

Jacob's Longing

As our Torah portion opens, Jacob has been 17 years in Egypt. His longing for his homeland is unmistakable. His longings reflect not only individual preference, but the movement of faith and his membership among a religious people. Further, he puts his desires into word and active example by the way he speaks to Joseph and makes arrangements for his burial in Canaan.

Familiarize yourself with this portion, then closely read these nine verses: Genesis 47:27—48:4.

And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, and he said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and I will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding'" (Gen. 48:3-4).

Torah commentators note that Jacob is repeating God's words, but he is not repeating them exactly. Compare Jacob's words of blessing with God's 'original' blessing in Gen. 35:11-12. What does Jacob leave out? What does he add? (Hint: create two columns and compare line by line.) What might the sacred text be communicating through any omission or addition? Ponder this with the sages in the context of what you know about Jacob's story. Suggest an interpretation.

Recall that a previous discussion focused on Jacob's fear that his family's temporary descent into Egypt might result in them never returning to their God-given homeland. The Torah tells us that, 17 years after they entered Egypt, Jacob's children and grandchildren are doing rather well in this alien land; for "they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and

multiplied exceedingly" (47:27). Does this observation assist your reflection on how Jacob 'edits' God's blessing?

Can you appreciate the dilemma? If Jacob's descendants are so comfortable in Egypt, will they want to uproot their lives and return to Canaan? And if they don't, what will become of the promises and blessings of God which are bound up with the gift of a specific land?

In this text some Torah commentators see Jacob—now an elderly man and close to death—doing all he can to steer his children towards honouring their unique inheritance. Not only does he set an example by insisting that he be buried in Canaan (see 47:29-31), he also deletes the line where God says "kings will spring from you" (25:11) lest his children associate royalty with Egypt where Joseph has already achieved royal-like status. Instead Jacob emphasizes that the land of Canaan should be their constant focus by adding the phrase "for a perpetual holding" (Gen. 48:4).

Thus Jacob, a great patriarch of the chosen people, ends his days firmly fixed on the promises of God, on the relationship between God and God's people. No gain in power or wealth can compare with the riches of knowing the Lord God and being faithful to the divine call.

As you ponder and discuss this Torah portion, ask yourself: in what ways does it speak to my hopes and dreams, yearnings and fears as a believer and as a member of my faith community? •

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York: Lambda, 1994). Scripture: NRSV.

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