

Vayechi 5784

“Last Words”

Rabbi David Englander

This last Shabbat of 2023 is also a Shabbat that we read of a couple of lasts in the Torah. The last of the patriarchs, Jacob, who dies and the last king of a unified kingdom of ancient Israel, David, whose death is reported in the Haftarah. Arguably among all the early kings of Israel David lived the most eventful life, and among all the patriarchs and what we know of the matriarchs Jacob's journey was for sure the most elaborate, dynamic, and drama-filled.

And the end of Jacob's life is spent giving blessings and instructions to his children before making sure that they promise to bury him in the Machpela, where all of his ancestors other than Rachel were also buried. David, on the other hand, channels his last recorded words in quite a different way, instructing his children to punish someone named Shimei son of Gera who had insulted him “outrageously”. His last words are “send his gray hair down to Sheol in blood.” Not exactly what we would expect from the most noted and written about king of Israel, but it was certainly not the only time David's humanity - flaws and shortcomings together with tremendous bravery, loyalty, poetry and leadership - were on display. There are two aspects of these significant spiritual transitions that I am going to guess many of you can relate to.

The first is that an experience that is not universal but which I have heard about often enough to believe is both a reality and a gift. Even when someone has been in medical decline for sometime, just before they depart

this world there can be some moments - an hour or two, maybe a day or two, of lucidity beyond what anyone expected. I remember seeing this once on Grey's Anatomy - don't ask - and they called it a rally, and the term fits. It seems that both Jacob - who was barely able to sit up in bed, and David - who needed constant attending to in his final stage, however long that lasted - both rallied at the end of their life.

Jacob's adult children received instruction. David's son Solomon was reminded, perhaps, that ruling the kingdom would require both compassion and toughness, and it would take Solomonic wisdom for when to employ each and in what quantity. Too much compassion and you could be steamrolled, too much toughness and you would be a target forever, and despised by your own people. Maybe that's where the expression heavy is the head that wears the crown comes from. And maybe that is something that Israel's own leadership is struggling with today as it finds itself facing impossibly difficult challenges, knowing that defending the people of Israel requires the inflicting of destruction on others. We have to be the ones to not forget that Israel did not seek this conflict, not this level of conflict. It was brought through the gates on October 7th and there is no country in the world that would not be expected to do all it could to respond to make sure it cannot happen again. Especially when those still in leadership on the other side of the border have no qualms in saying they would do it all again tomorrow if they could.

If you have experienced a loved one's rally at the end of life I hope it was a source of blessing and inspiration. And if you did not have that opportunity we do get to focus and remember as much as we can those words of

encouragement and maybe blessing over years of lives intertwined with loved ones. One need not wait for a so-called rally to either inspire or be inspired, and the lives of Jacob and David serve as examples of this truth as well.

Second is an idea that Jacob for sure has on his mind that I was reminded about at the Wednesday funeral of our honored member Charles Middleberg, whose wonderful family came together to talk about his extraordinary journey, as one of the last Holocaust survivors able to remember some of what he went through when he was hidden away with righteous gentiles in France. We stood at the graveside at Beth Jacob cemetery and I looked around and saw many other family members were buried there as well. And I reminded the gathered group of family and their friends who came to be of support that there is a concept in Judaism called Kever Avot, the burial plot for a family. And the first one is recorded in the book of Genesis and it is the very last thing that is on Jacob's mind.

So many of our ancestors, including Charles' own mother Bertha, were not afforded the chance to be buried in their family's kever avot, and not all of us have that tradition or opportunity in our family lives as well. Perhaps it is not too late to think about starting. It is an honor not only to those who will rest there in peace, but also to redeem something of the tragedies of our history when this choice was not offered, to put it mildly. And in these dark and challenging days for Israel it is a reminder that we have to pray, work, and advocate for the release not only of the living hostages but of the many bodies that are held by terrorists who the world seems to now seek to allow to continue in power. All should be demanding one thing, which is surrender.

When you start a war you don't get to dictate whether those you attacked will or will not fight back. That was the truly and devastatingly unfortunate choice of this enemy. It expected more of its allies to rise to its aid; none of them did. They all knew Israel would not stand by and wait for the world to intervene on its behalf. So we will continue to support Israel in its efforts to do what any other country would be expected to do. As long as this enemy swears itself to Israel's destruction, and declares it will act on those intentions and through thought, word and deed continues to do so, may God bless the IDF with strength and its commanders with wisdom to meet this merciless threat. Od lo avdah tikvateinu, our hope is not lost. Am Yisrael Chai.

Shabbat shalom.