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Jacob is still alive in his descendants

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Vayechi, Genesis 47:28-50:26

In introducing our forefather Jacob's death, the Torah says, "Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years. The days of Jacob, the years of his life were 147 years." Why is Jacob's time in Egypt described as living but his life span described as the days and years of his life?

The Torah is teaching us that there is more to being alive than a physiological reality. Our true lives are the productive pursuit of our life's purpose.

When Joseph sent his brothers to bring Jacob the news that he was still alive, the Torah says, "They told him saying, 'Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler of all the land of Egypt.' Jacob's heart stood still, for he could not believe them." But then, "They told him all the words of Joseph which he had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him. Then the spirit of their father Jacob was enlivened."

During all the years that Joseph was in Egypt, Jacob mourned not only the loss of his son but his failure to create a family/nation that could carry on the tradition of Torah that he received from Abraham and Isaac. He thought that much as Ishmael and Esau did not stay true to their father's vision, so too his family would not transcend into a nation with unity. Therefore, even when he heard that Joseph was the leader of Egypt, he did not believe the words "Joseph is still alive."

Even if Joseph was physiologically alive, to imagine that he was spiritually alive was more than Jacob could hope for. However, when the brothers told Jacob all the words of Joseph and he saw the wagons, he did believe.

Rashi explains that the wagons symbolized the last portion of Torah study that Jacob had taught Joseph. Jacob saw that indeed not only was Joseph alive and not only did his sons find the greatness of spirit to overcome their differences, but Joseph had remained true to Jacob's vision of the world - God's world.

Thus Jacob truly lived during his 17 years in Egypt with all of his sons unified in the service of God. He had succeeded in his mission to establish a family, a nation, true to the service of the God of his fathers.

Indeed, the Talmud says that when Jacob was about to reveal the end of days to his children, he was concerned that one of them might be a nonbeliever.

His sons reassured him immediately and cried out, for the first time, with the "Shema Yisrael" - "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One," perhaps the most famous of all Jewish sayings.

To his very last breath, Jacob stayed "on mission," unifying his children in the service of God.

To this day, Jews say Shema upon arising in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. It is said when praising God and when beseeching Him. It is the first prayer that a Jewish child is taught to say. It is the last prayer a Jew says prior to death. And as long as we continue to tread the path of Jacob, we are ourselves enlivened with our purpose.

In fact, the Talmud says that as we carry his legacy, Jacob, our forefather himself, is not dead; he is alive spiritually within each and every one of his descendants.

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