (פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם) “God will surely remember you,” reveals his faith in Israel’s eventual *return* to the Promised Land. When he asked to be buried in Israel, Joseph was full of faith that he would be raised from the dead in the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Burial in the land of Israel has been the wish of many generations of Jews, since tradition states that the resurrection will take place first in the Holy Land. This has led to the custom of burying the body with a small sack of earth from Israel. How important is the land of Israel to your theology?
7. Joseph was buried in a “coffin,” though the Hebrew word is actually *aron* (אָרוֹן), a word used elsewhere in the Torah to refer exclusively to the Ark of the Covenant. Throughout all their wilderness wanderings, the Israelites therefore carried *two* arks – one held the bones of Joseph and the other held the Ten Commandments. What relationship do you see between the reminder of Joseph’s sacrifice for the Jewish people and the giving of the commandments at Sinai?

לִישׁוּעַתְךָ קִנִּיתִי יְהוָה

li·shu·ah·te·**kha** ki·**vi**·ti Adonai

“I wait for your salvation, O LORD” (Gen. 49:18)

For Next Week:

- Read parashat Shemot (i.e., Exodus 1:1-6:1)
- Read the Haftarah (Isa. 27:6-28:13; 29:22-23)
- Read the New Testament (Acts 7:17-35; 1 Cor. 14:18-25)

