

Parashat Vayechi 5776, 2015

*Jacob: The Unique Patriarch*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

[And Jacob said:] “And now, your two sons [Joseph], who were born to you in the land of Egypt, until I came to you, to the land of Egypt they are mine. Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuben and Simeon.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 48:5, all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

A careful reading of our *pasuk* (verse), when viewed in the context of succeeding biblical narratives, reveals that Jacob’s declaration to Joseph represents a transformative moment in the history of the Jewish people. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his students and disciples, addressed its profound meaning in a celebrated public discourse subsequently entitled, “The First Jewish Grandfather.” In doing so, he presented an exceptionally powerful textual analysis that has far-reaching implications:

... Jacob was the first patriarch to establish direct communication with his grandchildren. He was the first to make a solemn declaration, an historic pronouncement, which is responsible for the sense of closeness we still have with the past, thereby laying the foundation for the dialogue of the generations. He literally conquered time and space when he said to Joseph, “Now your two sons, who were born to you in Egypt, before I came to you in Egypt, are mine. Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine, no less than Reuben and Simeon.” ... Though a second generation removed, and nurtured in an Egyptian environment, Jacob equated them with his own sons who had been reared close to him in the Holy Land. (*Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav*, adapted from the lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, editor, volume II, pages 18-19)

Allow me to highlight some of the major points of the Rav's pioneering explication of our verse:

1. "Jacob was the first patriarch to establish direct communication with his grandchildren."
2. Jacob was the only one of the *Avot* (Patriarchs) "to make a solemn declaration, an historic pronouncement, which is responsible for the sense of closeness we still have with the past, thereby laying the foundation for the dialogue of the generations."
3. Even though Ephraim and Menashe were a second generation removed from Jacob, and had not been raised in the holy environment of the Land of Israel, "Jacob equated them with his own sons." It is in this sense that "he literally conquered time and space."

The Rav expanded upon the uniqueness of Jacob, and the ramifications of his approach regarding the future of our people, in the following manner:

Abraham and Isaac transmitted their spiritual heritage to their sons, not to their grandsons. The latter received it from their fathers, but there was no direct communication between Abraham and Jacob or between Isaac and Reuben and Simeon. The influence of the grandfathers on their grandchildren was indirect. Jacob, however, related directly to his grandchildren; he did not need an intermediary or an interpreter; his was a direct dialogue. He leapt over the gulf of the generations and transmitted the great *Mesorah* [religious traditions] of Abraham directly to Ephraim and Menashe. Despite the discrepancy of years, the *Zaken* [Jacob the Elder], the carrier of the old tradition, succeeded... Though the covenant was made initially with Abraham, it was not until Jacob that the secret of perpetuating the *Mesorah* was discovered. (Page 19, brackets my own)

According to Rav Soloveitchik, Jacob's contribution to the continuation of our people was second to none, for it was he who discovered "the secret of perpetuating the *Mesorah*." Therefore, in a very real sense, it was Jacob who laid the foundations for *Kenneset Yisrael*, the transhistorical entity of the Jewish people, who, with G-d's boundless mercy, exists and will continue to exist for all time. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.