



Shabbat Vayechi

11 Tevet 5778 / December 29, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

This week marks the end of the book of Genesis, Bereishit. This final portion, Vayechi, strikes me (every time) as a strange passage, one in which Jacob "blesses" his sons and Joseph's sons - but it's much more about speaking his truth than what we might consider blessing.

The portion begins, "Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt..." But wait - we've been reading the stories of Jacob's sons - Joseph and Joseph's brothers - for the past several weeks. Now as we end the book, we return to the father - who happens to be the father of all our people.

"Jacob lived in Egypt". Hebrew grammar doesn't require such an active verb as living; the Torah might well have said Jacob was in Egypt 17 years. The word choice (always significant in Jewish tradition) points us to the possibility of living, not simply existing, in exile. When things are rough, when we don't feel "at home" Israel shows us we can still live fully.

How does he do that? He gathers his people; he speaks his truth.

There is a power and importance in bringing everyone who matters to him together, and speaking his truth. Rabbi Jonathan Slater, in *A Partner in Holiness*, extrapolates from a teaching by Kedushat Levi: "Gathering around Father Jacob for instruction and inspiration is here a model for the later Hasidim. Seeing each other's dedication and desire inspires greater dedication, or teshuvah, to bring the final redemption. When we gather together - to celebrate, to worship, to do good works - with loving hearts, we are inspired to be better people. We recognize the potential that is in each of us to do good, to live lives of compassion, of integrity, of honesty; the presence of other people striving to manifest those qualities encourages us to do the same."

This season, the Shir Tikvah community has embodied this sort of gathering to support and bring out the best in one another. Speaking hard truths - at least according to the Jacob story - is part of what helps us raise one another up.

Thank you for being part of this loving community. May this last Shabbat of Bereishit and of 2018 bring peacefulness and joy.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Debra Rappaport