



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayechi

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 14, 2013

Vayechi

**Can We Mortals Become
Immortal?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do you want live forever? Do you want to achieve immortality?
Do you want your love relationships to last till the end of time?

No problem – all you have to do is to transform your
earthenware body into a glass vessel for your soul.

But is this a fantasy or truly possible?

This week’s Torah reading says it’s actually, really possible. It
says that the answer is crystal clear – clear as a crystal glass that
is indestructible and immortal.

This sermon analyzes some fascinating passages from an
enigmatic Talmud and along the way reveals a little known
reason why we break a glass under the chuppah, explains how
it was that Jacob (though eulogized, embalmed, and buried) did
not really die, and answers the question once posed by New York
Magazine: What Do a Bunch of Old Jews Know About Living
Forever?

Genesis

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CAN WE MORTALS BECOME IMMORTAL?

1. Living Forever (2 Jokes)

1st Joke

A 46-year-old woman comes for her annual physical. The doctor tells her, "I have some very bad news. You are not going to live more than six months."

The woman, horrified and distraught, whispers, "Doctor, is there nothing I can do? Is there no cure, no way for me to live longer?"

To which the good doctor replies, "Well, there is one thing – you can marry a rabbi."

"Marry a rabbi? How on earth will that cure my illness?!"

"Oh," says the doctor. "It won't cure your illness at all, but it will make those six months feel like forever!"

2nd Joke

At his checkup, Schwartz asks the doctor, "Do you think there is any way I can live forever? I don't smoke or drink or eat rich food, or do anything dangerous."

"So, tell me," says the doctor, "Why on earth would you want to live to forever?"

2. Old Jews, A Cover Story

A couple of years ago, *New York Magazine* ran a story illustrated on the cover by a picture of an ancient man sitting in an old-fashioned baby carriage, his exaggeratedly long white beard flowing over the side, down to the floor. In bold letters, the headline beneath the image read:

THEY'RE OLD, THEY'RE JEWISH, AND THEY HAVE DNA LIKE YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE.¹

If you opened the magazine, you got another eye-full. Let me quote:

Irving Kahn is about to celebrate his 106th birthday. He still goes to work every day. Scientists are studying him and several hundred other Ashkenazim to find out what keeps them going. And going. And going. The secrets of the alter kockers.

What Do A Bunch Of Old Jews Know About Living Forever?

3. Do You Even Want To Live Forever?

Is there any way to live forever? And should we even want to?

I mean, I can barely cope with life in my 40s!

I can't imagine trying to take out the garbage when I'm 396 ... or going into work on a dark rainy morning when I'm 574 ... or trying to compose a sermon that'll keep my audience awake when I'm 813. I can barely do it today, in the so-called prime of my life!

But, if we do forget about the practicalities of it for a moment, most of us, when offered the opportunity to live forever, would probably grab it with both hands and both feet and never let go. My fellow Jews, on this special Shabbat, I have some very good news:

I, your humble rabbi, am going to share with you the secret to living forever.

And while we're at it, I'm going to also share the secret of eternal relationships.

¹New York Magazine, November 2011.

Much is said about love forever after. But is it a fantasy or truly possible? And if it is possible, then how? How do we build an eternal edifice – a *binyan adei ad* (the traditional blessing given to a newly wedded couple) – in a transient world?

The secret of living and loving forever is found in this week's Torah reading – in *Parshat Vayechi* – which is the final portion of the Book of Genesis.

4. The Immortal Jacob

The Torah relates how Jacob, living now in the land of Egypt, felt like his time on this earth was coming to an end. Jacob called in all of his children, blessed them and instructed them how to perpetuate the family legacy. The Torah describes Jacob's final moments:

And Jacob concluded commanding his sons, and he drew his legs into the bed, and expired, and was brought in to his people.²

This verse says a great deal. But, what this verse does not say may convey a great deal more than what it does say.

If you read this verse carefully, one word is conspicuously missing. This verse describes Jacob's final hour and yet it does not use the word "death" or "dying" or "died."

In describing the culmination of Jacob's life, the Torah does not say that Jacob actually died. Instead, the Torah uses a rare word, *vayigva*, which can be translated as "expired" or "faded" or "diminished." Why replace the obvious word "died" with a more obscure euphemism? What can this possibly mean?

²Genesis 49:33.

5. Talmudic Dinner Conversation

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi,³ finds it odd that the word “death” is not mentioned and, in an attempt to explain this, quotes a passage from the Talmud⁴ that relates an interesting tidbit amidst – or after – a dinner celebration.

Rabbi Nachman and Rabbi Yitzchak were once sitting at a feast. Rabbi Nachman turned to R’ Yitzchak and asked him to share a *vort*, a Torah inspiration at the feast. To which R’ Yitzchak replied:

“So said R’ Yochanan: ‘One should not speak during a feast, lest the windpipe acts before the gullet, thereby creating an unnecessary choking hazard.’” After the meal had concluded, R’ Yitzchak expounded and shared the following: “So said R’ Yochanan: ‘Jacob our patriarch did not die.’” R’ Nachman then questioned: “Was it then for naught that Jacob was eulogized and embalmed and buried?”⁵ R’ Yitzchak replied: “I derive the fact that Jacob did not die from a scriptural verse, as it is said, *‘Therefore fear not, O Jacob, My servant,’ says the Lord, ‘neither be dismayed, O Israel, for, behold, I will save you from afar and your seed from the land of their captivity.’*⁶ The verse likens Jacob to his seed– as his seed lives on, so does he live on.”

Okay, this definitely wasn’t your regular feast. There is a lot to digest here. But, at first blush, this Talmudic passage seems to be somewhat problematic. The Talmud’s main statement here is that Jacob is alive and never died. Okay, that’s wild enough a declaration as it is. But, let us deconstruct this with a few questions and try to understand what is going on here.

³ See also Tosafot on Taanit 5b, entitled, Yakov avinu lo met.

⁴ Taanit 5b.

⁵ As stated in our parsha, Genesis 50:2, 5, 10.

⁶ Jeremiah 30:10.

6. The Deconstruction

Let's take it one by one:

- Anyone that has ever traveled to the holy city of Hebron less than an hour south of Jerusalem in the Land of Israel knows that there is a place called the *Meorat Hamachpela*, wherein are buried three of our four matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah (Rachel is buried in Bethlehem); and our three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and – who is that third? – yes, Jacob! If Jacob did not die, would it not be just a little cruel to bury him?
- What's with the beginning of the Talmud, not to speak and share an inspiring Torah message because one may get distracted during the meal, lose focus and risk choking? Every Shabbat table on the planet is full of Divrei Torah, discussions and inspiring messages conveyed during the meal!
- If R' Yitzchak was truly worried about speaking and getting distracted during the feast, then he should not have said anything; he should not have even said that one should not speak during a feast.
- How is the first part, a general health tip not to talk while eating, related to the second part, that Jacob never died?
- R' Yitzchak's response, that as Jacob's seed lives on, so does Jacob himself live on, seems to contradict his earlier statement: If Jacob himself never died then who cares if his seed lives on? And if Jacob lives on only because his seed lives on, then Jacob himself did actually die, and he only lives somewhat metaphorically and vicariously through the seed and offspring he sprung. Which is it then – is Jacob himself still alive or is he alive only by virtue of the fact that his descendants are alive?

7. Another Piece of Talmud

In the good Jewish tradition, in order to shed light on one perplexing piece of Talmud, let us introduce another perplexing piece of Talmud. And then, in truly Talmudic fashion, by clarifying the second we might be able to clarify the first as well.

In Tractate Brachot, a seemingly bizarre episode is related. Rav Ashi hosted a marriage feast for his son. He saw that the rabbis were growing very merry, so he brought a cup made of crystal and broke it before them and they became serious.⁷

What a strange thing. It is the happiest of occasions, a wedding feast, and at this most joyous feast, Rav Ashi saw that the rabbis were celebrating and growing merry, so he went and broke a crystal glass. Huh? Why?

How does breaking a glass demonstrate joy and happiness? Indeed, the exact opposite seems to be true, as their reaction suggests.

8. Origins of Chuppah Custom

To make it even more depressing, the Tosafot commentary on the Talmud relates that the custom to break a glass under the chuppah originates from this Talmudic passage:

As Rav Ashi broke the crystal glass at the wedding of his son, so do all Jews break a glass under the chuppah.

Why? Why bring in this destructive, anti-climactic, depressing custom into the most joyous moment of life? And then, after that poor glass is crushed and decimated underfoot, we all yell Mazal Tov! What is wrong with us Jews? Have we completely lost it?

⁷ Brachot 31a

Ah, my friend, within this broken glass lies the most complete message ... within this shattered glass lies the wholesome key to our Talmud, Jacob's immortality, the forever-after of loving relationships, and one of the deepest, most joyous Jewish teachings.

9. Glassware vs. Earthenware

If you notice, both the goblet Rav Ashi broke at his son's wedding and the goblet we break under the chuppah are made out of a specific material. What material?

No, not gold, not silver, not earthenware, neither copper nor pewter. Nope, it is made of glass, that most translucent of materials.⁸

When the Jews had crossed through the Red Sea after it split before them, God gifted them with manna from heaven to sustain their journey in the desert. The Torah relates that Moses told Aaron to preserve one jug of this manna for future generations. The word used by the Torah for jug is *tzintzenet*. The Midrash⁹ focuses on this word *tzintzenet* and asks, "Of what material was this jug composed? Was it silver, steel, earth, copper?" Answers the Midrash it was made of the material that shines and illuminates – *meytzitz* – more than any other material. And what type of material shines more than any other? Well, there are two opinions. The first is polished, varnished, shellacked earthenware; the second opinion is, yup, glass.

A vessel can be made of earthenware or glass – which in turn are made of clay or sand. A human being, too, is composed of clay or sand (or dust of the earth, if you will).

⁸See Talmud Shabbat 15b-16a regarding the difference between earthenware and glass vessels.

⁹Mechilta Beshalach 16:33 with the Gra's notes; Tanchuma ibid. See also Ibn Ezra (ibid) for an alternative interpretation.

10. Not so Similar

Fascinating, how both earthenware and glass are both made of the earth. But though they are both similar in source and origin, that's where all similarities end.

- Where glass is glinting and light, earthenware is dark and heavy.
- Where glass is translucent and transparent, earthenware belies and conceals.
- Where glass is refined and fragile, earthenware is thick and coarse.
- The process of making glass involves melting raw sand until it almost liquefies, and is pliable enough to mold and blow. The process of making earthenware is the opposite – raw clay is shaped and only after that it is heated to harden and temper.
- Where translucent glass reminds us of heaven, earthenware, like its name, reminds us of the earth.

There is one more distinction between glass and earthenware. And it is the key to everything we have been talking about. It contains a message of eternity we must all take to heart, a message that can have us living on forever.

- Once earthenware falls and breaks and shatters, it is done and can never be repaired. Glass, however, can never die – if glass breaks or shatters, it has merely reverted back to its original state, that of raw material that needs only be put back into the fire, melted and re-blown into a new, maybe even better vessel.

This, my friends, is why Rav Ashi broke a crystal glass at his son's wedding, and why he did it specifically, when he saw the rabbis grow merry. And this is why we break a glass under every chuppah today – to demonstrate the indestructible nature of glass and the indestructible, immortal nature of human beings.

11. Book of Proverbs

In the Book of Proverbs it states: *Burning lips and a wicked heart are like silver dross overlaid on earthenware.*¹⁰

An 18th century Talmudic commentary¹¹ says that the bodies of people who have not lived up to their full potential are like earthenware vessels, but the bodies of those righteous tzaddikim who have fulfilled and lived up to their every potential are like glass.

Why? For the very reason we listed above. A righteous tzaddik is: 1) glinting and light, 2) translucent and transparent (you see not the body but the soul it chauffeurs), 3) refined and fragile, 4) raw material molten in the furnace that is the soul, 5) like glass reminiscent of heaven, and, last but not least, 6) the tzaddik can never break or shatter – the tzaddik can never die! Like glass that can be re-melted in a furnace, the prism of the tzaddik's burning soul can refine any perceived flaws or cracks.

12. Back to the Original Story

Now let us at last return to our original story.

R' Nachman and R' Yitzchak were sitting at a feast. A feast that was a metaphor for the feast of life. Said R' Nachman to R' Yitzchak, "Share with us some words of inspiration during this feast, this smorgasbord of life." Replied R' Yitzchak: "I heard in the name of R' Yochanan *ayn masichin b'seudah*." The word he uses is *masichin* (with the letter samach not sin). *Masichin* with a *sin* means to speak. *Masichin* with a *samach*, as in *hesech hadas*, means to get distracted. R' Yitzchak was saying do not get distracted during this diverse feast of life, lest one become distracted from the feast itself, by-and-by creating an unnecessary hazard."

¹⁰ Proverbs 26:23.

¹¹ Tzintzenet Ha'man on Taanit 5b (from R' Menachem Man ben Feivish of Lisa, Aufibach, 1722).

This in itself constituted words of inspiration that R' Yitzchak shared: "Do not get distracted from the feast of life and the purpose you are at this feast in the first place. While partaking of life you should never lose focus, never lose sight of the goal that is to perpetuate life and elevate."

After the feast was over... in other words, as the metaphorical feast of life came to a conclusion, as the end (death) was upon them, the ultimate question of eternity and immortality arose. To which R' Yitzchak said: "Jacob our father did not die." It may seem that, when the feast is over, and we have all had our dessert, that life is done. But it is not so, and R' Yitzchak's proof comes from this verse. Jacob lives on eternally, and we can prove it by looking at his results, his contributions, his seed, his offspring. If they are still alive today, then he is still alive today.

They eulogized, embalmed, and buried Jacob because he looked to them, to their untrained eyes, like he had passed away, just as broken glass looks destroyed to eyes untrained in the fine arts of glass-making. But, in true reality, Jacob had not died; Jacob had merely drawn his legs into his bed and diminished. But Jacob's offspring are the living proof of his immortality.

And this is why the Torah in our portion does not use the word "died," but rather "expired" or "diminished" – Jacob did not die, he merely looked to the eyes of the world as if he had expired, just as a chuppah glass done in. But put that glass in a furnace and its wholeness is readily perceived.

The secret of immortality – and of building an eternal edifice – is embracing and revealing the soul within the body. Not to focus on the physical container, but on the spirit within. Our *bittul* – suspending the self and recognizing that we are part of a greater eternity – allows us to be an extension of that eternity.

13. In Conclusion: Crystal Clear!

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with this little bit of humor:

Mrs. Radosh says to the rabbi, “My husband keeps shrinking! When we married 50 years ago he was five foot eight, and now he’s five foot four. Can you say a blessing for him?”

“Of course,” replies the Rabbi: “May he live to be three foot ten.”

Glass is a fascinating thing, the more refined and more delicate the glass the less you can see it.

I’d like to leave us all with this blessing. May we all shrink, shrink to a point where our earthen bodies become so refined, so pure, so delicate that they are like the finest crystal, the most translucent glass. Then, when people look at us, they will see right through us, right through the glass vessel that is our bodies, into the depth and spirit this vessel contains – our very souls, our piece of God Himself, our Divine spark.

Then, it is inevitable: We will all live forever, as our father Jacob lives forever. As our father Jacob did not die, we, his grandchildren, also shall never die.

By becoming glass – which, contrary to appearances, is unbreakable, indestructible – we mortals become immortal.

And how is this achieved?

By living our lives as if our bodies are translucent transmitters and transparent transports for our souls. This transformative idea translates into all languages.

To be vessels of glass – light, reflective, clear, lucid, brilliant, and yes fragile – is the greatest blessing we could ever have.

And this is why we break the glass during the most joyous occasion in the world – to demonstrate that this shining material is eternal, lives forever, and can never, ever be truly broken – just put it back in the heat, and it is whole again.

And this is so true of us Jews. *Mah zarei bachaim af hu bachaim* ... as the fruit of this brimming glass, we, the Children of Israel, are alive and eternal, just as the brimming glass itself – Jacob, Israel himself – is alive and eternal.

Ah, you ask, “If Jacob is alive how come I cannot see him?” Of course you cannot see Jacob – Jacob, of the purest glass, is so clear and transparent, and one just cannot see transparency. But one may see transparency’s impact.

Let us thus raise these translucent glasses overflowing with the most soulful wine in a toast – To Eternal, Everlasting Life – *L’chaim!*

Shabbat Shalom!