

Vayechi: 20/20 Vision

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Two old timers, Max and Jake, spent their retirement discussing and debating the nature of the afterlife. They pledge that whichever one of them dies first would somehow contact the other to let him know what he has found.

Max dies, and Jake waits expectantly.

One day the phone rings.

“Jake? It’s Max.”

“Max, where have you been? I’ve been so worried. What’s it like?”

“Well, I’ll describe it. I get a good night’s sleep. I get up at sunrise. I stretch a bit. Take a walk. Have a good breakfast. After breakfast I relax a bit. I take a nap. I enjoy the scenery. Soon it’s time for lunch. Lunch is delicious but very filling, and after lunch I take a little nap. I get up refreshed. I wander down to the lake. I have a swim. Before you know it, it’s time for dinner, after dinner another stroll, and then to sleep.”

“Max, that’s heaven? Doesn’t sound half bad.”

“Who said anything about heaven? I’m a buffalo in Montana.”

We are living in a challenging time of turmoil and rapid change. It would be nice to know what awaits tomorrow let alone in the world-to-come. Is it green pastures or choppy waters? I don’t have the answer. But as 2020 enters, I look to our tradition to consider the future.

We meet Jacob in our parasha also considering the future. Lying on his death bed, Jacob calls his sons together and says the following: “let me tell you what is to befall you in the time to come agidah lakhem et asher yikra etkhem b’achrit hayamim” (49:1).

The phrase “acharit hayamim” literally means in the days at follow. But Rashi understands it to mean in the afterlife, the messianic era. Why would Jacob make his final words to his children, about the coming of the messiah? Perhaps he was comforting his children saying, “Now you are in exile in Egypt. But don’t worry, the messiah will come and exile will end.” Or perhaps the message was more personal. “Now you are facing my death. Let me tell you about the time that is coming that will be one of eternal life.”

What happens? In the verses that continue, Jacob does not reveal the end of days. Instead, he describes each of his children’s special traits. This leads the midrash to claim that the spirit of prophecy departed from Jacob davka because he was going to reveal acharit hayamim, the timing of the messiah’s arrival.

Why is Jacob prevented from revealing the future? Perhaps the Torah is suggesting that a life without surprises is not worth living. Perhaps there is an implicit critique of those who are always looking ahead and don't live in the moment. The commentary in our chumashim suggests that if we know the future, it might lead us to despair or complacency, neither of which are acceptable.

So, here is my question for you, if you could know the future, would you want to? Why? Does your answer change at different points in your life?

In this scene, the Torah seems to oppose revealing the end of days. But that's not to say we shouldn't look ahead. We read in Pirkei Avot, "What is the right path a person should travel in life. That is to say, what are the qualities she needs to develop to live a good life? "Tzu uru ezeh hu derekh sheyidback ba'adam" (3:12).

Rabbi Shimon answered, "haroeh et hanolad." To travel the right path in life requires that we develop the capacity of foresight. Haroeh et hanolad literally means seeing what is about to come into being, seeing the consequences of your actions and your choices.

Traditional commentaries like the 11th C French, Machzor Vitry, connect this answer to mitzvot. The author describes a person who weighs what he might gain or lose by following the commandments. But Rabbi Shimon's advice goes beyond the world of mitzvot.

What is foresight? It means being aware of, anticipating the consequences of your actions. It means cultivating the maturity to not be fixated on the moment, on instant gratification. It means looking to the future and not just the present (Yitz Greenberg).

Richard Slaughter, a professor of future studies writes in his book, *Futures Beyond Dystopia*: "There are two basic motivations for looking ahead and studying the future. One is to avoid dangers. The second is to set goals, dream dreams, create visions, make designs."

We need foresight in our everyday lives at home, at work, at play. We need to carefully consider the consequences of our choices and actions. And of course, foresight is essential on a global scale as well. It was Joseph's foresight, for example, that enabled the Egyptians to avoid famine in Egypt's seven lean years. The question of foresight is what we've been asking this past week in the aftermath of the Sulmani assassination: Is there a plan?

So how can we develop the capacity of foresight? How can we move from what Jewish mystics call mochin d'katnut small mindedness, constricted thought to mochin d'gadlut expanded consciousness? Perhaps we should all be playing chess or watching the weather channel. Or maybe we should take classes at a university. The University of Houston offers a Master of Science in Foresight. The University of Hawaii offers a Masters in Alternative Futures. I don't know about you, but I can picture a future on a beach in Hawaii right about now.

Rambam says foresight is a function of the mind, of thought. We anticipate the future by deduction of what will be from what is. Our musar teachers would suggest that before deduction we need awareness. We have to see clearly and calmly with an awakened heart and mind.

Classes and strategic planning exercises are important tools. But on our own we can develop the capacity for foresight. We do so through study, reflection, and meditation.

Let's take each of these individually. Study. As Jews, we know from study. We are trained to think critically, to explore alternative perspectives, to analyze information. We know that our thinking is sharpened and deepened by studying with others. These same tools help us grow in foresight: critical thought, open mindedness, seeking input from others.

Next, reflection. As Jews, we know the importance of setting aside time for reflection. Shabbat for example, invites us to step back and look at our lives, where we are and where we are going. We review the week that has past, renew our selves for the week to come. To grow in foresight, we must carve out time for reflection.

Finally, mediation. Here too we can draw on our experience with meditation, that is prayer, as way to develop foresight. Prayer invites us and challenges us, to envision a different time, to look beyond this moment, to see our lives and our world different than what currently exists. We must tap into that same spiritual muscle to grow the capacity of foresight.

Let me be clear. I don't think we will ever perfectly predict the future. And I know that sometimes we need to make quick decisions and have little time for study, reflection, meditation. But as we enter this new decade, let us strive to develop 2020 vision that we might avoid most dangers and realize the dreams we dream.