



Leading through Darkness • Parshat Vayechi

After decades of difficulty on the way to leadership greatness, Jacob breathes his last in this week's sedra, *Vayechi*: "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his kin" (Gen. 49:33). Joseph, perhaps aware of all the lost years between them, was understandably bereft: "Joseph flung himself upon his father's face and wept over him and kissed him" (Gen. 50:1).

But the real summation of Jacob's last years emerges in a conversation he has, not with Joseph, but with Pharaoh in last week's Torah reading. We've all participated in or witnessed unusual, almost inexplicable conversations that leave us baffled. This is one of the strangest conversations in all of Tanakh. I've written about this conversation at length and am still bewildered by it every year.

Jacob speaks to Pharaoh and tells this powerful leader and stranger of his woes. "Joseph then brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh, and Jacob greeted Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked Jacob, 'How many are the years of your life?' And Jacob answered Pharaoh, 'The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my ancestors during their sojourns.' Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh's presence" (Gen. 47:7-10).

Pharaoh asks an odd question about Jacob's age. Jacob responds by telling Pharaoh something he never revealed to his sons. His life has been punishingly hard and is soon to be over. How Jacob knows this is never explained. After this upsetting

download of misery, Pharaoh says nothing. He offers not a word of solace or consolation. Jacob then exits the scene. The story progresses with no further mention of the encounter.

Before we look at the content of this dialogue, there is an important context for this conversation that appears a few verses later: "Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, down to the little ones. Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine" (Gen. 47:12-13). Jacob, the inheritor of Abraham and Isaac's legacy, had to be supported by his son, in a land not his own, at the point of starvation. Any leader would be humiliated and ashamed in this desperate situation. How could it be that Jacob began his leadership with a magnificent dream of a ladder covered with angels and many divine promises, and now he was bereft, untethered from his homeland, and virtually penniless?

Nahmanides, the 13th century Spanish commentator known by the acronym Ramban, explains that it was Pharaoh who requested the meeting, not Joseph. Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph's many talents that he, understandably, wanted to meet Joseph's father. Nahum Sarna, in his JPS commentary on Genesis, observes that it would be undignified for Jacob to appear with his sons as humble petitioners so Joseph set up a separate meeting to preserve his father's dignity.

Pharaoh then asked Jacob a puzzling question, one that sounds out of place, even rude: why

have you lived so long? Yet some understand this as a question that emerges out of respect. Many Pharaohs were young on the throne. This Pharaoh may have been shocked by Jacob's longevity and regarded it as a blessing. Pharaoh was asking Jacob to tell him the secret to a long life.

But, if this was Pharaoh's intent, why did Jacob answer that his life was actually short and soon to end? Jacob was 130 at this time, but his grandfather Abraham died at 175. His father Isaac died at 180. Because of Jacob's many disappointments – the theft of his brother's blessing, the switching of wives on the marriage alter, Lavan's exploitation, the disappearance of Joseph, the rape of Dina, the famine in Canaan – he felt that death was fast approaching, even if he was unable to predict it.

The French medieval exegete, R. Hezekiah ben Manoah, takes this view when he explains Pharaoh's intake of Jacob: "You look old and at the end of your days." Life has worn Jacob down. On the expression Jacob uses in response – that the years of his life did not achieve that of his ancestors during their sojourns – Rashi explains Jacob's confession: "All my life I've lived in the country of others." He did not want to spend his old age in someone else's land.

All leaders have dark days, even dark years. Two great leaders in more recent world history – Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill – suffered terrible depression. Lincoln called it melancholy. But rather than seeing these difficult periods as obstructions, they may have held the key to their respective greatness. They were able to harness the darkness they experienced to become more empathic to the suffering of others and more willing to take risks to solve problems than others. J. W. Shenk, in his article "Lincoln's Great Depression" (*The Atlantic*, Oct. 2005) writes, "Whatever greatness Lincoln achieved cannot be explained as a triumph over personal suffering. Rather, it must be accounted as an outgrowth of the same system that produced that suffering ... Lincoln didn't do great work because he solved the problem of his melancholy; the problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work."

Churchill called his dark days the "black dog." A black dog is an interesting image – a hovering, gloomy shadow that stays close but can walk away.

In a letter to his wife Clementine in 1911, Churchill wrote that he heard about a German doctor who treated depression: "I think this man might be useful to me – if my black dog returns. He seems quite away from me now – it is such a relief. All the colours come back into the picture."

Jacob struggled in this melancholic moment in last week's Torah reading, but there is a small, redeeming detail that is often ignored in this conversation. It is bookended by Jacob blessing Pharaoh on his way in and on his way out. Seforno regards the blessing as a small act of defiance. Jacob "did not bow to him (Pharaoh), neither when he arrived nor when he departed." Rashi deems the blessing as a "greeting of peace, as is usual in the case of all who are granted an interview with kings at long intervals." We find a similar usage in II Samuel 16:16.

Nahmanides disagrees with Rashi. This was not a polite, inconsequential gesture, the ancient equivalent of a curtsy or bow before royalty. Ramban believes that Jacob was truly blessing Pharaoh. Jacob may not have had bread. He may have been far from home, and his last years were characterized by difficulty, but Jacob always carried with him the capacity to bless. Even when he struggled with an angel, Jacob was injured but asked for a blessing. More than any other biblical leader, Jacob understood the secret of Jewish continuity and leadership: the ability to find the blessing in the struggle.

In his essay "Staying Young" on *Vezot Ha'Bracha*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers us advice that could have been lifted straight from Jacob's story: "Never compromise your ideals. Never give in to defeat or despair. Never stop journeying merely because the way is long and hard. It always is." It is easy to give in to dejection and misery and to give up. It is always harder to plow on and to seek the light. It is even harder to make the light by finding the blessing in the struggle. Our longevity as a people is nothing short of a miracle. It can only be explained by the capacity to be a blessing and to bless others even and especially when oppressed and downtrodden. This is leadership. This is Jacob. This is the people Israel named after Jacob.

What difficulty are you facing right now that needs a healthy dose of blessing?