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"And when the time approached for Israel to die . . ." (Gen. 47:29). It is written, "[. . . like all my forbears] I am an alien, resident with You. [Look away from me, that I may recover, before I pass away and am gone.]" (Psalm 39:13–14) And: "For we are strangers with You, [mere transients like our fathers]; our days on earth are like a shadow, and there is no hoping otherwise." (1 Chron. 29:15). Would that [our days] were as the shadow of a wall or of a tree! Rather they are like the shadow of a bird in flight, as it says, "[Man is like a breath; his days are] like a passing shadow." (Ps. 144:4)

". . . And there is no hoping otherwise." (1 Chron. 29:15). None can hope not to die; all know it and declare by their own mouths that they are mortal. Abraham said: "[O Lord God, what can You give me,] seeing that I shall die childless . . ." (Gen. 15:2). Isaac said: ". . . so that I may bless you in God's presence before I die." (Gen. 27:7) So too, Jacob said: "When I lie down with my fathers . . ." (Gen. 47:30). When was this? At the time when he expected to die.

For many—if not most—of us, death arouses great anxiety. Much of our emotionality regarding the end of life comes from the way that death changes how we perceive ourselves. This midrash about Jacob's deathbed scene presents ancient rabbinic wisdom about mortality based on insights from key passages in the Hebrew Bible. By presenting biblical metaphors alongside our patriarchs' experiences of dying, the text above teaches us to accept our limited lifetimes by acknowledging an uncomfortable reality

In the first half of the midrash, we find two poetic verses that express how death and dying literally alienate one from a normal sense of reality. By comparing mortals to "strangers," whose fleeting lives "are like a shadow," these passages evoke the feelings of emotional distance and meaninglessness that often accompany the loss of a loved one or one's own impending demise. Nonetheless, this midrash finds hope in the truth that we are all "mere transients like our fathers."

Perhaps we can find comfort in reading how even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob experienced the same grieving process of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression that we undergo before achieving acceptance. We can balance our powerlessness before death by emulating our patriarchs, whose trust in God and spiritual journeys can guide us in this world and the next.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yehi
Genesis 47:28–50:26
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi David Hoffman, assistant professor, Department of Talmud and Rabbinics, and scholar-in-residence, Development Department, JTS.

Was Abe Lincoln Honest?

Some of the more amusing commercials running on television today are put out by GEICO. One series of ads begins with the question, "Would switching to GEICO save you money on car insurance?" My favorite in this series addresses the potential consumer with yet another question: "Was Abe Lincoln honest?!" What follows is grainy footage of Abe Lincoln's wife asking him if the dress she just tried on looks flattering on her; we then see Honest Abe struggle, trying to suppress his opinion ultimately without success. He tells Mrs. L. the bad news and she walks away from him in frustration and, one would imagine, anger. Abe Lincoln was so honest that he would not even compromise his truth telling in order to protect his wife's feelings. (The message is: of course, Abe Lincoln was honest, and of course, GEICO can save you money on car insurance.) What is memorable is that Abe doesn't make the decision that most of us would have made: he doesn't offer the small, white lie for what we might consider to be the greater good of protecting his wife's feelings.

A well-known reading of our Torah portion for this Shabbat finds a source from the story of Joseph's interactions with his brothers for the idea that the small fib—the white lie—is religiously justified in certain circumstances. After Jacob's death, the brothers keep their promise to their father and take his body back to Canaan to bury him in the cave of Makhpelah, the burial site of his ancestors. At the conclusion of the mourning period, the family returns to Egypt without Jacob. As the brothers settle back into their lives in Egypt, a familiar anxiety begins to blossom. They express their fear: "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" (Gen. 50:15).

In truth, this seems like worry well-placed. Behind their words lies an unspoken incredulity perhaps complicated by lingering guilt. In the terseness of the text, I imagine the brothers' conversation held behind closed doors: "Is it possible that

Joseph really forgave us for taking him from his family and selling him into slavery? We have not spoken of the incident in the 17 years since our reconciliation with him. In fact, we have never asked for his forgiveness for the terrible wrong we perpetrated against him (see chapter 45). Perhaps Joseph has patiently waited for our father's passing before he moved to settle old scores?" (Think *Godfather* and Michael Corleone's relationship with his younger brother Fredo.)

Given these well-placed fears, the brothers send a message to Joseph: "Before his death, your father left instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly'" (Gen. 50:16–17). Jacob speaks from beyond the grave and instructs Joseph to pardon his brothers. But, of course, this message is painfully contrived. There is no record of this statement in the Torah. If this was indeed Jacob's instruction, why had he not shared it directly with Joseph as he was offering his sons his last will and testament before he died? Indeed, by juxtaposing this new deathbed wish with their concern that Joseph would now seek his revenge (Gen. 50:15–16), the Torah intimates that this is a desperate fabrication created by the brothers in response to their fears. Joseph's reaction to hearing this lie is that he cries. He reassures his brothers that he intends them no harm.

Basing themselves on this incident, two Sages from the Talmud conclude: "It is permitted to lie for the sake of peace" [BT Yevamot 65b]. This rabbinic reading of Va-yehi is popular because, I think, it intuitively makes sense and resonates with our life experience. Many of us have lied for the sake of a perceived greater good. Generally, we don't even call such an act a "lie." We have a special expression for it: a "white lie."

It seems to me that by accepting this rabbinic reading we let the brothers off the hook too easily and, in so doing, deprive ourselves of an important conversation. The brothers go too quickly to the white lie. Instead of speaking with courage, acknowledging their lingering guilt and their fear, they make up this story. In the 17 years since their reunion with Joseph, they have not once expressed shame for their behavior. They have never offered regret. They seek forgiveness in contrived words put in the mouth of Jacob. Instead of finding the strength to have a difficult conversation, they keep their feelings buried and Joseph must intuit their true feelings behind the lies spoken.

When we choose silence or a small fib told presumably in the name of peace, often something more than truth is compromised. Only when we challenge ourselves to find the courage and the gentle words to say difficult things can we expect intimacy to grow. The brothers have no reason to fear Joseph, but we have no reason to hope that the distance between Jacob's sons will ever be meaningfully healed. Their relationship will not deepen as it might have through an honest exchange. Instead of justifying the brothers' behavior, we would have been better served had the Rabbis of the Talmud used this incident in our parashah as an opportunity to challenge the ways we too easily permit ourselves to avoid conversations, bury our fears and feelings, and justify our actions by claiming the primacy of a competing good.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Over the past few weeks, we have been immersed in the story of Joseph: from the fateful gift of the *ketonet passim* (striped robe) to imprisonment in Egypt to his meteoric rise and, finally, to the family reunion. Now we are witness to the most dramatic and heartfelt aspects of the story: his revelation to his brothers in last week's Va-yiggash, and now the panicked response of his brothers in the aftermath of Jacob's death in this week's Va-yehi: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong we did him?' (Gen. 50:15). The brothers fear and surmise that Joseph will now take vengeance on them. What is Joseph's moving response? First, he cries. Torah goes on to teach that, afterward, "he comforted them and spoke to their heart" (Gen. 50:21). How are we to contextualize Joseph's mature and loving reaction to his brothers' fear?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

What this means is "Once again, have no fear that our father's death will make the slightest difference in my feelings toward you. The proof will be in your hands every day that I am and will remain exactly the same as before." "He comforted (*va'yinahem*) them," for *nahem* is consolation and regret. Both represent a complete change of feelings to the way one had felt toward something up until this point. Up until now one had considered something to be right and had perhaps boasted about it, and then suddenly one realizes that he is ashamed of it: regret and remorse. Similarly real consolation is in this spirit. It brings the conviction to one who has suffered pain and grief that this too leads to the ultimate good and everlasting happiness . . . (Hirsch, *Commentary on Torah: Genesis*, 686)

Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator, reinforces Hirsch's words commenting that Joseph employs "*devarim hamitkablum al halev*" (he spoke words that found ready access to his brothers' hearts). In Joseph's thoughtfulness, sensitivity, and creativity, he realized that he had to set a new course, create a new agenda, and, now, find a compelling way to connect to his brothers. Old ways were insufficient. There is a profound sense that the Joseph encountered in Parashat Va-yehi is not the same Joseph of the earlier Parashat Va-yeishev. He has matured in seemingly miraculous and hopeful ways. Joseph has transformed himself from a person who engages in self-absorption and boasting to an individual of nuance, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness. He is able to look back on his life and declare that "God intended it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Forgiveness and reorientation conclude the remarkable life of Joseph, inspiring all of us to make these qualities part and parcel of our daily lives.

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