

Dear Chavraya,

When Avraham died, his sons, Yitzchak and Yishma'el, bridged the divide between them and came together to bury their father. When Yitzchak died, so too did Ya'akov and Esav bridge the divide between them and come together to bury their father. When Ya'akov died, Yosef and his brothers, having come so far, still reaching across the years of pain and separation, gathered together and buried their father.

These are the stories of imperfect human beings, knowing tragedy and triumph, the pain that comes of one's own mistakes, the joy of striving fulfilled. Perfection comes to be an illusion, doing good the way of response to the mystery of our being. It is all contained in the first word of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*. That is the first word, *Vayechi/and he lived*, referring to Ya'akov. Similarly, the portion concerning our mother Sarah's death is called *Chayei Sarah/the life of Sarah*. There is no need to emphasize the universal truth of death, the challenge, and what we shall be remembered for, is how we live.

For all of the anguish that he knew in life, Ya'akov's death represents an ideal closure of one's time in this world. He is aware that the time of his dying is coming near, saying very simply, "*henei anochi met/see, I am dying.*" He is surrounded by his family, blessed with the wherewithal to call them together, that in turn he might bless each one, *hey'asfu... , hi'kavtzu v'shim'u b'nei Ya'akov/gather yourselves as one... , keep together and listen, O children of Ya'akov...* Completing what he had to say, aware until the end, he died in his own bed; *he drew his feet back into the bed, expired and was gathered to his peoples/va'ye'asef el amav*. For each of the ancestors and so for us, we are gathered back into the embrace of those from whom we have come. Not simply gathered to our people, but to our peoples, all come to be as one in the beauty of our diversity.

In the midst of their grieving and weeping, the family turned to the needs at hand, *and Yosef went up to bury his father... , and all the house of Yosef, his brothers and the house of his father... , he arranged a seven day mourning period for his father*. And as so often, when *shivah* was over there was stress within the family. Death brings people together and can also open old wounds. Yosef's brothers were afraid that with their father gone, Yosef would now requite them for all the long ago pain they had caused. Teaching the way of a gracious and magnanimous heart, Yosef wept and told them not to be afraid. With words so beautiful, the Torah tells us of his manner, a way of response to every broken and hurting heart, *he comforted them and spoke to their hearts/va'y'nachem otam va'y'daber al libam*.

So have we done during this week of sorrow, comforting Jacquelynn and each other following Sonny's death. In the words he spoke to gather his children together, Ya'akov looked beyond himself, offering a way forward toward wholeness and healing, *hi'kavtzu v'shim'u b'nei Ya'akov/ keep together and listen, O children of Ya'akov...* The Chassidic rebbe known as the *Ma'or va'Shemesh* understood this to mean gather and listen to each other, children of Ya'akov. We are the children of Ya'akov, whose name as Yisra'el becomes each one of us, and all of us. From heart to heart, speaking and hearing, our gathering shall be not only to mourn, but a place from which to walk more surely into life.

Completing the book of *B'reishit/Genesis* with this week's reading, the Torah will be raised as we sing out together, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek/be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another*. Taking these words to heart, may we honor Sonny's memory and make it a blessing.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor