



Did Ya'acov Ever Die?

Why is it Better to go to a Funeral than to a Wedding?

Many secular Jews don't believe in the afterlife. They believe that once a person closes his eyes for the very last time, it's all over. Thus, they lack faith in the light at that other side of the tunnel. I've always thought how scary it must be for them to get older and approach the darkness of death. It seems to me daunting enough to think about the prospect of crossing over to the other side, even when we do believe that there is a greatest eternal light awaiting us. Fear of death is fear of the unknown, even if that unknown hopefully will turn out to be the greatest good. We may also be afraid of the judgment that face us on the other side. Who can truly claim to have lived up to his or her potential in full? If our lives were short of achieving ultimate perfection, will we be barred from the eternal bliss awaiting the righteous in the world-to-come? King Solomon teaches us: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for that is the end of every man, and the living shall lay it to his heart" (*Kohelet* 7:2). A person must take to heart that every being eventually must die (Ibn Ezra), and thus it will cause his heart to repent before it's too late. At a funeral we are reminded to straighten out our lives. Thinking of death reminds us about why we are here, and that life is short to accomplish our purpose. So, we better repent and put ourselves back on track, after having been easily sidetracked and stuck in physical pleasures, forgetting about our ultimate purpose to perfect our character and perform mitzvot. At a graveyard, men tuck in their tzitzits, since the tzitzits represent the mitzvot, which no longer can be performed in the hereafter. Disbelieving in the afterlife causes disbelief in the importance of perfecting ourselves in this life. If we only live once, and life is over once and for all, when the body becomes lifeless, then how can there even be a purpose to life? Why were we even placed here to begin with?

What Convinced Me to Believe in the Hereafter?

I recall reading the following Taoist quote in high school: "Once upon a time, I, Chuang Chou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man" (Zhūangzi (c. 369 BCE – c. 286 BCE)). This Chinese proverbial opened my mind to the possibilities that our present life may be like a dream or illusion, whereas true life may only begin at the end of this life. The notion of the hereafter is what originally brought me to teshuva. Learning about how we are to do our work in this world, and receive our reward in the coming world, brought me to belief in the Torah path. It always seemed to me that there is a spiritual law that every lack must eventually become filled. Otherwise, what would be the purpose of experiencing this lack? Most people never feel complete fulfillment in this world. We always yearn for more. So, there must be a place beyond this world for receiving the 'more' for which we long. The more we become aware of our soul, the more we fathom its eternity. The fact that the soul is always yearning for spirituality – for a greater connection with the divine, which it can never fully achieve within the body – convinced me that there must be another place beyond this physical world in which the yearning of our soul will finally become fulfilled.

Why Did Ya'acov Never Die?

Tzaddikim are called alive even in their deaths" (*Berachot* 18). Thus, the parasha describing Sarah's death and burial is called "*Chayei Sarah* – The Life of Sarah." Likewise, Although the main theme of *Parashat Vayechi* is the demise of Ya'acov, the parasha opens with "*Vayechi Ya'acov*" – "Ya'acov lived."

ספר בראשית פרק מז פסוק כח

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁבַע עָשָׂר וָיָמִים יְמֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שְׁבַע שָׁנִים וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה:
 "Ya'acov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and Ya'acov's days, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty-seven years (*Bereishit* 47:28).

From this our sages learn that "*Ya'acov Avinu lo met* – our patriarch Ya'acov never died" (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 5b). The Torah portion about Ya'acov's death is really about his life, that he "lived" even after he "died." I was pondering about what it means to live on after death, and it seems to me that our sages were not only referring to the afterlife but moreover to the ability of the righteous to live on even in this world, but how exactly? The Talmud sheds light on our question:

Rabbi Yochanan said: Our patriarch Ya'acov did not die. [Rav Nachman] asked him, "And was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him, and the embalmers embalmed him, and the buriers buried him?" [Rabbi Yitzchak replied:] "I am interpreting a verse, as it is stated: 'Therefore do not fear, Ya'acov My servant, says Hashem, neither be dismayed, Israel, for I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity' (*Yirmeyahu* 30:10). This verse juxtaposes Ya'acov to his seed: Just as his seed is alive when redeemed, so too, Ya'acov himself is alive" (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 5b).

Whereas Avraham fathered Yishmael, and Esav was born to Yitzchak, Ya'acov was the only patriarch whose entire offspring was righteous. Each of his 12 sons were worthy to be included in the Chosen People. We learn this from the verse: "...Israel prostrated himself on the head of the bed" (*Bereishit* 47:31). He prostrated himself to G-d because his offspring were perfect, insofar as not one of them was wicked, as is evidenced by the fact that Yosef was a king, and furthermore, that although he was captured among the heathens, he remained steadfast in his righteousness (*Sifrei Va'ethannan* 31, *Sifrei Ha'azinu* 334); (Rashi, *Bereishit* 47:31). Thus, Ya'acov's entire offspring are called the Children of Israel, because they continue the legacy of their righteous father, Yisrael. Therefore, Ya'acov never died, but lives on through his children.

Can the Childless Remain Alive Forever?

So how can a childless person live on? There are numerous ways to leave our legacy behind, as our sages explain concerning the verse: "These are the generations of Noach, Noach was a righteous man" (*Bereishit* 6:9). This is to teach you that the main progeny of the righteous are their good deeds (*Midrash Tanchuma Noach* 2); (Rashi, *Bereishit* 6:9). Even if we don't have any children in this lifetime, our good deeds are our legacy through which we live on. Moreover, inspiring anyone to perform a good deed, grants us eternity, because any positive influence we had on someone else can be transmitted to others throughout the generations. Rebbe Nachman explains that we also can gain eternal life through eating in holiness the Torah way. Acquiring true humility is the main prerequisite to be able to eat in holiness. Thereby we draw out the holy sparks within the food – its inner lifeforce that derives from the source of life – the eternal life of the future. The person who eats in this way will live forever as it states, "He will eat and live forever" (*Bereishit* 3:22). This pertains to the true tzaddikim who are alive and established forever, and never die. Likewise, Ya'acov, our Father, never died" (*Ta'anit* 5b); (*Likutei Halachot, Hilchot Tefillin* 6). Just as the holy sparks within the food is its lifeforce, so is the holy soul the life of a

person. Since the body without the soul is just an empty shell, the soul is our essence, not only in the world-to-come but even in this world. The expressions of the soul are the spiritual accomplishments and the legacy – the special qualities for which a person is eulogized. Rather than making a good living, or being an excellent bridge player, the legacy of the soul includes qualities such as faith, kindness, self-discipline, honesty, wisdom, courage, gratitude, humility and repentance. These are some of the qualities that Ya'acov bequeathed to his children that still live on today within his descendants – the people of Israel.