

Dear Community,

This Shabbos, with the reading of Parshas Va'yechi, we end our yearly trip through the first of the Five Books of our Torah. Bereishis starts with the glorious, though largely incomprehensible, description of Creation, and ends with the roots of a bitter exile. Throughout the past eleven weeks we are introduced to humanity's capacity for evil, folly, introspection, and redemption. We are introduced to the devastation of sin and the healing power of repentance. We experience a repeating pattern of inspiration, fall from grace, and glorious rebirth.

One common theme threading through the whole Book of Genesis revolves around the power, grandeur and responsibility of humankind. The Torah starts off by characterizing the creation of humanity as G-d forming a creature in the likeness of G-d. A human has a divine quality and a divine mission. We are not merely advanced animals; rather, we are here to partner in the divine work of creation and completion of our world. Our life was not given to us to eat, drink, and die, but to build, create and further the work of G-d.

As we journey through Bereshis we meet people who have carried out their mission to its fullest, and those who, sadly, did not. We are introduced to the consequences of sin and the message that we live our lives one choice at a time. We are introduced to the complexities of G-d's machinations and we are taught humility in the face of G-d's greatness.

In Va'yechi, Bereshis comes to a close and we listen to Jacob blessing his children. We cannot help but be astounded by the individuality and specificity of each of his blessings. This is a powerful lesson about the importance of recognizing and appreciating our own individual strengths and our unique mission in this world. Each one of us is here for a purpose that *only we* can accomplish - "for me, the world was created." We are assigned specific tools and a time limit in which to achieve this goal -- and it is incumbent upon to us to accomplish it.

The Torah closes with Jacob's final lesson to his sons, a lesson then repeated by Joseph. Before he dies, Jacob asks to be buried in the Land of Israel, in the Cave of Machpela. Later, Joseph asks his brothers to ensure that when the Jews leave Egypt, they will take his bones with them to the land of Israel. Why was this such a priority for them? Why did their final resting place make any difference to them if their souls will be up high?

One answer is that Bereshis closes with the reiteration of the grandeur of the human form. Even after the departure of the soul, as we learned at the beginning of Genesis, the human form is still valuable and G-d-like. We are commanded to honor a dead body and to bury it in a respectful place so it can return to whence it came. After we pass on, our body, still divine, must complete its mission and be returned to its rightful home.

This Shabbos, our shul will be joining with 450 other shuls in 215 communities in TEAM Shabbos. This initiative from the National Association of Chevra Kadishas' is meant to help start conversations about our plans and perspectives for our final journeys. Our goal is to make this decision as one fully informed and with an appreciation for the value of human life- and death.. More information about all aspects of these decisions can be found on the NASCK website. I hope to see you all at our motzei Shabbos Medical

Ethics melave malka, where we anticipate a lively discussion with Dr. Paul Richman about end-of-life decisions.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein