

# PRACTICED-FOR ETERNITY

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

And Yaakov ceased from commanding his children and he gathered his feet upon his bed, he expired and was gathered up to his people. (Breishis 49:38)

All those sit-ups for nothing! (Jacqueline Kennedy Onasis' last utterance)

Yaakov was productive right up till the end of his long life. Even in the last moments of his life he was giving guidance to his children and all future generations. Why are the last words of Yaakov so important that the entire text of that address is recorded in detail for all time? Why is his last act of his life linked in verse with his being "gathered up to his people"?

There is obviously something more intensely profound about the final moments of a person's life that reveals something of his essence. In the face of any test, Rabbi Dessler, points out, the true nature of a person is made manifest.

Rabeinu Yona asks a question and remains without an answer in a state of wonder. Why don't people begin to repent by the age of 35? If the years of a person's life are 70, then after the fuel tank on the plane has passed the ½ mark, one should begin to consider learning how to gracefully conclude this flight.

This type of thinking is not necessarily morbid. It can be rather refreshing to the soul. King Solomon, the wisest of all men, says in Koheles, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a drinking party." The Talmud tells us on the verse, "And G-d saw all that he had created and it was very good", that the ingredient that turned the world from "good" to "very good" was the introduction of death. What could possibly be so very good about death?

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter met Rabbi Yosef Yozzel Horowitz, who at the time was a merchant. Rabbi Yisrael remembered the young man as a great scholar and asked how he had come to abandon his youthful idealism. Reb Yosef Yozzel answered rhetorically, "How am I to live!?" Reb Yisrael Salanter retorted, "How are you going to die?" The words went through him like a knife. In time, because of that encounter, he was to become the father a vast yeshiva school system with thousands of students leaving a rich legacy of personal teachings.

A clever man once asked, "When is the best time to buy an umbrella?" The answer, "Before it starts raining." Once the rain begins, one may become drenched and the price of umbrellas rises significantly. Battles and tests are won and passed in times of preparation. Athletes and actors

rehearse plays and performances in their minds thousands of times before the actual execution. When the event arrives and the action is successful, it is because it is not nearly the first.

Rabbi Akiva rehearsed in his mind his finale' thousands of times and was ready for a torturous death when the moment arrived. His dying words speak volumes about how he lived. Remarkably, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter spent the last hours of his precious and productive life, anticipating his own death, in conversation with a lone attendant about the unfounded fears people have in the presence of a dead body. Even in his final moments he was concerned about the feelings of others. Where does one get such presence of mind?

When asked about the "after life" a great Rebbe once said, "There is no "after-life". There is only continuation of life as it was lived here in another dimension." If one believes they are a body, and they are fully invested in physical life alone, then death is the seeming conclusion of everything absolutely and finally and this is a too terribly morbid discussion.

However, if life is understood to be essentially a spiritual adventure, and one is living life with a constant awareness of what lies beyond, then the end of life is like a birth and the last state is a concentrated summary of prior to transition.

What one really believes determines how one chooses to live here, and forever more. Yaakov continued to work on his speech right up until the time he was called to the other room to deliver what he had practiced-for eternity.

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