

Parashat Va-Yehi

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Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

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Back in the ancient past, closer to the beginning of Judaism as we know it - let's say the 1960s and 70s - there was often a conflict - surprise surprise - between observant Jews and what we now call "classical Reform" Jews. To way oversimplify, observant Jews were focused on the traditional practice of Judaism -- observing Shabbat and all the holy days, keeping Kosher, etc. while Reform Jews, much less interested in the so-called "observance" of Judaism, "practiced" what was/is sometimes called "prophetic Judaism" - by which was meant heeding the call of the ancient prophets, who called upon the people Israel to work for justice. It was something of a split in Judaism - there were the Jews who practiced Judaism and the Jews who didn't care so much about going to synagogue, but whose values and ethics and political activity in the world clearly grew out of Jewish tradition.

In many ways, the split still exists, even though the liberal movements of Judaism - Reform and Reconstructionist - have clearly gotten more interested in Jewish observance than they used to be, even as more Orthodox Jews have gotten more interested in politics and political activity (witness someone like Joe Lieberman to name a tame example, or the right-wing ultra-Orthodox political activists in Israel, to name a less tame example). A lot of us tread somewhere in the middle - we like coming to shul, we like being politically active in the world (or if not active ourselves, we at least send money to politicians and causes). And these days it doesn't seem that much like a conflict of interest to tread in the middle - to be interested in the political as well as the religious sides of Judaism.

One of the reasons the conflict has faded for us is because of some of the role models we have had who showed us that Prophetic Judaism and observant Judaism are companionable. Perhaps chief among these models is a rabbi who died 30 years ago - the same year BCC was founded. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose yahrzeit falls next week, was a rabbi grounded in European Hasidism - a devout and learned man, who came to this country to escape a Europe in the throes of anti-Semitism, and who taught here at two rabbinical schools - those of the Reform and Conservative movements. He wrote many books on many subjects and engaged in many public demonstrations (including protests against the Vietnam war), but he is perhaps most remembered for two separate works: one is his book called "The Sabbath," a classic text about the sanctity and preciousness of time. And the other was a political action: He is the white-bearded rabbi marching arm-in-arm with Ralph Bunche, Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King, Jr. in this famous photograph [hold up photo] -- leading the huge group of marchers as they made their way from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. It was a turning point in race relations in this country, a turning point in U.S. history. Rabbi Heschel later famously wrote of that

moment in time: "When I marched in Selma, I felt that my feet were praying."

It's a wonderful statement and image, isn't it? How the act of walking can become a prayer. I think of the Israelites walking through the Red Sea - a scene we recall daily in our liturgy. I think of the AIDS and Breast cancer walks that so many of us have taken part in over the years. I think of the first tentative steps of a baby learning to walk; and the first steps of someone who has been ill, and slowly recovers. Walking as prayer.

I think of the opposite of such moments also. When added to the sound of footsteps comes the tap of a cane or walker, or the whirring of the wheels on a wheelchair. . . .Or when someone who has walked many years upon the earth stops walking altogether. In this week's Torah portion, Vayechi, we read of the deaths of two of our ancestors, Jacob and his favorite son, Joseph. In the Torah's description of the end of Jacob's life, we learn that he gathered his 12 sons around him and blessed each one. Having finished instructing them, says the text, he gathered his feet into the bed and he expired, and he was gathered to his people. [Gen. 49:33]

Isn't it a lovely description? One gathers one's feet into the bed at the moment of death. How apt a description too for our ancestor Jacob, who spent so much of his life walking, traveling - having fled from his homeland on foot so long ago, and then come back home again, having walked from place to place within the Promised Land, family in tow, and then, for the last seventeen years of his life, he had come with all his family to the land of Egypt, where he died. After his death, we read this week, his family carried his body back to the Cave of Machpelah, where he was buried alongside Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and his own wife, Leah. [Gen. 49 and 50]

Tradition instructs us that in Jewish cemeteries, bodies are to be buried with our feet facing Jerusalem, so that, come the time of resurrection, we can rise up pointed in the right direction, since we'll all head together then toward Jerusalem, the city of Peace.

In the final scene of Jacob's life, his sons gathered around him, Jacob says to them: v'shimu b'nai Ya'akov, v'shimu el Yisrael avichem Listen sons of Jacob, listen to Israel, your father [49:2] The midrash tells us that Jacob was worried that upon his death, his sons would once again fall to arguing with each other, would forget the God of Jacob who had brought them to safety in Egypt, reuniting them with their lost brother Joseph, who for seventeen years has kept them safely there in Egypt. Shimu, shimu! Jacob, also called Israel, says to his sons, "listen, listen! don't forget God is your God." And, says the midrash, Israel's sons reply to him, "Shema, Yisrael. Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad." "Listen, Israel, [we know] that God is our God, [we know that] God is one." This midrash, by the way, has become one of the explanations for why Jews recite the shema at the moment of death.

Despite their declaration of faith, though, as soon as Jacob is dead and buried, the brothers fear that Joseph will turn on them for their earlier offenses to him. v'yelchu gam-achav - "and his brothers walked toward him" [50:18] they bowed before him to ask his forgiveness - their feet were praying here!

When we finish a book of Torah, as we do this week, we recite the words Khazak, khazak v'nithazek. Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another. As we recite

that verse tonight, keep in your mind's eye the picture of Rabbi Heschel walking with his brothers and sisters, arms linked, feet praying, walking toward liberation, reminding those of us who come after that our own footsteps may be the most heartfelt prayer of all.

It's customary to rise (maybe we should each take a step too) as we recite together: Khazak, khazak v'nithazek. Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another.