

ETERNAL YAAKOV

by Nechama Stampler

Eternal Yaakov [1]

Yaakov finished commanding his sons. He drew his feet on to the bed. He was still, and was gathered unto his people.

Rashi: The pasuk omits mention of the word "death." Chazal say that our father Yaakov did not die.

Maharal: The gemara[2] from which Rashi takes his comment fills in a bit more. "Was it for naught that they embalmed him?" R. Yitzchok replied: "I expound a verse! [3] âFear not, my servant Yaakov, says Hashem. Do not become broken, Yisrael. Behold I will deliver you from afar and your seed from captivity.' The pasuk compares Yaakov and his seed. Just as the seed of Yaakov continue to live, so too is Yaakov among the living."

Many are puzzled by this passage. Clearly, Yaakov died. They buried him! Furthermore, the gemara challenges the statement that Yaakov remains alive with a pasuk from the Torah, and attempts to answer it with a pasuk in Nach. How could the latter possibly trump the former?

This is what Chazal mean: Existence and non-existence cannot coincide; they have no connection with one another. It follows that if existence is characteristic of one object, and non-existence is characteristic of another, then the two objects cannot have an essential bond and connection. The two are mutually exclusive. Father and son, however, certainly share a strong bond. It is impossible to think that this bond exists only in the lifetime of the father, and is severed with his death. We speak of a person as being a "son" even after the passing of the older generation. Yet, the word "son" has no meaning without reference to a father. What this means is that the death of a father does not completely erase his existence. So long as the son remains alive, the father does as well, to a certain degree. The father and son do not stand in the same relationship as non-existence and existence. They are not polar opposites, but share something that can be said to be vital, alive.

Of course, this can be said of any father and son. The difference is not the non-death of Yaakov, the father, but of the non-life of the son in every other case. In most cases, the life of the son isn't all that much of a life. There isn't much there to share with the father!

Let us explain. What we call life seems, understandably, very real to us. In fact, however, it appears more like smoke and mirrors when seen against the backdrop of Hashem's eternal existence. Life without a connection to eternity may feel real to people living it, because that is all they know.

Considering how fragile, fleeting, and often empty it is, however, what we call "life" pales in comparison to the ultimate Reality of Hashem and true spirituality. While there is a continuum of connection to the true source of life, the connection to eternity of even great people is dwarfed by that of the Yaakov's progeny. Hence, the "life" of others, that aspect that continues to be present in the father after his death, is not so significant. Only in the special case of Yaakov is it appropriate to say that the aspect of Yaakov that remained through the connection to his offspring even after the father's physical passing is a bit of true "life" that banishes the idea of complete death. (Elsewhere[4], Chazal extend this idea beyond Yaakov. They teach that whoever produces a son who toils in Torah is as if he did not die. One who possesses Torah possesses life itself, and this life applies to the father who is still linked to the son.)

On a deeper level, there is another way to explain Yaakov's continued life. Death is terminal, the reaching of an end. It is incompatible with someone who cannot occupy an end point, an extreme.

Yaakov was that person. As the third of the avos, he occupied a position intermediate between the extremes of Avraham and Yitzchok. It is inaccurate to see Yaakov as simply a combination of the midos of his predecessors, taking a bit of this and a bit of that. Rather, his function was to unite and bind the other two, in such a way that there was no extremity in his position, only the stability of intermediacy. Intermediacy was his characteristic. It knows no extreme; it is beyond failure and death.

We have yet another way to explain our enigmatic passage. True life is connection to Hashem. It is attachment to, clinging to, the Source of all existence. What we see as existence is maintained by Hashem's influence reaching and sustaining us. It creates the possibility of connection - but not the certainty. The physical nature of human beings interposes between the Divine influence and its recipient. The influence is there, but the connection, the attachment is weakened and attenuated by the limitations of the physical.

Yaakov transcended the limitations of the physical. He was a kadosh[5], which itself means that he transcended the physical. His life of suffering weakened his physical nature, but not his spirit. He was plugged into Hashem while still on this earth. That life was never interrupted, never ceased. The transition to a higher form of life that applies to the rest of us after death never applied to him. He was alive, in the true sense, and he continues to be alive.

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 49:33*
2. *Taanis 5B*
3. *Yirmiyah 30:10*
4. *Bereishis Rabbah 49:4*
5. *Yeshaya 29:23*

