

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

## **(Bereishit)**

*Endings and beginnings: the black and white of life.*

*Close to 80 years later, the image still remains, burned into his memory, as if it were yesterday.*

*He was five and a half years old, but already an adult, standing in the central square (the umshlagplatz) of the Piyotrekov ghetto, next to the synagogue. His father, the Rabbi of the town, stood tall and proud in the middle of the square surrounded by the men of the village, distinguishable by his long full beard and his black rabbinic frock. The men were all on one side of the square and the women and children, by decree of the Nazis, off to one side.*

*Tension filled the air, with an intense, silent fear of the unknown, as they stood waiting in the square from where Jews were sent to... where?*

*Seventy-eight years later Rav Yisrael Lau remembers watching as the commandant of the Gestapo approached his father, the Rabbi, with murder in his eyes. He stood opposite him and drew his mika, the meter-long rubber truncheon favored by the Gestapo, from his belt. Suddenly, without warning or provocation, he brought the truncheon full force down on his father's back. The suddenness as well as the force of the blow caught the rabbi by surprise, causing him to stumble forward a few steps and his body bent forward and it appeared he would fall to the ground.*

*But in a moment of enormous will power the Rabbi caught himself and, straightening up to his full height, stepped back to where he had been standing. Rav Lau still remembers the intense look on his father's face as, with tremendous force of will, he removed all emotion from his face, refusing to give the Nazi the satisfaction of seeing the Chief Rabbi of Piyotrekov fall or shout in pain.*

*It was clear to little five year old Srulli, that his father knew how humiliating and demoralizing it would be for the Jewish community to see their rabbi fall to his knees before the grinning Gestapo officer, and by sheer force of will, refusing to give the Nazis that satisfaction he betrayed no emotion whatsoever and turned back to face the Nazi officer, his face a stone mask.*

*Years later, in his book Al Tishlach Yadcha' el Ha'na'ar (do not stretch out your hand against the lad), Rav Lau, the boy who had risen to become no less than the Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, describes this moment as the absolutely most painful moment of the entire six years he spent in the ghetto, work camp and concentration camps in the Holocaust.*

*And yet, it was this moment, more than any other, that gave him strength in his darkest moments, and to this day, that earliest childhood memory, (one of the last times he saw his father), remains with him wherever he goes, motivating him under the most trying of circumstances.*

*An ending, a painful farewell; and yet, also a beginning. The gift of strength and inspiration against the most trying of circumstances that would ultimately become a gift to motivate a young boy against all odds, and allow him to survive a painfully dark journey and live to reach his destination.*

Endings that are really beginnings, and beginnings that are endings are the stuff this week's portion, *Bereishit* (Genesis), is all about.

Just a week ago, we danced with the Torah scrolls on the festival of *Simchat Torah* as we concluded the entire five books of Moses, only to roll it back to the beginning and start all over again.

But this week's portion is not just about starting all over again, because that would mean we had finished what came before; no, this beginning is really the continuation of last week's conclusion.

I recall a number of years ago; a student spent Shabbat with us in Efrat at the beginning of winter, and ended up visiting a Synagogue the following week in Jerusalem. It happened that these two Shabbatot were the first two Shabbatot he had ever celebrated, much less attended a Synagogue, and that they happened to fall during the time of year when the Torah readings are about the saga of Joseph and his brothers.

He later remarked how brilliant it was that the Torah reading leaves off in the middle of such a good story almost ensuring that everyone would come back the next week to hear the next installment read.... I guess it was a good thing he wasn't visiting during the book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus) with its portions full of sacrifices, but in truth, he was right: *Bereishit* (Genesis) really is the continuation of *Ve'zot Habracha* (the last portion of the Torah), and every beginning really is just a continuation of the illusion of a previous ending.

And of course, if on his next visit, this student came during these two weeks of *Bereishit* and *Ve'zot Habracha*, he might assume that the continuation of Moshe's death and the moment of anticipation of a second generation of Jews born free in the desert and about to enter the land of Israel (the end of *Ve'zot Habracha*) is in fact the story of the creation of the world and the beginning of the saga of mankind in this week's portion. (Interestingly, when Joshua enters the land of Israel which might be considered the historical continuation of the end of the Torah (*Ve'zot Habracha*) he gives the Jewish people a speech which comes very close to this idea.)

This leads us to note that the theme of this week's portion, *Bereishit*, is all about beginnings which are really continuations, and endings which are really beginnings.

The creation of the world is not as much a beginning inasmuch as it is an extension of G-d who has no beginning. And the creation of humanity is also really not a beginning as we are, each of us, created in the image of G-d, who has no beginning and no ending, such that a part of us as well has no beginning and no ending.

And the story of Adam and Eve's mistake in eating from the Tree of Knowledge leading to an end of their sojourn in the Garden of Eden was really the beginning of the human journey to become partners in creating a better world (*Tikkun Olam*).

And then there is the story of Cain and Abel. Firmly ensconced, by no accident, in this week's portion as well, is the ultimate question of the ultimate ending: the challenge of death.

Eating from the Tree of Knowledge, of good and evil, is somehow meant to introduce death into the world.

“*Ki’ beyom acholcha’ mimenu’ mot tamut.*” (Bereishit 2:17)  
“... *For on the day you will eat of it (the Tree of Knowledge) you will surely die.*”

On some level, man’s expulsion from the Garden and his confrontation with the physical world represents the confrontation with mortality.

And then follows the story of Cain and Abel, whose ultimate result is the death by murder of one brother at the hands of another.

“*Va’yakam Kayin el Hevel achiv va’yehargehu’.*”  
“*And Cain arose against Abel his brother and killed him.*” (4:8)

Followed by *Lemech’s* lament over having killed as well: “... *Ki’ ish haragti’ lefitzi’...*”  
“*For a man have I killed by my wound...?*” (4: 23)

All of this leads to the chapter of generations (Genesis chapter 5), which when listing each successive generation of mankind, concludes each generation (each life) with the simple and yet so very final word: “*Va’yamot*”, “*And he died.*”

In fact, in Chapter Five this word appears no less than eight times, (verses 5,8,11, 14, 17, 20, 24, 27, and 31, the only exception being the story of *Hanoch* who is not described as dying but rather as “*Einenu*”, “He is no longer”, implying a different experience, and suggesting that the death term (“*Va’yamot*”) being employed here does not mean that a person is no longer....

(It is also interesting to note that in an actual; Torah scroll, each instance here where the word “*Va’yamot*” is used, appears as the end of a paragraph.)

**Ernst Beckett**, in his award winning book, *Denial of Death*, suggests that our entire lives and everything we do are ultimately about our attempts to deny our own mortality.

Why then is ‘death’ introduced here at the beginning of the Torah, which seems to be such a central part of life, whether in its denial or anticipation, challenge or solution?

It is interesting that although the book of Genesis (*Bereishit*) begins with the question of death, the Torah never actually defines it, much less describes what follows this seemingly end of life. Death seems to be the indefinable, the unknowable, and remains as a question described even as “*sheo’lah*” (see *Bereishit* 37:35, where Ya’acov describes his mourning over Joseph as lasting till the end of his days...) whose root *sha’al*, the questions suggests death as the ultimate question.

Indeed, it is only at the end of the book of Genesis, when Ya’acov lies on his deathbed, that we are given the barest suggestion as to what death is about.

Ya’acov, the third of the patriarchs, is the first figure in the Torah and perhaps in history, who has the opportunity to anticipate death. His is the first narrative of the actual process of death, and according to the Midrash (rabbinic legend) he may have been the first individual who actually became ill, giving him the chance to prepare for death.

(According to the Midrash, up until that time when a person died it was like the battery ran out, he simply sneezed, expelling the air breathed into us as the giving of soul (see Bereishit 2:7) and dropped dead, literally. Which may be why, to this day we say “G-d bless you” when a person sneezes....)

And what indeed, was his last task here on earth? He gathers his children, the future twelve tribes of Israel around him (as well as his grandsons *Menashe* and *Ephraim*) and blesses them before he dies.

And as soon as he concludes this task, the Torah tells us:

*“Va’yechal Ya’acov le’tzavot et banav, va’ye’asef raglav el ha’mittah, va’yigvah, va’yasef el amav.”*  
*“And Ya’acov concluded instructing his children, and he gathered his feet onto the bed and he expired, and was gathered unto his people.” (Bereishit 49:33)*

A puzzling verse, to say the least.

**Onkelos** (the Mishnaic period scholar who translated the entire Torah into Aramaic, the language of the day) translates the term *va’yigvah*, (*and he expired*) as *va’itnagid*, which loosely translated means he went opposite or against, implying perhaps that death is just a step in a completely different direction.

But what does it mean that Ya’acov was ‘gathered unto his people’? Where are these people? And what does it mean that he ‘gathered his feet unto the bed’? Why do we need to know how Ya’acov was lying when he died? What do his feet have to do with his death?

And then there is the Talmud’s cryptic comment on this verse (*Taanit* 5a, quoted in **Rashi** on the verse):

*“Ya’acov Avinu’ lo’ met.”*  
*“Our father Ya’acov is not dead.”*

While this comment may be based on the fact that the word death (*mavet*) in fact does not appear here in this verse, nonetheless, it sure seems like Ya’acov died. So what does this mean?

Perhaps in order to deal with death we need to understand what life is all about.

There are many different levels to life. There is physical life, what Jewish mysticism describes as the *nefesh be’hemi*’ the animal side to who we are which basically is about consciousness, and the fact that even an animal is conscious of its needs and desires.

But then there is what we do with that life and the need we all carry to ascribe meaning to it. Our innate desire to make life meaningful is the part of us that rises beyond the animal part of who we are, and taps into the soul of life itself.

When Hashem breathed a soul into each one of us, we were given the opportunity to rise above our own physicality and to tap into why we are really here. This process, incidentally, cannot exist without our having been created by a Creator (What we call G-d, or Hashem). If we are created then we are not random; we must have purpose and our greatest challenge, along with life’s greatest joy, is in our

attempt to tap into that purpose and figure out why we are here, and what we are meant to do with being here. (Or at least what we *choose* to do with our being here.)

Indeed, no matter how insignificant something may seem to be, this week's portion teaches us that every thing was created and thus must have purpose, and our desire to give our lives meaning really stems from our need to tap into why we are here and connect to the source of life itself: Hashem, who created us.

And of course, part of that meaning is not just that we have our own individual meaning, but that we can connect to a collective that is much bigger than we are whether it be a Jew connecting to the collective soul of the entire Jewish people, or for that matter any human being connecting to the collective soul of his people, nation, or religion. Indeed, some people are able to connect to the collective soul of the entire world.

Thus, we sense that there is a difference between an American killed in a car accident on I-95, and an American killed in Iraq as part of the US Army's battle against terrorism, in defense of freedom who, even in his death, is connecting to the collective of an entire nation.

When Ya'acov leaves this world, he has essentially fulfilled his mission: he has forged a family of twelve sons into the beginnings of a nation that will become the Jewish people. He lives to see the brothers come back together as one, around his bedside, and he succeeds in instructing them on what that means. Only when he has completed this mission, the mission of his life, is he ready to move on. And he gathers his feet onto the bed, perhaps because his journey, his walk, is over, so he can move on. Yet, he is not dead; he is not "over", he rather becomes a part of the larger collective soul of the Jewish people, and remains with us, in who we are and all that we do as a Jewish people to this very day.

Death then, is not an ending but a milestone, a portal, giving all of us the chance to consider dreams realized, and challenges which remain.

And as we read the portion of Bereishit, and contemplate a new year, full of new beginnings, let us take the time as well to reflect on all those individuals and dreams, ideas and past accomplishments that are the foundations on which we can begin, read, and continue, all over again.

Best wishes for a sweet year full of joy and exciting beginnings,

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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