



Real-life Judaism

RABBI ZVI HOLLAND
Vayechi, Genesis 47:28 - 50:26

Vayechi opens with a sentence that begs an explanation. "Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years. The days of Jacob, the years of his life were 147 years." This is the opening of the portion that deals with the final blessings Jacob gives his sons, who go on to be the 12 Tribes of Israel, before his death.

Four questions stand out as needing answers: First, what relevance does Jacob's living in Egypt for 17 years have on this closing chapter of his life? Second, why mention Jacob's days when we count his years? Third, the sentence is reversed; Jacob's age should have preceded his time in Egypt. Why is it so? And finally, why is the Hebrew word *vayechi* used to describe Jacob's residence in Egypt, and not the more common *vayeshev* or *vayagar*?

I believe that there is a special message here that is most relevant today as we struggle to envision the future of the American Jewish community spiritually, religiously and even demographically. The root word of *vayechi* is the word *chayim* - life. What kind of life is the Torah telling us that Jacob lived in Egypt by using the word *vayechi*? The answer lies in last week's portion. When Jacob saw that the gifts Joseph brought were loaded in carriages, the Torah tells us that the "spirit of Jacob was enlivened." Rashi explains that his spirit was lifted only when he saw the carriages. Despite the fact that Jacob had already been told that Joseph was alive and ruling the entire land of Egypt, Jacob still wondered what kind of life (*chayim*) his son was living. Had he succumbed to the values and mores of Egyptian society? Or had he remembered and maintained the values and lifestyle of Torah Jacob had taught him? Jacob did not rejoice, his spirit was not filled with life, until he saw the carriages, which were a coded message reminding him of the last Torah topic Joseph studied with his father. Then and only then did Jacob experience *chayim* again.

"Vayechi" tells us that this spiritual living continued until the end of Jacob's life, even after he and his whole family moved to Egypt. This is the message the portion opens with: Not only did Jacob live years but he lived his days with *chayim*, the spiritual life of Torah he envisioned as fundamental.

What was the secret to his success? The study of Torah. The first step Jacob took to settle Goshen, what was to become the Jewish district in Egypt, was to send Judah to establish a place of Torah study.

Living in exile and still succeeding in living with the vision of his fathers was basic to Jacob's mission of establishing the Jewish People as an eternal legacy. He knew that God had already proclaimed to Abraham that his descendants would not always live in the Land of Israel. The years in Egypt were the prototypical Jewish exile, living among another nation but maintaining Torah values and morals through the ongoing study of Torah.

As we search for *chayim* and attempt to create our Jewish future in the face of apathy and assimilation, we must retrace the path of our forefathers and make Torah education for ourselves and all Jews at all ages the clarion call of our generation. With the strength of knowledge, the Jewish People has proved itself time and again to be eternal.

Rabbi Zvi Holland is the director of the Phoenix Community Kollel.