

Parashat Vayechi 5783, 2023:

Od Avinu Chai

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The passing of *Ya'akov Avinu* is the most poignant theme in our *parasha*: “And Ya’akov concluded commanding his sons, and he drew his legs [up] into the bed and expired and was brought unto his people. Yosef fell on his father's face, and he wept over him and kissed him.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:33-50:1, all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations) In his *Commentary on the Torah* on this verse, Rashi (1040-1105) states the following: “But no mention is made of death in his regard, and our Rabbis of blessed memory said: ‘Our father Ya’akov did not die.’” This gloss is based on the following passage from *Talmud Bavli*,

Ta’anit 5b:

After they had eaten, Rabbi Yitzhak said to Rav Nahman that Rabbi Yoḥanan said as follows: “*Ya’akov Avinu lo mate*—Our patriarch Ya’akov did not die.” Rav Nahman asked him in surprise: “And was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him, and the embalmers embalmed him, and the buriers buried him?” Rabbi Yitzhak replied to Rav Nahman: “I am interpreting a verse, as it is stated: ‘Therefore do not fear, Ya’akov My servant, says Hashem, neither be dismayed, Yisrael, for I will save you from afar, and your descendants from the land of their captivity.’” (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 30:10) This verse juxtaposes Ya’akov to his descendants: Just as his descendants are alive when redeemed, so too, Ya’akov himself is alive. (Translation, Koren-Davidson Talmud, Rav Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal* editor, with my emendations)

In his *Commentary on the Talmud*, Rashi elaborates on the statement, *Ya’akov Avinu lo mate* and maintains: “[That is,] he lives forever.” Moreover, “when the Egyptian embalmers embalmed him, they did this because they [erroneously] thought he was dead.” As such, Rashi suggests that Rabbi Yitzhak’s interpretation of the *pasuk* in *Sefer Yirmiyahu*, “just as his descendants are alive when

redeemed, so too, Ya'akov himself is alive," should be taken at face value. (Rashi translations and brackets my own)

A markedly different approach to understanding our talmudic passage is found in *Perush HaAggadot* by Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham ibn Aderet (the Rashba, 1235-1310):

How is it remotely possible to suggest that Rabbi Yohanan or Rabbi Yitzhak based their understanding of what happened to *Ya'akov Avinu* more upon a midrashic interpretation of the verse in *Sefer Yirmiyahu*, with its hidden hints in the text, rather than upon explicit *pasukim* in the Torah that clearly explain that Ya'akov died, was eulogized, was embalmed, and was buried? Without a doubt, this is something that logic eschews and repudiates. (This and the following translations my own)

Rejecting Rashi's gloss based on straightforward textual analysis, the Rashba instead suggests:

Rabbi Yitzhak responded to him (Rav Nahman) not in regard to the death of Ya'akov's physical body, but rather in reference to [his ongoing spiritual presence among the Jewish people. As such, Rabbi Yitzhak states]: "But, I am giving a midrashic interpretation to this text [in *Yirmiyahu*], and concluding, just as his (Ya'akov's) descendants are alive [physically], so, too, is he alive [spiritually]." At that point, Rav Nahman understood the allusions inherent in the essential principle Rabbi Yitzhak was attempting to convey, and he was silent.

In my estimation, the Rashba's interpretation of Rabbi Yitzhak's *drasha* is congruent with a well-known *pasuk* in Parashat Vayigash: "And Yosef said to his brothers, 'I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 45:3) It is impossible to explain Yosef's "question" as a question in the literal sense. After all, in the verses leading up to this *pasuk* in Parashat Vayigash alone, Yehudah refers to *av* (father), *aviv* (his father), *avi* (my father) and *avinu* (our father) no less than 14 times! I believe, therefore, that Yosef is speaking *b'ruach hakodesh* (with Hashem's Divine Spirit resting upon him) and proclaiming to his brothers that no matter what they have done, no matter how great the emotional pain they had inflicted upon Ya'akov through their errant actions: *My father is alive, and will be so forevermore!* (See the Abarbanel's *Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 41:1, for other examples of Yosef acting *b'ruach hakodesh*)

Today, anti-Semitism has once again reared its ugly head throughout the world. As a result, there is no better time to focus on the spiritual lesson contained in Rabbi Yitzhak's *drasha*, and remember the stirring phrase, "Ya'akov Avinu lo mate." As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach *zatzal* taught us all, "Am Yisrael chai! Am Yisrael chai, od Avinu chai—The Jewish people live, the Jewish people live, and our Father [Ya'akov] continues to live!"

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:

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*** 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: [The Rav](#)