

## **Vayechi – Together We Survive, Together We Thrive**

This is the final *parasha* in the book of Genesis. It's a time of peace for Jacob and the members of his family, a blessed time for the Jewish people. It's the last opportunity for the newborn nation to live in harmony before it is plunged into the darkness of slavery. Next week's *parasha*, Shemot, will begin the story of how Pharaoh enslaved and mistreated the Jews, both physically and emotionally. In Vayechi, Jacob teaches us how to enter the darkness of exile and survive.

Rabbi Effie Kleinberg brings the following wonderful idea from Montreal's Tosher Rebbe. Jacob gathers his children (וַיִּקְרָא),<sup>1</sup> binds them together, and blesses each of them according to his unique characteristics, qualities, and abilities. This is the secret of surviving exile. Jacob unites them. While each one is different, together they are one.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of Jacob uniting his children before the Jews enter slavery is twofold. First, it reinforces the unity of the Jewish people, even in the face of adversity. Jacob is demonstrating his unwavering faith in God and God's promises. No matter how dark things get, we must remember that the Jewish people's track record of surviving the harshest conditions is perfect. Second, it serves as a reminder for Jews that, even in the darkest of times, they can remain strong and united as a people. By sticking together, Jews can persevere and overcome any obstacle. In this way, Jacob's actions provided hope and inspiration for future generations of Jews.

Unity means that we can work as one, despite our differences. A perfect example is the human body. We have one body but it relies on a myriad of systems working together in order to function properly. We see that unity in the way that the organs, muscles, bones, and tissues interact to keep the body healthy. For example, the digestive system and the respiratory system work together to keep the body nourished and healthy - they both transport things - air or fluid and share the mouth region. The unity of the body is a reminder that all aspects of life need to cooperate if we are to thrive.

In 2008, when I was 22, I graduated from college in Toronto with a degree in kinesiology (exercise science), and came to Israel to invest in my soul and strengthen my Jewish identity. I spent half the year studying at Yeshivat Aish HaTorah (a Jewish educational institution) and the other half studying at an *ulpan* (a school for intensive Hebrew language instruction) in Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu. As two of my friends and I ate lunch there one day, we looked out the window and noticed a mountain in the distance. We all agreed that we should climb it.

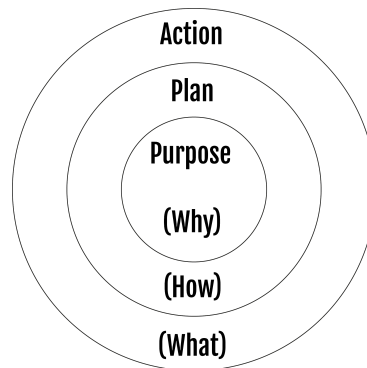
We gathered some snacks and water and set off, walking for hours through fields, over streams, and eventually to the top of the mountain. At the summit, we were rewarded with a breathtakingly beautiful view. As the sun began to set, we realized that we should start our descent, but the fear of walking in the dark prevented us from doing so. We decided to hitchhike back. To our surprise, a jeep pulled over right away, with two guys, plus a dog in the back seat. They offered a ride but said that there was only room for one of us. One of my friends responded, "We came together, and we'll return together." Those words were life-changing for me. I was tired and hungry. I just wanted to get home, and I would have been happy to take the single seat. However, at that moment I learned that I am part of a team, and that team is the Jewish people. Thinking only about myself would never again be an acceptable perspective. Now it's about my nation, my team, and our collective needs. I'm grateful for that day and the wisdom I acquired.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bereshit* (Genesis) 49:1–28

<sup>2</sup> Podcast on Spotify, Rabbi Effie's Podcasts, Strength thru Parsha Series: "Vayechi 5783 – Surviving Exile with Unity," 6 January 2023. See [https://open.spotify.com/episode/4YO2qbnxqHig6owNLsAIL?si=38jSKukwQ9KlIxyqC6JQA&utm\\_source=whatsapp&nd=1](https://open.spotify.com/episode/4YO2qbnxqHig6owNLsAIL?si=38jSKukwQ9KlIxyqC6JQA&utm_source=whatsapp&nd=1)

How does one create unity? Simon Sinek describes the concept of the Golden Circle.<sup>3</sup> The center is your purpose. God said to the prophet Isaiah: "I the Lord have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto the nations."<sup>4</sup> Our purpose is to be a shining light and leader in the world. Express it daily. Tell your friends, family, and team. This is your "**why?**" Before you do any task, ask yourself: "Why am I doing this?" Give meaning to your goals, your tasks, and your life. The next step is "How do you execute it?" This is your plan. This is your process and your "**how?**" Then finally you have your action, the doing – the "**what?**" You can apply this concept to any task, from getting yourself ready in the morning to launching a product. Follow this system to create unity in your family and your environment.



Not all lessons come from classrooms or books. Some find you when you hike and go on adventures with friends. Contact a friend or loved one, and schedule a hike. Go together, return together. The road is long, and who knows what's around the corner. Create unity in your life, your relationships, and your environment, so that your journey will be blessed because God is with you. May we unite, despite our differences, and reach new heights – both physical and spiritual.

### ***Shabbat Shalom***

#### **Point to Ponder:**

An example of someone who united the Jewish people was Esther. King Achashverosh and Haman enacted a decree to annihilate the Jewish people. Esther asked all of the Jews to pray and fast for three days as she prepared to approach the king and try to stop the massacre. The tension was palpable as Esther stood before the king, trembling with fear. The future of her people, the Jews, was in her hands. She knew that if she revealed her true identity and faith, the king might have her killed. However, she also knew that if she remained silent and did not plead for her people, their fate would be sealed.

Esther's courage and faith in God gave her the strength to speak. She revealed her identity as a Jewish woman, and boldly asked the king to spare her people. The king was moved by her bravery, and he granted her request.

The Jews of the kingdom rejoiced and they celebrated their deliverance from evil. They recognized Esther as a true heroine, and her courage and faith inspired the Jewish people to unite in joy and hope. They established the holiday of Purim to remember the day on which Esther saved them. Purim became a symbol of their unity. Esther's bravery gave the Jewish people new hope and a new future. May we always unite in peace, prosperity, and health –

<sup>3</sup> Sinek, S., *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone To Take Action*. (Penguin Books, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> *Yeshayahu* (Isaiah) 42:6

and not in suffering.

**Key Questions:**

1. Where do you feel the most unity in your life?
2. Where can you strengthen unity?