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Jacob & Joseph

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Reading the Torah

Nearing the end of his life, Moses commanded the priests to read to the people "the Law" every seven years (Deuteronomy 31:10). Researchers believe that some time later, certain prophets began to regularly read the Torah in the presence of the people — see, for example, the Book of Nehemiah (8:18). And during the time that Jews were banished to Babylon, it became the custom to publicly read a portion of the Torah each week and to complete the entire reading on an annual cycle.

The modern custom is to read a portion of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, each Saturday morning at Sabbath services, on a set annual cycle, with the same portion read each year on the corresponding date of the Jewish (lunar) calendar. The text for each Sabbath is further divided into seven portions.

As a trained Torah reader prepares to chant the text at the reading table (usually elevated), certain members of the congregation are honored by being called up (referred to as *aliyah*, meaning to "go up" or



Photo by Robert Ervin

Raful

"ascend") to stand next to the Torah as it is read. Those who are so honored recite a short blessing praising God just before and just after the reader finishes a portion of that day's reading. Congregations award the *aliyah* honor for all sorts of reasons: for those who are celebrating a happy occasion, for those who are mourning the recent death of a relative, for those who are about to embark on or have just returned from a long journey, or for those who are about to marry. Many congregations follow the ancient custom of awarding an *aliyah* to a stranger, a person new to that synagogue, because we are commanded to love the stranger, for "I was a stranger in a strange land" (Exodus 22:20, 23:9). This story is about my *aliyah* in a new, strange synagogue.

Jacob

You, dear reader, must surely remember the story of Jacob and his 12 sons, from Bible stories, from the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, or from recent animated movies. You may remember that Jacob believed that a wild beast had devoured Joseph, his favorite among 12 sons, when in reality Joseph's brothers had thrown him into a pit, stolen his coat of many colors and then sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Twenty-two years later, after Jacob learned that Joseph was alive, he set out with his family to move from Canaan to Egypt. God spoke to Jacob in a dream, telling him not to fear this trip and that the Children of Israel would return to this homeland as a great nation.

In our annual reading of this portion of the Torah (see "Reading the Torah" at left), I have always been confused about Jacob's words on seeing his son Joseph after this long period of exile. The climactic moment of the story of Jacob and Joseph, in which Jacob is reunited with his son Joseph and meets his two grandsons, Manasseh and Ephraim, is reported in Genesis, Chapter 46, verses 28-30:

"And Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph, to point the way

before him to Goshen. So when they came to the region of Goshen, Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while. Then Jacob said to Joseph, **'Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive.'**" (Emphasis added.)

Rabbi J.H. Hertz, the editor of the volume of the Torah, the five books of Moses, that we use in our synagogue, writes this interpretation of Jacob's words in this verse: "Having once more seen Joseph, there was nothing more for him to live for. He had attained the highest joy in life."

This interpretation has always confused me. First, I am shocked, I guess, that this is really the first thing Jacob says to Joseph. Joseph was thrown into the pit by his brothers when he was 17. His brothers took his coat of many colors, tore it and placed animal blood on the coat, and then they told Jacob that Joseph was dead, when, in fact, he had been sold to a passing band of Ishmaelites.

Twenty-two years had elapsed between Joseph's disappearance and Jacob meeting Joseph again. Jacob thinks his son is dead, and then miraculously sees him alive. I wonder why he would then say "Now I can die." As a matter of fact, Jacob did NOT die after he saw Joseph again — the Torah tells us that Jacob actually lived 17 more years in Egypt. But Jacob, thinking for 22 years that his son was dead, now sees a grown man, presumably wearing the beautiful clothes of a nobleman, and he is obviously overcome with shock and emotion. But now really — he now has NOTHING else to live for? Surely Rabbi Hertz has misinterpreted the text. Now Jacob has EVERYTHING to live for. He has all of his children together, and, even more, he has all of his grandchildren together. Now is not the time to die — now is the time to celebrate, to rejoice, to live!

Because Rabbi Hertz's interpretation has never made sense to me, I looked for

& Joseph

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Photo courtesy of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art

This 17th century painting depicts Jacob, on his knees and overcome with joy, reuniting with his lost son Joseph.

other interpretations from the great scholars and sages of the past. Onkelos, an early Aramaic translator of the Torah, wrote that the verse means, “If I were to die now, I would be comforted, having seen your face and knowing you are still alive.” That’s a little better, I guess — “If I were to die now ...”

The great French rabbi, Rashi (1040-1105), author of probably the most famous Torah commentary, interpreted Jacob’s phrase in this manner: “Until now, I thought I would die twice: once in this world, and once in the world to come, because I thought God would punish me for causing your death. Now that I see you are alive, I know that I will die only once, in this world.” Perhaps Rashi thinks that this is the response of a man who has been racked with guilt and sorrow for 22 years.

Another famous Torah scholar, Toldos Yitzchak, had a different view of Jacob’s words: “If I had not seen you today, I could have been considered dead long ago, from the time they showed me your bloody, torn coat. But today, seeing that you are alive, I will only die once, when my time comes.” This comment is curious, too — the assumption is that Jacob was dead inside when he lost his favorite son, but now that he has his son back, he will only die at the end of his physical life.

None of these interpretations is very satisfying to me. We know Jacob to be a complex person, a man who has been through many experiences (for instance, stealing Esau’s birthright, being fooled into marrying Leah before Rachel and wrestling with an angel). Now he sees his favorite son, whom he gave up for dead. Surely Jacob meant more in this phrase than meets the eye. I searched for another interpretation, and I remembered that I had heard one in a sermon many years ago.

In December 1968, my brother and I took our first trip to Budapest, to visit our grandparents (may they rest in peace), our aunts and uncles, and our cousins. My mother, about whom I have written before in these pages, is Hungarian and a Holocaust survivor. On the Sabbath that December in which the portion about Jacob and Joseph was read, my grandfather Andor took his

daughter and his two American grandsons to synagogue.

I don’t know why I remember the details so clearly, but it seems like just yesterday. It was so cold that day and we had on suits and ties and warm coats, and we walked into a tiny, dimly lighted room — not the main sanctuary, which was closed because of the shrinking size of the congregation, but a small side room that was used for services. The room smelled of the coal-burning stove, but we kept our coats on because the stove couldn’t chase the cold. Everyone looked at us — we were so out of place, it was as if we had landed from Mars. The average age of the handful of congregants was well over 80, and they all had expressions of sorrow and sadness. Because the communist rulers discouraged religious practices, they hadn’t seen teen-agers in their synagogue for many, many years.

On the *bimah* (the raised platform in the front of the room), two or three men were leading traditional Sabbath services, and behind them sat an elderly, overweight yet regal looking man. Mom whispered to us that this was the famous Rabbi Domany, who had taught Mom and her two sisters in Hebrew School many years before, in a world where no one knew of Nazis and yellow stars and Jewish laws. She had not seen him since before the war. He held a cane in his hand and appeared to be of limited sight. When we came in, one of the men on the *bimah* went over to him and whispered, and he nodded his head that he understood.

The service to read the Torah began, and they continued to run the service in low, monotone voices. Then, to our surprise, my brother and I were each called up for an *aliyah*. My older brother, Bruce, went up first, and the congregation fixed their eyes on him, wondering, perhaps, whether this teenager, this American kid, would know what to do. Then he broke the silence with a strong, confident voice as he recited the traditional blessing before the reading of the Torah. You could see the surprise, relief and awe on the faces of those elderly people, amazed that there were still young people somewhere in the world who knew the

proper Hebrew blessings. I followed my brother, and I received the same reaction.

At the conclusion of the Torah service, there was a murmuring in the room. Apparently, the rabbi had decided that he would speak, and, from what we learned later, the rabbi was old now and rarely gave sermons or spoke at all. It was like that scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* when everyone is told to quiet down: “Shh, shh — the rabbi is going to say something.” Except this wasn’t musical theater — this was the real thing.

The rabbi struggled to pull himself up, and, using his cane, he walked slowly and with difficulty to the reading table. He spoke without notes, and his thoughts came from his heart and his mind. The rabbi said that year after year he had heard the story of when Jacob once again saw his dear son Joseph. Rabbi Domany said he never really understood what Jacob meant — and he quoted from memory the Hebrew words of the Torah — “Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive.”

The rabbi said that now he understood the meaning of the words and the explanation from the rabbis of old. “What can it mean, that Jacob was



Photo courtesy of Lawrence Raful

Raful, second from left, with his brother, Bruce, right, visiting grandparents Netka and Andor Taubner in Budapest in 1968.

“Now I can die,
having seen for
myself that you
are still alive.”



Photo courtesy of Lawrence Raful

Rabbi Domany, seeing Raful's mother and her two young sons, finally understood the meaning of Jacob's words.

ready for death, having seen his son's face?" the rabbi asked. The rabbi answered his own question, saying, "It is not enough to merely find your lost son, because how can one rejoice at finding a lost son if that son no longer believes in God?" Rabbi Domany reminded us about Jacob's history, about when he wrestled with an angel (Genesis 32:25-31). Remember that after Jacob wrestled with the angel, the Torah tells us that Jacob saw God face-to-face? After that time, the rabbi said, Jacob had a gift of great insight into the character of people.

Jacob was able to look into Joseph's face and realize that even though his son had become a high-ranking Egyptian official, his son was still righteous and spiritual, still a God-fearing man. And therefore what Jacob really said, Rabbi Domany explained, was: "I will now be able to die in peace, since I have seen your face and I know that you remain righteous." And it's Joseph's righteousness that most concerned his father, Jacob; it was his righteousness that showed that he didn't merely exist, but that he was truly "alive." The rabbi told us that this interpretation comes from the famous verse in the Talmud: "Only the righteous are truly alive."

Rabbi Domany then said he finally understood this interpretation because like Jacob and Joseph, he was here this

day when Taubner Zsuzsi (that's Mom's maiden name) returned from the concentration camp, from the pit into which she, like Joseph, was thrown, and now she returned to her home like Joseph, with her two sons, who were today called to the Torah and who have continued to remain Jewish. And Rabbi Domany said that today he felt like Jacob, and he concluded in a soft voice: "Now I can die in peace, because I have seen your face and the faces of your children, and I know that you are yet alive." And he sat down.

I found that interpretation in my research — it comes from another great Jewish scholar, Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, who wrote, "Jacob possessed the ability of the righteous to recognize the spiritual state of an individual." When Jacob says, "... since I have seen your face and I know that you are yet alive," Rabbi Chaim interpreted this to mean "... you still remain righteous, for only the righteous are truly alive."

This makes sense to me. Jacob didn't care as much about Joseph's chariot and fancy clothes — he met his son and said, "I can see in your face what you have become in your adult life, and I can live the rest of my life in peace, knowing that WHEN I die, my beloved son will carry on my faith." Rabbi Hertz is wrong —

this is not the time for Jacob to die — this is the time to rejoice.

Rabbi Domany obviously understood this thought. On that day, Jacob saw in Joseph what Rabbi Domany felt when he realized that a Holocaust survivor had returned to his congregation, when he heard me and my brother recite the prayers in the synagogue. It was as if Jacob had looked into my mother's face, and no longer did he see her thrown into the pit of the concentration camps, or the torn, bloody coat with a yellow star. Rather, Jacob looked into my mother's face and saw the righteousness of her faith, and the faith of her sons. He could see in her face her dedication to working with her synagogue and with charitable groups, and to carrying on her faith and tradition, and yes, even the righteousness of making chicken soup.

That's the lesson that the Torah teaches us with this phrase. We read about an incredibly emotional moment in Jacob's life, and we gain from this story the understanding of what life is really about. We all may think we are alive, but it's not enough to merely breathe in and out, to carry on a daily routine. Life means more; as Jacob understood, only the righteous are truly alive. ©



Bruce, left, and Larry Raful with their mother, Susy, last year.

Photo courtesy of Lawrence Raful