

Necessary Conversations

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For reasons will be clear in a moment, let me concentrate on this week's parsha.

For a parsha called Vayechi, "And he lived," it's really to a large extent about death.

Not just death, but anticipating, arranging, communicating about death.

Sometimes death is foreseen, anticipated, arrangements are made.
Sometimes it comes swiftly, suddenly, and there can be a lingering sense of guilt that perhaps the wrong decisions were made.

Yaakov tells Joseph, "your mother died suddenly in child birth, she couldn't be buried in the ma'ara (Cave of Machpela), our family cemetery - there wasn't time, it wasn't possible, I buried her by the side of the road. Please don't hold it against me.

And Ya'akov avinu himself goes to great pains to communicate his own wishes - "al tikbreyni bimtzeyim", Do not bury me in Egypt. He makes Yosef swear an oath, he leaves detailed instructions. It's his duty, it's his right to see his wishes respected when he is gone.

This shabbat we are launching a new initiative:

What Matters

It's about encouraging people to think about, have the necessary conversations, with loved ones, with rabbis, about our wishes,

about what we would want to see happen to ourselves.

The midrash says that before the *avot* (forefathers), death was sudden, and came without warning. There was no process.

But each of the *avot* davened (prayed) for what we might think of as unusual.
For old age, for aging, for sickness, for a sense of time running out.

As the midrash says:

Jacob requested sickness

Jacob, says the Yalkut (Yalkut Shimoni, a medieval compilation of rabbinic exegesis on the Torah), requested that people should suffer from sickness. Jacob said, "Master of the universe, if a person is going to leave this world without having to be sick first, he will not have a chance to arrange his affairs and settle his estate between his children. But if a person is sick for two to three days, he has an opportunity to arrange everything." Again, G'd answered and said, "You are right. You are requesting a good thing and it will start with you." As it says (Bereishis 48:1): "And Joseph was told, "Behold, your father [Jacob] is sick."

Yaakov's last days on earth were spent not just arranging his funeral, but on something far more profound.

Talking to his children, blessing them, instructing them.

Ensuring that when he left the world his family would become a nation.

Perhaps the brothers were not lying when they told Joseph; "our father commanded you to forgive us before he died."

The end of life that Yaakov merited allowed him to see to things - peace in his family - that he had not been able to have until then.

But Yaakov's end of life, "*vayechi Yaakov*," was even more profound than the acts of communicating or blessing.

It allowed him to come to terms with his own life.

To be able to leave the world ultimately finally *shalem*, complete, when during his life he had experienced so much fracture.

I've always been bothered by something;

In last week's Torah reading, Yaakov meets Pharaoh.

He tells him, "My days were few and bitter."

This week we see a different reality.

Whereas last week Yaakov told Pharaoh, "my life has been unimaginably difficult", now on his deathbed as he sees his grandchildren and contemplates his own death and therefore his own life, he is able to say "*ha malach hagoel*" - "The angel who has redeemed me from all evil."

In the midst of a trying, challenging and unbearably difficult life, Yaakov could not see the meaning or the value of his life.

He could not see "*hamalch hagoel oti mikol ra*," that he had been spared all negativity. His life, his relationship with Hashem was always phrased as a request for salvation.

Only now finally, as the sun begins to set, as rest finally comes to this exhausted man, can he look over what he has done, who he has become, and see his own life, in its totality, as one of the blessing of an angel.

I don't read difficult books.

But I read *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi.

He was a neurosurgeon in his 30s with his whole life before him. Suddenly in a chance of one in 10s of thousands he was diagnosed with an aggressive lung cancer.

Part of the book is his own choices - now that this has happened to me, what will I do?

If I have 10 years, I will be a surgeon.

If it is to be less, I will write.

And it's a meditation on the intersection between our autonomy and wishes, and the realities that life, illness, and death often robs us of all of this.

But at the very end - and his first child is born just 8 months before he dies - he ends with a wish to his baby, to know that "if you ever doubt your value as a human being, know that you filled your parents' hearts with indescribable joy when you were born."

"There is perhaps only one thing to say to this infant, who is all future, overlapping briefly with me, whose life, barring the improbable, is all but past. That message is simple: When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing."
(*When Breath Becomes Air*, p.199)

Not just how we die, and how well we must try to make choices and articulate them.

But how in that process we learn about, and become, ourselves.

And that, friends, is ultimately what matters.