

Rav Kook Torah

by Rabbi

Chanan Morrison • www.ravkooktorah.com



Yaakov did not Die

Third-century scholar Rabbi Yochanan made an astounding claim regarding Yaakov:

“Rabbi Yochanan stated, ‘Our father Yaakov did not die.’

Rabbi Nachman asked, ‘Was it in vain that they eulogized Yaakov and embalmed his body and buried him?’

Rabbi Yochanan responded, ‘I derive this from a verse: ‘Fear not, Yaakov My servant... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity’ (Yirmiyahu 30:10). The verse likens Yaakov to his offspring: just as his offspring lives, so too, Yaakov lives.’” (Ta’anit 5b)

What did Rabbi Yochanan mean that Yaakov did not die? If he intended to say that Yaakov’s soul is still alive, that requires no verse – the souls of all righteous people are eternal. And if he meant that Yaakov’s body did not die, several verses explicitly state that he died (for example, “Yosef’s brothers realized that their father had died” (B’reishit 50:15)).

The medieval Talmudic commentary Tosafot explains that, when describing Yaakov’s death, the Torah only says that he “expired”, not that he

“died” (49:33). We need to examine the difference between these two verbs.

Also, why did Rabbi Yochanan make this claim of eternity only for Yaakov, and not for Avraham and Yitzchak?

Two Aspects of Death

When a person dies, two things occur. First, the bodily functions (breathing, pumping of the heart, and so on) cease. This is called G’VIYA, expiring. The natural cessation of bodily functions is a sign of a virtuous, well-lived life, since an unhealthy and profligate lifestyle brings about an early demise of the body.

The second aspect of death concerns the soul. After the sin of Adam, death was decreed in order to allow the soul to purify itself from its contact with the body’s physical drives and desires. Death purges the soul of those sensual influences that distance one from true closeness to God. The aspect of death that cleanses the soul is called MITA.

Thus, Shlomo HaMelech wrote that “Love is strong as death” (Shir HaShirim 8:6). How is love like death? Just as death purifies the soul from the body’s physical wants, so too, a truly intense love for God will overwhelm any other form of desire.

The Impact of Intermediate Actions

All actions that we perform during our lifetime make a deep impression on our souls. The soul is influenced not only by our ultimate goals but also by the intermediate actions we take to achieve those goals. Sometimes, these actions are themselves worthy means for attaining our goals, and their impact on the soul is a positive one.

At other times, a specific goal is achieved via means that contradict the overall objective. This is like scaffolding that is erected when building. The scaffolding is needed to aid in the construction, but is removed once the building is complete. So too, these temporary means will be canceled after the goal is attained, and their impure influence on the soul must be purged.

Yaakov's Family was Complete

Avraham, Yaakov, and Yaakov are called the Avot (forefathers), since the main objective of their lives was to father a holy nation.

Avraham and Yitzchak's efforts towards this goal included using means that needed to be relinquished once the objective is attained – i.e., they bore and raised Yishmael and Eisav. Even though these offspring contested the true goal of the Avot, they were needed in order to accomplish their overall aim. Therefore, the Torah uses the word MITA to

describe Avraham and Yitzchak's death. It was necessary to purge the influence of fathering and raising these non-Jewish nations on their souls, since this occupation conflicted with their soul's inner mission.

But while the souls of Avraham and Yitzchak required the cleansing effect of MITA, Yaakov's "bed was complete". All of his children were included within the people of Israel. Yaakov did not need to occupy himself with any transitory means; all of his efforts were eternal, in line with God's design for His world. Therefore the verse says, "For I, God, have not changed; and you, the children of Yaakov, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). The eternal nature of the Jewish people is particularly bound to Yaakov, the forefather who "did not die".

In certain respects, Yaakov did die, but this was only in personal matters, due to the baseness of the physical world and its negative influence upon the human soul. That was not the true essence of Yaakov's soul. When the Torah describes Yaakov's passing, it does so in terms of his life's goal, as the father of the Jewish people. The Torah does not use the word "death", since there was no need to purge his soul of its ties to its worldly occupations.

This explains why we do not find in the Torah that Yaakov's sons

eulogized their father. Only the Egyptians did so – “A profound mourning for Egypt” (B'reishit 50:11). Yaakov had assisted the Egyptians by bringing the years of famine to an early end. From the standpoint of the Egyptians, Yaakov had died, and the connection of his soul to these matters was severed. Therefore, the Egyptians had reason to mourn.

But Yaakov's sons, who knew that Yaakov was still alive with them, had no need to eulogize their father.

*Gold from the Land of Israel pp. 95-98
Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 242-251*