



Visiting Torah Reflections on *Parashat Vayehi*

Genesis 47:28 – 50:26

It can be awkward and intimidating to spend time with a loved one who is sick or dying. For many people, the challenges are amplified when our only opportunity to connect is from a distance. Still, it can also be a powerful and blessing-filled experience not only for the person being visited, but the visitors as well. This week's Torah portion gives us such an example. In it, we follow the aging Jacob, now re-settled near his son Joseph in Egypt. When Jacob realizes he is nearing the end of his life (starting with Genesis 47:28), he calls for Joseph. Joseph dutifully appears at his father's bedside.

During the visit, the elder patriarch bows "at the head of the bed", presumably in gratitude or respect toward his son, the number-two political authority in the land. Some of our Sages in the Talmud (Nedarim 40b) interpret Jacob's gesture as bowing to God. Jewish tradition understands God's presence ("*Sheh_{in}ah*") as being particularly felt above the head of a person's sick bed.

<A question for reflection or conversation: How do you think (or wish) this teaching could guide our interactions when facing the experience of illness together?>

This scene is compelling for both Jacob and Joseph.

During the visit Jacob lets Joseph know how he wants to be buried after his death. He makes Joseph swear—not as the oldest but, as commentator Rashi notes, the most well-positioned son—to carry out his wishes.

<If you have clear wishes or advance directives—for your medical or spiritual care, or for actions to be taken after your death—have you conveyed them to those who would most need to know?>

Some time later (Genesis 48) Joseph learns that his father is ailing. He responds by collecting his children—Jacob's grandchildren—for another visit. At the sight of his son, Jacob rallies and sits up in his bed. This time, it is Joseph who bows in the presence of his father—a humble and poetic gesture mirroring their earlier interaction.

<How do we convey our honor, love, and caring when we are frail or facing death?>

In the conversation that follows, Jacob offers blessings to Joseph and his sons. In looking back on his life, and looking out toward the future generations' horizons, Jacob expresses his sense that—despite all he has lived through, and even in some way here as he knowingly approaches his own death—he has repeatedly been preserved from harm. Jacob prays for that kind of divine protection—or perhaps perspective—for Joseph and his family (Genesis 48:16 and Rashi's comment there; 48:21).

Early Torah commentators saw in moments within these encounters, hints of Jacob going in and out of spiritual focus. Put another way, in their view God's presence (*Shehina*) appeared sometimes more and sometimes less palpable to Jacob during these poignant last visits with Joseph and with the rest of his sons (i.e. Rashi on Genesis 49:1). How well this describes many people's experience of serious illness and deathbed vigils with loved ones!

It is considered a *mitzvah* to visit with someone who is ill. Deep comfort and spiritual potential may lie there. Yet especially with someone near the end of their life, and especially with a loved one, these visits can also be "loaded"; fraught with tension and unpleasant drama. Serious illness is often in our day an experience framed and colored by medical care and its attendant sights, sounds, relationships and rhythms. There are manifold factors that can complicate visits and the act of simply spending time together.

Furthermore, there can be so much to say that friends or loved ones find themselves speechless, oddly separated from one another, unable to begin uttering the profound truths, fears, hopes, wishes, or blessings that stir in their souls. And once someone takes the initiative and words begin to flow, precious reflections and feelings are often revealed.

<How might you want to step forward, speak out, or "bow to" the fullness of what is present in this situation?>

Sometimes it can help to voice feelings, thoughts, memories, or desires especially when confronting heightened vulnerability, frailty, or our mortality. As with Jacob and Joseph, these discussions can even be transformative.

<What do these vignettes and questions stir in you at this time?>

The next time you or a friend or loved one have the opportunity or are in need, may you find the strength, openness, and inspiration to share the blessings of meaningful conversation, of presence, and of time.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner, BCC of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. Gracious support is provided by the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.