

# This Land is My Land

## A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

### Essay #44—Parshat Vayechi 5762

"And Yaakov lived in the Land of Egypt...." Life! A wonderful blessing, especially when lived right, as Yaakov (also known as Yisrael) did. But did Yaakov have such a wonderful life? His brother Esav wanted to kill him (on two different occasions); his uncle Lavan wanted to kill him; his daughter Dinah was raped; his son Reuven interfered in his marriage; his son Yosef was kidnapped; his son Shimon was jailed in Egypt; he was widowed from his favorite wife, Rachel. There are even more that our Sages tell us about. So, what was Yaakov's life that was so wonderful?

The commentaries point out that it is written, "Yaakov lived in Egypt seventeen years." This refers only to the last 17 years of his life when he felt life. When Yaakov descended to the Egyptian exile his family numbered 70 souls. Yet, our Sages teach, prior to his passing he saw 600,000 progeny. The Talmud teaches that people at that time were able to reproduce even at the age of eight years old. Thus, in just 17 years, his family produced 599,930 offspring! (Must be a world record!) This means that every day Yaakov was able to celebrate many a *bris milah* (circumcision) and kiddush. Think of all the bar and bat mitzvahs and wedding celebrations he attended. What a life—from joy to joy, from celebration to celebration, from strength to strength.

Contrast this with Avraham's offspring, with Yishmael. Interestingly (as discussed in [essays ##16-18](#)), Avraham prayed to God for Yishmael. "Avraham said, 'Let Yishmael live before You'" (*Genesis* 17:18). Why did Avraham pray to God for Yishmael to live? Look what has become of the Arabs, a murderous nation?! But a friend recently pointed out to me that this was the deeper meaning of Avraham's prayer. "Let Yishmael **live** before You." Don't let Yishmael turn himself into a suicide bomber, destroying all life around himself, including his own. Let him live.

Let us examine the difference between Yaakov, the Jew, and Yishmael, the Arab. Yishmael seeks death and destruction, for himself, his neighbors and community, his family, indeed for the entire world. Mohammed gave birth to Islam with the sword, ramming his new religion down people's throats. Little of this method has changed in the past 1500 years, save for the different means of guns and explosives used to force their way and will upon others. Not so Yaakov. He learned to live despite a lifetime of suffering and fleeing from pursuit. Yet, if his final days are not so comfortable, being forced into exile far from the Holy Land, Yaakov never despaired of life.

"Yaakov **lived** in Egypt for 17 years...." He lived there despite his suffering because he knew that he had children who would follow in his ways, who would be devoted to God and His Torah, who would never despair of the ultimate good that awaited them. He even wanted to reveal the day of Mashiach's arrival so that his descendants would be fortified not only with faith, but with the knowledge of their salvation. However, he was restrained from doing so (see Rashi, *Genesis* 49:1).

Yaakov sought life and delivered a powerful message to his children. Every day has inherent joy. Each day you can celebrate a new "birth," a new outlook on life, a fresh insight of God and His Torah. "Go from strength to strength!" "Renew yourselves!" "Renew your faith!" "It's a brand new day."

The key was in Yaakov's transmission of Godliness, of Life itself. Connecting to God, connecting to Life, we are a continuous nation, a nation that has been beset by tragedy after tragedy. Yet even in the darkest moments—Yaakov knew his descent to Egypt was the prelude to several centuries of horrible suffering for his descendents—Yaakov gave over his message of life. "Live!" he said to his children. Seek out the freshness of every single day God allows us to awake. Considering the message Yishmael constantly sends, it's good advice. For it is precisely Yaakov's message which we need today, in an era when Yishmael's message is that human life has no value at all. It is all the more reason for us to hang on tenaciously, seeking whatever ray of light we can find.

This is also how Yaakov was able to bless his children. He saw that they accepted his message. When he wanted to reveal the Day of Mashiach's arrival, the knowledge suddenly left him. He asked his children, "Is there, God forbid, among you one who lacks faith in God?" Immediately all his children replied, "*Shema Yisrael!* Hear Israel! The Lord our God is the One God" (*Pesachim* 56a)! Enheartened by his sons' faith he was able to give his blessings. These blessings contain many a reference to our possession of the Holy Land and our right of ownership. So, it is ours by faith, by the gift of faith that Yaakov bequeathed to us. It is ours by right, by right of our propensity for life, for even in exile we sought and seek life, for ourselves and others.

The weekly reading concludes with the same message (see *Genesis* 50). Yaakov passed away, but insisted on burial in the Land. He was not to be separated from it. Neither was Yosef or any of the other brothers. "Yosef made his brothers take an oath. When the Exodus takes place and you will ascend from Egypt (your descendents will take along your coffins do be reburied in the Holy Land) you shall make sure to take me along with you" (v. 25).

For this is our Land, in death as well as in life. In life as well as in death. Even if Yishmael seeks our death, the Land is ours. How much more so is it ours, when *we* seek to **live** in it.

Yet how can we live in it, with such terrible death and destruction around us? Therefore the custom was instituted that when we conclude the reading of a book of the Bible, as we do this week when we conclude Bereishis (Genesis) both the congregation and the reader cry out, "*Chazak! Chazak! V'nitchazeik!*" "Be strong! Be strong! We will be strengthened!" All it takes is a little bit more of inner strength to renew our faith and our commitment to life, to the Torah, to the Land and to Life Itself. King David and his soldiers knew this and they, too, said, during a fierce battle, when all seemed quite overwhelming, "Strengthen yourselves! Strengthen yourselves again! For our nation and for the cities of our Lord; God will do what He sees is good" (2 *Samuel* 10:12).

Then all of Yaakov's wishes and blessings will come true—with peace, good health, with tranquility and prosperity, speedily in our days, Amen.

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- [Home](#)
  - [This Land is My Land Table of Contents](#)
  - [Essay #43](#)
  - [Essay #45](#)