

Life in the Middle of Days

“Jacob lived” (Gen. 47:28). So begins the last portion of the Book of Genesis. And one verse later: “The time approached for Israel to die” (Gen. 47:29). We are told the patriarch’s lifespan, 147 years, inviting reflection on the sum of all he saw. He was born grasping the heel of his brother, for which he was named *Yaakov* (Gen. 25); he saw angels at Bethel climbing in and out of heaven and beheld God there as well (Gen. 28) – just as he would later wrestle with the angel who named him Israel (Gen. 32) before speaking directly with God again (Gen. 35). His life was punctuated by divine encounters, as his eyes again and again beheld the image of God.

So perhaps we are not surprised as he summons his sons to his deathbed to hear his words of prophecy. “Gather together,” he says, “so I can tell you what will befall you in the days to come” (Gen. 49:1). What does Jacob mean by “the days to come”? Does he predict the fates of his sons’ tribes in the land they will one day inhabit? Or does he speak of something greater, a time more ultimate and all-encompassing? The Hebrew phrase *אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים* can go both ways, meaning either “the time ahead”¹ or “the end of time.”²

In the plain sense, rooted in the context of our story, Jacob’s words concern only the tribes themselves. He predicts, for instance, the fall of Reuben as the dominant tribe and the rise of Judah as the seat of the crown. This poetic passage reflects our people’s early history and their dreams of unity in the generations ahead.

But there is another way to interpret Jacob’s vision of the “the days to come.” This passage is one of the oldest in the entire Bible, but we can read it in light of the Bible’s latest text, the last three chapters of the Book of Daniel. When we do, we see “the days to come” referring not merely to a vague future but to the famous “end of days.”

This segment of Daniel features the prophet³ visited by an otherworldly angel who looks human (Dan. 10:16) but who also has the “appearance of lighting” (Dan. 10:6) and a voice “like the noise of a multitude” (*ibid.*). The angel delivers to Daniel a startlingly precise prophecy of the rise and fall of nations and kings. Scholars can pinpoint the composition of this passage to the Maccabean era, for it speaks unerringly

¹ See Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30, 29:31; Jeremiah 23:20 (nearly parallel to 30:24), 48:47, and 49:39.

² Isaiah 2:2, Ezekiel 38:16, Hosea 3:5, Micah 4:1. As will be discussed below, the book of Daniel is uniquely eschatological in its presentation of “the end of time,” though it is easy to read these prophetic references eschatologically. Truly, the differentiation between “the time to come” and “the end of time” is more theological than semantic or linguistic, but the question remains whether Jacob refers to *ultimate* occurrences or simply *future* occurrences.

³ The Talmud actually does not consider Daniel a “prophet.” In BT Megillah 3a and BT Sanhedrin 9a, we read אֵינָהוּ עֲדִיפִי מִיְּנֵהוּ דְּאֵינָהוּ נְבִיאִי וְאֵינָהוּ לֹא נְבִיא, “They [Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi] were greater than him [Daniel] as they were prophets and he was not a prophet.” Still, the Talmud concedes that he saw a vision “greater than” those of the named prophets, so his insight as a messenger of divine truth is still reliable.

of the politics of preceding generations.⁴ When forecasting the future, though, the text takes on an apocalyptic air.

Daniel 12:1 At that time, the great prince, Michael, who stands beside the sons of your people, will appear. It will be a time of trouble, the like of which has never been since the nation came into being. At that time, your people will be rescued, all who are found inscribed in the book. ² Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. ³ And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever.

This vision aligns with the dominant Rabbinic understanding of the World to Come, in which the dead – “who sleep in the dust” – are somehow revived, and the wicked and the righteous receive their ultimate and just deserts. Daniel, frightened and confused, asks when this fate will befall humankind, and the angel cryptically alludes to a time in the very distant future. The entire Book of Daniel concludes with the angel’s words of comfort: “But you, go on to the end; you shall rest, and arise to your destiny at the end of days” (Dan. 12:13).

Here we see “the end of days” referring to the last leg of our spiritual journey, the destination beyond life toward which all life bends. The human mind cannot grasp its meaning, though it seems to come with assurance of wellbeing and hope. And perhaps it is this vision of the ultimate future, the “end of days” beyond which mortal life can reach, that Jacob sees as he faces death in the loving embrace of his family.

Indeed, Nachmanides offers the common Rabbinic view that Jacob wanted to share with his children the secrets that lay beyond all life – but before he could do so, the Divine Presence left him.⁵ The Talmud explains that Jacob feared the loss of the Shechinah was due to his sons’ failing faith.⁶ To reassure their father, the Children of Jacob say, “*Sh’ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*,” Hear, O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal alone. With relief, Jacob responds, “*Baruch shem k’vod malchuto l’olam va-ed*,” Blessed is God’s glorious majesty forever and ever. From this we learn the Jewish custom to recite the Shema on the day that one dies as this affirmation of heavenly glory is the last and greatest testament to a life of service to the divine.

Many who have seen the light of life dim from a loved one’s eyes as they pass into death could affirm that something unique and holy occurs in this moment of transition. Our tradition offers us the insight that the “end of days” is, in some non-physical way, *real* – and yet, its understanding eludes even our most gifted of prophets. It is fruitless to try to explain or predict what lies beyond; and indeed, were we to know with some certainty what life after life entails, we might lose sight of the meaning and depth of life *during* life. As Rabbi Zohar Atkins, a contemporary scholar, puts it: “To

⁴ I believe there is scholarly consensus on this point. See *The Jewish Study Bible*, comment on Daniel 11:40-45.

⁵ See Ramban’s comment on Gen. 49:2.

⁶ See BT Pesachim 56a.

reveal the terminus of history, ... to understand how it will all unfold, would remove our capacity to *live*. It is not unlike seeing God's face, *and living*."⁷ Can we see God's face? Maybe. But only if we see without our eyes in a life beyond our life. The story of Jacob's vision, and his inability to share what he sees, models our own experience of life and death. We know that death will come, but we don't know what it means – or what it means *for us* – and so we must keep our story going. We put one foot in front of the other despite what the future may hold, treasuring the sacred moments of transition and seeing through them the greater purpose our daily lives hold.

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When Daniel comes face-to-face with the end of days, he loses his ability to stand. Only with the angel's help can he go on: "[The angel] said, 'Have no fear, precious one; all will be well with you. *Chazak chazak*' ... [and] *hitchazakti*" (Dan. 10:19) – Be strong, be strong – and I was strengthened. This is the source of our tradition to recite these words at the end of a book of Torah: *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek* – be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another. Genesis ends with the death of Jacob, and we strengthen ourselves. Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses, and we strengthen ourselves. With every story that concludes, with every life that ends, we can do naught but strengthen one another, reminding ourselves that our stories matter, that they add to the greater story of which we are all a part.

There is no life as we know it at the end of days; our lives are lived only in the middle. Whatever lies beyond lies beyond our understanding, and the symbol of Torah reminds us to stay strong through every passing chapter. In the turning of this new year, in the turning of this book of Torah, in the turning from moment to moment and life to life – we are reminded always to strengthen one another. Though Jacob's tongue is held, let us hear the words he could not speak. K'vod Malchut, the glory of God's presence, is with us in death as in life. Blessed shall it be forever and ever.

⁷ "The Unfinished Story," <https://etzhasadeh.substack.com/p/the-unfinished-story>.