

Parashat Vayechi, 5780, 2020:

## *On Becoming the Jewish People*

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 Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Vayechi is the final *sidrah* in *Sefer Bereishit* and the bridge to *Sefer Shemot*.

Until this time, our forebears were a small family comprised of 12 tribes, yet, within the first chapter of *Sefer Shemot*, Pharaoh utilizes what will become classic fear-mongering and rabble-rousing rhetoric and proclaims to his nation:

... “Behold, *Am B’nai Yisrael* — the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are. Get ready, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase, and a war befall us, and they join our enemies and wage war against us and depart from the land.” (1:9-10, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Suddenly, we have become an *am*, a people, a recognized “nation within a nation,” that in Pharaoh’s twisted and hate-filled mind threatens the existential being of the Egyptian people.

I believe that *Ya’akov Avinu* was well aware that his family of 70 individuals was destined to become an *am*. As such, prior to blessing his sons he declared: “...*Hayasfu* — Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. *Hekabtzu* — Join together and listen, sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel, your father.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:1-2, with my emendations) While *hayasfu* and *hekabtzu* have slightly different meanings, both suggest the idea of banding together into a singular entity, in this case, the nascent Jewish people.

What is the essence of *Am Yisrael*? What makes us a unique nation? How, against all the “laws of history,” have we managed to not only survive, but to thrive? These are questions to which my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) returned time and time again. During some of the darkest days of the Holocaust, the Rav penned, “*U’vikashtem Misham — And from There You Shall Seek*,” his most personally beloved theological work. Therein, he identifies and analyzes the idea of *Knesset Yisrael*:

*Knesset Yisrael* — the Community of Israel — its definition: the inextricable connection between the first and last generations of prophet and listener, of Torah scholar and student, of the Revelation of G-d’s Divine Presence in the earliest lights of dawn, and the eschatological vision on that day to come. (Translation my own)

At first blush, one might imagine that *Knesset Yisrael* is a homogeneous entity that is linked together by like-minded people and universally agreed upon concepts and patterns of thought. Yet, in his analysis of the term, “*hekabtzu* — join together,” the Rav presents an entirely different notion of what accounts for the continuation and greatness of *Knesset Yisrael*: “Jacob here [in his blessings to his sons] expresses the essence of *Knesses Yisrael*. According to Nachmanides, *Knesses Yisrael* connotes a community of contradictory, mutually exclusive ideas and people. ... [with] many traits of character.” (Public lecture, Boston, 1979, cited in, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Bereishis*, page 357)

I believe that *Ya’akov Avinu* profoundly recognized this constitutive aspect of the Jewish people, as demonstrated by his differentiated *brachot* (blessings) to each of his sons. Then, too, in my estimation, *Ya’akov’s brachot* represented the key to the Jewish future in which our many differences have become a dynamic source of strength, enabling us to survive the seemingly endless trials and tribulations that we have encountered throughout our storied history.

May the Master of the Universe ever encourage us to embrace our myriad differences so that we may continue to join together and proclaim as one, “*Am Yisrael chai!*”

*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria 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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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. Please click on the highlighted link.