

Vayechi 5780

Living, not just breathing

This week, we sent out one of our notices of condolence - we head them Barukh Dayan Emet, which is the traditional blessing one makes on hearing of a death. This one was for Marilyn Anderson, beloved mother of Ken Klein, our incoming President, and I would like to dedicate these thoughts this morning, on our Board Shabbat, to her, to him and to the family.

Our notice reads:

The entire Shir Chadash community extends its condolences to [family] on the loss of their beloved [relative].

Details of funeral and shivah follow, and the email concludes with

May [name's] memory be for a blessing.

I would venture to suggest that this notice is typical, and you would see similar notices not just from other synagogues but also from other places of worship.

What is interesting, though, is that the Torah uses a completely different model.

From the outset of Torah, the long genealogies found in the first two parshiyot of the Torah and onwards, the emphasis is placed elsewhere. Listen:

When Adam had lived 130 years
he begot a son in his likeness and after his image
and he named him Seth.
After the birth of Seth
Adam lived 800 years
and begot sons and daughters.
All the days that Adam lived
came to 930 years
and he died.

The genealogies of Seth and his succeeding generations are expressed in a similar way, and the same poetic formula is used in chapter 11 to describe the generations of Noah down to the birth of Abraham.

We notice, of course, the fact that the references to life outweigh the references to death - not only in their frequency, but also in their priority. When our ancestors left the world, they did so with their life referenced first. Death comes at the end of the sentence almost as an afterthought: what is important seems to be that - and perhaps how - they lived.

The same is true of the opening of our Torah portion today:

*Jacob lived 17 years in the land of Egypt
so that the days of Jacob's life
came to one hundred and fifty-seven years.*

It is only after this announcement has been made that the Torah then goes on to describe Jacob's deathbed scene, the blessings he gives and his eventual departure from the world.

I'd like us to hold on to that thought while I add another - one that I encountered a little while ago. It's by the poet Mary Oliver, from the poem called *Have You Ever Tried To Enter The Long Black Branches*, and I'm giving it to you for homework. Oliver writes about the way that we hold ourselves back from experiencing the fullness of life and urges us to find our way back into it:

*Well, there is time left -- she challenges us --
fields everywhere invite you into them.*

*And who will care, who will chide you if you wander away
from wherever you are, to look for your soul?*

Quickly, then, get up, put on your coat, leave your desk!

she urges, and then, later in the poem, asks us:

Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?

I suggest that the lesson Oliver is trying to teach us and the lesson of the way the Torah describes the death of our earliest ancestors is the same lesson: that as living creatures, one of our greatest challenges is truly to live.

So let's take a quick look at the way that word *vayechi* or similar formulations occur in the context of our ancestors from Adam to Jacob and see what guidance it offers us, too, about how to live.

We've already looked at Adam. *Vayechi Adam* is told in two parts: the years he lived before producing an heir, and the years he lived afterwards. I think we can formulate two questions from this:

*What gives my life meaning for myself alone?
What legacy am I leaving the world?*

Next up is Noah. The Torah tells us:

Noah lived after the Flood 350 years. And all the days of Noah came to 950 years; then he died.

And from this, perhaps we can formulate the question:

How do I live through the significant events of my life, and how do they change me?

Next is Sarah, described in slightly different language:

The life of Sarah came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years.

There's a famous Rashi on this, which teaches that when Sarah was 100, she was like a twenty-year old in terms of her righteousness and a seven-year old in terms of her beauty. So perhaps Sarah's question would be something like:

How do I approach my life with an open mind and a sense of wonder?

Abraham's *vayechi* is described this way:

These are the days of the years of the life of Abraham which he lived - one hundred and seventy five years.

We can ask:

How do I value my days, not just my years?

Next comes Isaac:

The days of Isaac were one hundred years and eighty years.

In the next verse, the Torah tells us Isaac was buried at a ripe old age - *zaken u's'vea* - so perhaps his question could be:

How do I create years which are rich and fulfilling?

And, finally, this brings us to Jacob:

*Jacob lived 17 years in the land of Egypt
so that the days of Jacob's life
came to one hundred and fifty-seven years.*

And from Jacob's life rises a final question:

How do I live meaningfully with my surroundings, even when they change?

So let's recap. We noticed that, unlike our standard framing of a condolence in terms of loss, the Torah always emphasizes life over death. We took up Mary Oliver's challenge - are we just breathing a little and calling it a life - and we looked at the lives of our ancestors to formulate a set of questions to ask ourselves today and everyday. Perhaps they can guide us towards the kind of lives where, at their ending, folk will say *vayechi* - we lived.

What gives my life meaning for myself alone?

What legacy am I leaving the world?

How do I live through the significant events of my life, and how do they change me?

How do I live after those events are over?

How do I approach my life with an open mind and a sense of wonder?

How do I value my days, not just my years?

How do I create years which are rich and fulfilling?

How do I live meaningfully with my surroundings, even when they change?

May the life of Marilyn Anderson - and all our lives too - be for a blessing.

Shabbat shalom.