

Dvar Torah - Vayechi

You can live for ever!

Jacob never died.

This extraordinary statement is recorded in the Gemara, (Mashechet Ta'anit). There we are told how Rav Nachman and Rabbi Yitzchak were exchanging words of Torah, and when they came to Jacob our Patriarch, Rabbi Yitzchak declared, "Ya'akov Avinu lo met" - "Jacob, our Patriarch never died".

Rav Nachman challenged him: "In the Torah we read how he was eulogised, he was embalmed, he was buried. So how can you say Jacob never died?" Rabbi Yitzchak replied: "I learn it from a scriptural source in the book of Jeremiah Chapter 30. There, the prophet tells us about the promise of Hashem, that the day will come when the children of Jacob will be reunited in the Holy Land at a time of redemption. Therefore, 'Ma zar'o ba'chayim af u'ba'chayim' - since his descendants are alive, he too is alive."

Since Jacob influenced so many people who internalised his values and passed them on through the generations, he is considered still to be alive. We often reflect on the immortality that our souls can attain, through life in Olam Habah - the world to come. But the Gemara wants to teach us that there is an additional form of immortality which we can attain here, in this world.

In the Book of Bereishit, there are two parshiot which have in their titles the term 'life'. They are 'Chayei Sarah' and 'Vayechi'. 'Chayei Sarah' means 'the life of Sarah' but if you look at the content of the parasha, it is all about her death. And similarly, 'Vayechi', our parasha of this week, describes the death of Ya'akov, the death of Yosef - the death of that entire generation. But the message is very clear: because Sarah's values continued to be cherished and to be transmitted throughout the generations, the parasha is called 'Chayei Sarah' - Sarah is alive! Similarly, Ya'akov is very much alive even to this day! We speak about him and reflect upon his great teachings and therefore the parasha is called 'Vayechi' - because he lives on and on.

There is a double message for us here. First of all, we can guarantee that our forebears remain alive through us - through all the good deeds that we perform. And secondly, we can attain our own immortality by touching the hearts and moulding the minds of as many people as possible. If Jacob is still alive today, so too, we can be alive forever.

Shabbat Shalom