

# FINAL YEARS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*And Ya'akov dwelled in the land of his father's sojourning, in the land of Canaan. (Bereishis 34:1)*

He had been 108 years old at the time, and had already gone through in one lifetime what others don't go through in many lifetimes. If any one had the right to stop and retire, it had been Ya'akov Avinu. At least, that is what we might have thought. Apparently, as Rashi points out, God thought differently:

Ya'akov wished to live in tranquility, but the trouble of Yosef jumped upon him. Righteous people seek to dwell in tranquility, but The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "What is prepared for them in the World-to-Come is not enough for righteous people, that they seek tranquility in this world? (Rashi, Bereishis 37:2)

It is a lesson for us all, even if we do not consider ourselves righteous, especially like Ya'akov Avinu. However, all of us do want to go to the World-to-Come, and get the best portion possible. At the same time, retirement in this world is very attractive, and many people save for it, and take it when it comes. Are they making a mistake?

Well, it all depends upon what you call "retirement," doesn't it? Some people retire from the business world, and work on the most important project of their lives: themselves. In their early years, day-to-day concerns and responsibilities fought for their attention, leaving them little to time to develop their spiritual side. Having merited to reach their "later days," and knowing that soon, they will have to stand before God and justify their past existence, they use the "extra" time to further grow spiritually.

Others retire from life altogether. It's not that they sit around and do nothing. They do plenty, but unfortunately, not much of it, as fun and distracting as it may be, adequately prepares them for life in the next world. And why should it, they argue, if they don't believe in the World-to-Come, and figure that all we get is what we have in this world, which seems to decrease, at least physically, with each passing day.

But, imagine getting to Heaven and being greeted by an angel, who says,

"Can I help you please?"

Surprised that the angel does not know you, you mention your name, hoping for instant recognition. However, you become nervous, when you see the angel go up and down his list, flipping page after

page, looking for your name without success. Finally he says,

"Oh, right ... Mr. So-and-so ... Ah, well, your portion is, ah ... just follow this angel and he will show you it do you. Next!"

The Maitre d of Heaven calls out, as you move on, uncertain of and concerned about what to expect.

In the wink of an eye, you find your "place," and quite frankly, it is not what you expected or hoped for. Turning to the angel to complain, but before you can even open your mouth, he says, somewhat sympathetically,

"Sorry, but this is all you invested in your portion in the World-to-Come. Here, you get exactly what you paid for there, spiritually-speaking, throughout the course of your many lifetimes."

"But ... but ..." you stammer.

However, in another wink of an eye, the angel is gone, and you suddenly realize what life had always really been about, and wish you could go back and make amends. But that's not the way it works, not anymore. Old age works the same way. Many assume that the real commodity of a golden old age is wealth. With wealth, you can live in fancy houses filled with creature comforts that make aging more amenable, pay for assistance when doing simple tasks becomes too difficult and tiring, and take plenty of trips to see the world to keep yourself occupied. They rarely think about being able to grow, even, and really, especially, at that opportune time of life.

So many people, especially in the secular world, just show up, spiritually- speaking, at old age, and expect it to just work. They didn't realize that when they were a teenager, and then a young adult, and after that, middleaged, that they were supposed to be preparing for their later years. For, those are the times, in the youthful years, when one is able to build "vessels" for growth, "mechanisms" that will allow them to make the most of life, even as their bodies fail to do so anymore.

In the Torah world, we know that this world is only a corridor to the next one. Yes, we get very distracted and succumb to temptation far too often, but still, we do teshuva, and want, ultimately, to leave this world having used every possible moment to prepare ourselves for the World-to-Come, to which we look forward more than anything else, even if we can't relate to it yet.

In other words, according to Torah, spiritual growth is where it is at. Whatever we do, whatever we learn, it is to this end. One more mitzvah, one more portion in the World-to-Come. One more blessing, one more step in the direction of holiness, one more step closer to God—forever—in the World-to-Come. We know that how we deal any number of daily tests directly impacts our view from the top.

At least, that is the way it is supposed to be, and should be, if the Torah education is on the money. If a child has been raised with a true Torah consciousness, then by the time he grows through all of the stages of life, he will just have become better equipped to extract from each moment of life

what it has to offer in terms of personal completion. When he finally reaches the golden age of life, he will be prepared; all of the intellectual and emotional mechanisms that he will need to grow the rest of his life will already be in place, waiting for him, so-to-speak.

Talking to a friend of mine, who is also a psychiatrist, I learned just how prominent depression is amongst the elderly. And, though he is someone who is not quick to prescribe medication to treat depression, he finds, for the most part, that when it comes to the elderly, he has little choice but to focus on their comfort, sensing little else than can be done to help them at that vulnerable stage of their lives. Teaching them how to spiritually grow through the situation is not an option for many of them.

Yet, we see many elderly people who never get depressed, and even if they do, from time-to-time, they work it through, usually on their own, and rarely with the help of medication. They're alive, and that reason enough to be happy, they say, even if they are not financially well-off, and they can't travel the world, etc.

Why? Because, they know how to grow spiritually, even at that age. Having done it all of their lives, retirement from the business world, etc., did not mean retirement from life. Rather, they welcomed the opportunity to not be so busy anymore, to not be at the center of attention, having to be available to anyone who called. All of that was exciting, at the time, but it was also a distraction away from the main issues of life.

When we are young, life is so fast-paced. We are confronted by so many challenging situations that, often, overcome us more than we overcome them. Later, after the fact, we often find ourselves saying, "Well, I didn't handle that well ..." or, "I shouldn't have really said that ... or done that ..." Etc. If we are spiritually-attuned, we will have lived, and learned, and maybe, just maybe, acted better the next day.

If that is our attitude today, while we're still young and able to build ourselves, intellectual and emotionally, not just physically and financially, then when we get to that wonderful point in life when what matters to us most is our mind and our emotions, we will be ready. We will retire from the fastpaced world of physical survival and raising families, b"H, but unretire from spiritually-growing at leaps-and-bounds, just when it means the most to do so.

For, what people fail to realize, or they just forget, is that an entire lifetime can, and often does, come down to one's final moments of consciousness. It's as if God says at that very last moment, "Okay, after all those years, what have you become? What do you believe?" The answer we give will make all the difference in this world, and the next one.

And, how we live out the final years of our lives will make a world of difference to the answer. Perhaps, Ya'akov Avinu, after all he had gone through and accomplished, had thought he had his answer already. However, it turns out, as far as God was concerned, he could be even greater, grow even more, become even better prepared for the next world. Ya'akov had gone gold after all his

years. He was about to go platinum from hereon in.

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