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**Text Sermon: Parashat Vayechi**

Quick raise of hands- is it normal in your household to drink a glass of milk at dinner?

Ok, and now, if you are comfortable, raise your hands if you keep a kosher home?

The first time I went over to a friends house for dinner and they were all drinking milk, I'm not sure if I've ever been more disgusted in my young life. I don't know why, but the thought of it was so unappealing. As I grew older, I realized there might be some reasoning to my aversion. While my family did not keep kosher in any sort of way, parts of the tradition of kashrut still came through. Having a glass of milk at dinner, was much too clear of mixing meat and dairy and somehow, in our very unkosher house, this part of the Jewish law has seeped through the generations.

It's not that anyone has really promised grandparents or great-grandparents to uphold this tradition, but this small aspect of keeping kosher has continued in my, and many Jewish homes. In this week's parasha, Vayechi, there is a clear promise between the generations. Not of keeping kosher, but rather, of following through with a task. Genesis 50:25 reads:

וַיִּשָּׁבַע יוֹסֵף אֶת־בָּנָיו וַיִּשְׁרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעֲלִתֶם אֶת־עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה:

So Joseph made the children of Israel swear, saying, “When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.”

Carrying the bones here is both a tangible act that is to occur, and a symbolic one of generational responsibility. This verse is merely the final line in the lengthy story of Joseph and

his relationship with his family. The troublesome story of Joseph and his brothers concludes with reconciliation. Joseph lives a long life and we are told he lives until the age of 110. He lives to see his children and grandchildren. His story and his life conclude the book of Genesis. In the final verses of parashat vayeichi, Joseph is aware of his eminent death. In this verse, he is literally making the arrangements for his death by calling upon the children of Israel. This phrasing, though, is an indication that he is not merely calling out for his family and the generation to come from his familial line, but rather all generations of the Israelites. This is calling upon a sense of peoplehood that will root from Joseph and his time in Egypt and will lay groundwork for the beginnings of peoplehood felt for the following book of Exodus. Peoplehood will be carried on through Joseph's literal bones here, as he asks his bones to be carried up after his death. This continuation of the theme of peoplehood becomes tied into the relationship with God as the verse reads a causative statement: "When God [...] you shall [...]." The divine here is part of the peoplehood relationship that ties from one generation to the next, through the movement of Joseph's bones.

Finally, the Hebrew used to describe the transition of movement of the bones is quite specific. It translates to the bones being taken care of as they are brought up "הַעֲלֵתָם" from there. This root is familiar to many of us- aleh, or the same root as aliya, going up. This word is not simply going up to a higher elevation, but rather rising in closeness to holiness. There is a powerful symbolism that the remnants of Joseph will not simply be brought with or are part of a journey, but in some manner, will be elevated with those children of Israel that will be carrying them. Carrying the bones of Joseph is symbolic of the generational responsibility all human beings, generally; and all Jews, particularly, carry with us. Each of us, too, carry with us parts of the past that impact how we become our own person.

Some of the metaphorical bones we carry, are weighty, and serve more as baggage from the past. One year during our family Passover seder, my Zaydie made an odd request. The youngest member of our family had finished reciting the four questions and my Zaydie said, “Would it be alright if I also said them?” “Of course,” we all agreed and he proceeded to recite them in Yiddish. This was the first time I had ever heard more than a word or two of Yiddish from his mouth. After the seder, I pulled my chair next to him and asked about it. He said he was feeling nostalgic- in another time, he was the youngest in the family and this was his annual responsibility. In talking to him more, I felt the sadness that he is the last one in the family who speaks Yiddish, but at the same time, he very intentionally never taught it to anyone else in the family. He never passed on this language because he had to fight to feel American throughout his whole life. He did not see the Yiddish language as his responsibility to uphold, instead, he carried the baggage of an immigrant mentality that did not want to sound or look different. Each of us carries the weight and stressors of the past generations. Even my questions to my Zaydie placed responsibility on him and his generation to uphold a whole language and a culture that comes with it. This is a great deal of pressure to put on a generation. In the story of Joseph, while he asks for his bones to be carried, he is asking for the metaphorical bones of his experiences, to also be carried. There are so many lessons from his life that should be carried into the next generation, and he is putting that exact pressure to do so upon them.

In a family, though, there are different pressures and responsibilities between the generations. We are familiar with having established wills, or in my family, my mother walking around the house telling us which piece of furniture and china is going to which child. In Judaism, we also have the custom of saying Kaddish and marking a yarhzeit, the year anniversary of someone’s passing. Saying Kaddish, though, in our communities, is often done by first saying the name of

our loved ones aloud. This marks that Kaddish Yatom as not simply part of our liturgy, but part of the family and communal responsibility to carry on the names and memories of those who came before us. Our Jewish tradition is very clear that we have an obligation as those still alive to honor the memory, work and life of those who have passed. Between generations, there is a familial responsibility. When Joseph is on his deathbed, he turns to his family. He is clear the those closest to him, will be the ones to carry on his spirit.

Beyond the family structure and within the Jewish community, there is a responsibility also to future generations. This has become most evident in today's world in the fight for protection against climate change. The lines that are most often offered in this context are about making sure that there is still a planet for our children and our grandchildren. We all want to be sure that future generations can step outside and breath fresh air, eat fresh produce and have less risk of natural disasters. Protecting the planet we inhabit is one way that we can ensure well being for future generation. The Torah tells us about the journey to the promised land. Once we get there, though, the work is not simply done. We do not simply settle and forget our identity that has been built by generations past. Israel may be the promised land of the Torah, but all human beings live and share one planet that we all must work to protect, because our work, too, does not end with our generation being satisfied with where we are.

In Hebrew we say the words L'dor V'dor, from generation to generation. We pass the Torah from one end of the family to another. It is inherent in Judaism that we pass down traditions, lessons and the words of the past to help bring up the future generations. With this task comes a great deal of baggage, Jewish communal and familial obligations and universal human responsibility to one another and to the future of human kind. Joseph's family did not question the task of carrying his bones. Yet, we may wonder, at what generation did they remember

exactly what it was they were carrying and for what purpose? How were they reminded that this was not simply a burden, but a rite of passage? While I hope none of us are carrying physical bones of loved ones, I do pray that we carry their memories, their love, and their passions. May the burdens of the past not be too heavy for us and in all the work we do, may we be mindful of the generations before and the generations to come.