

# Parshat *Vayechi*- For the Next Generation

Then Jacob called his sons and said: "Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come. Assemble and hear, oh sons of Jacob: listen to Israel your father."  
-Genesis 49:1-2



## USCJ Hazak Shabbat

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Prepared under the auspices of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

Dr. Ray Goldstein, President; Rabbi Jerome Epstein, Executive Vice-President  
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**Mark your calendars!!  
Future Hazak Shabbatot**

**Shabbat *Vayechi***

14 Tevet 5769- Jan. 10, 2009  
16 Tevet 5770- Jan. 2, 2010  
11 Tevet 5771- Dec. 18, 2010  
12 Tevet 5772- Jan. 7, 2012  
16 Tevet 5773- Dec. 29, 2012  
11 Tevet 5774- Dec. 14, 2013  
12 Tevet 5775- Jan. 3, 2015

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## **Introduction to Hazak Shabbat Manual**

This manual is designed to help congregations and Hazak chapters plan successful programs for Hazak Shabbat. It includes planning and organizing suggestions, learning materials, and suggestions for reading and discussion. For more information, please call Jo-Anne Tucker-Zemlak at 301 230-0801 or email her at [zemlak@uscj.org](mailto:zemlak@uscj.org) or Maury Potosky [maury3505@aol.com](mailto:maury3505@aol.com) 301 460-9008.

This manual is an ongoing work. If you have any suggestions for improving it, or for adding material, please share them with us.

### **Hazak Shabbat**

Hazak was created to provide structured programming for older members of United Synagogue's member congregations. Among its initiatives is Hazak Shabbat, a Shabbat set aside to recognize chapters for their accomplishments and their members' contributions to the congregation. Hazak Shabbat, which is similar to Sisterhood Shabbat and Men's Club Shabbat, is scheduled on Shabbat *Vayechi*, when the last parasha in the book of *Beresheit* is read.

There are many ways to observe Hazak Shabbat. Many congregations ask Hazak members to lead parts of Shabbat morning services; Hazak members also receive aliyot, deliver the d'var Torah, and sponsor the kiddush. Other congregations observe Hazak Shabbat at mincha and maariv, which they conclude with havdalah, or at Kabbalat Shabbat

services on Friday nights. Congregations often add special readings about wisdom and maturity, or invite guest speakers to talk about those themes.

## **Committee Structure and Tasks**

Each chapter should set up a Hazak Shabbat committee, working in consultation with the rabbi and other synagogue professionals, to plan its program. The committee's tasks should include

- ★ deciding what service would work best.
- ★ determining if you want a guest speaker or congregational speaker and if you want special readings.
- ★ setting up the order of the service.
- ★ assigning roles, readings, and introductory remarks and distributing honors.
- ★ planning the kind of Kiddush or Oneg you want, and finding people who will work on it.
- ★ assigning people to serve as ushers.
- ★ setting up a publicity committee, whose members will write articles for the congregation's newsletter and blurbs to be posted on the web, prepare hard-copy fliers for mailing and distribution, and set up a phone squad.
- ★ working with the budget committee.

Usually the committee should be made up of four to six people, including the chair. It should begin its work about six months before Hazak Shabbat. Its first step should be securing the date on the synagogue calendar.

Because it is always scheduled on Shabbat *Vayechi*, it is both smart and easy to lock in that date for many years. If that day is not available, please choose any date your congregation can give you.

As you prepare, be sure to remember that not only are your lay and professional leaders available to help you, so are all the resources of United Synagogue's regional and central offices.

### **Publicizing Hazak Shabbat**

It is of course important that everyone in the congregation knows about Hazak Shabbat. After all, people can't come to something they don't know about! So be sure the date is on the community calendar as soon as you have it. The congregation should learn about the program about four months in advance. Send out email; if you still use hard-copy flyers send one in the mail and be sure that a copy is posted on the synagogue bulletin board and a pile is available in the lobby. Put announcements in the congregation's newsletter every month, and make sure that it's on the website. Set up a phone tree to reach senior members of the congregation, and reach out to them starting three weeks before. Ask the rabbi to announce Hazak Shabbat from the bimah.

The more closely you work with the synagogue's publicity and newsletter committees and with the rabbi and executive director, the easier it will be able to spread the word about Hazak Shabbat.

## Talking About Hazak on Hazak Shabbat

Feel free to use as little or as much of the following points as you'd like to put together a talk about Hazak Shabbat.

- ★ This weekend, Conservative congregations all over North America are recognizing Hazak.
- ★ Open to congregants 55 years old and older, Hazak provides social, educational and religious programming within the congregation. Our congregation's chapter joins other Hazak chapters from across the region and the continent with shared programming. This allows for enhanced networking and interaction among Conservative Jews. Hazak brings together people with years of experience in congregational and other forms of leadership and provides an outlet for channeling that experience and corporate memory into work for synagogue governance and congregational development.
- ★ Hazak Shabbat honors the congregants who have made the congregation what it is. As leaders, as workers, and as participants in communal endeavors, Hazakniks have led the way and set the example for the generations that follow.
- ★ Talk about your congregation's Hazak chapter. Mention some of your programs. Describe how people can get involved
- ★ In this week's parasha, Jacob talks to each of his sons and describes his strengths and weaknesses. He articulates his vision for his sons' future, as individuals and as a people. In doing so

Jacob provides them with an understanding of his values, which they are expected to promulgate. He also defines the structure of the tribes that, from the time of the Exodus on, will define the structure of the Jewish people.

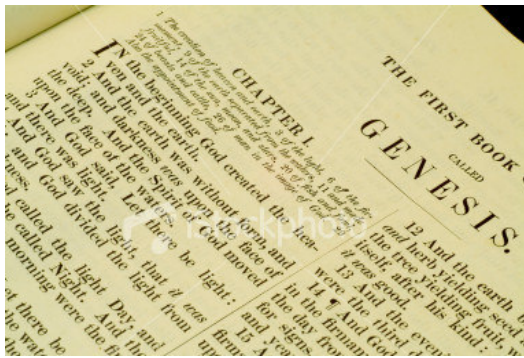
- ★ As Jacob set the tone for the Jewish people, Hazak members set a tone for the congregation. We wish the Hazak chapter, our Hazak members, and all the congregation's seniors future strength. Hazak means strength; the letters that make it up are *het* for *hochma*, wisdom, *zayin* for *zikna*, maturity and *kuph* for *kadima*, looking forward. Hazak members epitomize each of these values.

**Use the Torah materials provided for all your divrei torah; talks at lunch tables or discussion questions. The International HAZAK staff has worked to provide you with what we feel are materials to enhance each of your Hazak's Shabbatot.**

# Discussion Starters for USCJ Hazak Shabbat

## Torah Portion Summary:

Following the climax of the Joseph narrative, and the subsequent reuniting of Jacob's family in Egypt, Jacob lived for another 17 years in the land of Egypt. The name of the parasha is *Vayechi*, literally "and he lived," referring to the time that Jacob spent in Egypt before his death. The parasha describes the final preparations Jacob makes at the end of his life, the blessings given to his sons, and the transition from the children of Jacob as a family that came to Egypt, into a nation that will face major challenges in *Sefer Shemot*, the next book of the Torah.



At 147 years of age, Jacob realizes that it is his time to die, and begins to make preparations with his children for his eventual burial. To ensure that he is not buried in the strange land of Egypt, Jacob says to his children, "Promise that when I die you will be bury me with my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, in the cave of

Makhpelah" (Genesis 47:30). Ultimately, when the Israelites finally relocate to Canaan, the promise is fulfilled, as Jacob's bones are returned to where he requested.

Following the statement of his personal wishes, Jacob summons Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, to receive their blessing from their grandfather. While Manasseh is the older child, Jacob surprises everyone when he chooses to place his right hand on Ephraim's head, thereby giving the younger son a greater blessing than the older one.

Following the blessing of Joseph's children, Jacob summons his twelve sons and gives them each a prediction and evaluation of their future, both positive and negative. This dramatic scene concludes with Jacob's death. Joseph and his brothers mourn their father together. In spite of the brothers' concern that Joseph will act vengefully toward them, Joseph assures his brothers that no harm will come to them.

The parasha and the book of Genesis conclude with Joseph dying at the age of 110, also instructing his brothers to bury him in Canaan. Joseph's death is mourned in Egypt. A family that began with Abraham and his small family has now become a notable presence in Egypt, a presence that will prove difficult for the Israelites in the next book of the Torah.

We conclude *Genesis*, and recite the traditional formula for ending a book of the Torah, *hazak hazak v'nitchazek* (Be strong, be strong, and may we all be strengthened).

The pages that follow contain key verses in the Torah portion, with questions for discussion, and various traditional and modern commentaries on the profound issues raised in this parasha. As you read the parasha on your own, and read the pages in this packet, please remember to ask questions about the sources you read, so that you might add your own layer of interpretation.

## Discussion 1: Hesed Shel Emet- A True Act of Kindness

נא (כט) ויקרבו ימי ישראל למות ויקרא לבנו ליוסף ויאמר לו אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך שים נא ידך תחת ירכי ועשית עמדי חסד ואמת אל נא תקברני במצרים:

*And the time drew nearer that Israel must die; and he called his son Joseph, and said to him, If now I have found grace in your sight, put, I beg you, your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I beg you, in Egypt. (Genesis 47:29).*

**Sparks for Discussion:** Jacob asks Joseph to ensure that he is buried in Canaan, as opposed to Egypt. However, the language that Jacob uses to make the request is interesting. Jacob refers to this act as "*hesed v'emet*," namely a true act of kindness. In commenting upon the meaning of this expression, Rashi writes that "*a true act of kindness*" refers to an act done for the dead "*since one does it without expecting any repayment*" (Rashi on Genesis 47:29). More specifically, since Joseph's act of burying his father is something for which Joseph can never be repaid, the act itself is considered a true act of kindness. Joseph does it for the sole desire to do the right thing.

This comment by Rashi is echoed in a variety of others sources that comment on the burial of the dead. The Maggid of Dubno states in the *Ohel Yaakov*,

*"When dealing kindly with a person in life, one cannot know whether it was truly kindness, for many times that which one thinks is an act of mercy and kindness results in harm. But the mercy one shows to the dead is always true mercy because this is loving-kindness which the dead truly require and it therefore cannot result in harm or evil."*



This text and others echo the sentiment there is something inherently pure about the mitzvah of burying the dead that makes it an act of kindness like none other.

As a result, many people who work in a community *Chevrah Kadisha* or Cemetery Committee in their synagogue refer to the mitzvah they are performing as “Hesed Shel Emet,” for that captures the essence of why they do what they do.

**Questions for Thought:**

- Rashi says that the burial of the dead is the *only* true act of kindness. Can you think of where kindness from another person is impossible to repay?
- When we think about the role that the *Chevrah Kadishah* or the Cemetery plays in the Jewish community, how might we relate its functions to this text from the Torah?

## Discussion 2: The Blessing of Ephraim and Manassah Why are these sons different than all other sons?

(טו) ויברך את יוסף ויאמר האלקים אשר התהלכו אבתי לפניו אברהם ויצחק האלקים הרעה אתי מעודי עד היום הזה: (טז) המלאך הגאֵל אתי מכל רע יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי ושם אבתי אברהם ויצחק וידגו לרב בקרב הארץ:

*And he blessed Joseph, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long to this day. The Angel who redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. (Genesis 48:15-16)*

**Sparks for Discussion:** One of the major themes of the entire book of Genesis is the theme of blessing, specifically who receives a blessing, oftentimes at the expense of others. As a result, it may seem odd that Ephraim and Manasseh are chosen specifically to be blessed by their grandfather, and the specific blessing they receive also demands discussion.



Rashi comments, "*Whoever shall come to bless his sons will bless them with their blessing, and a man will say to his son, 'God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh'*" (Rashi on Genesis 48:20). The traditional blessing for girls asks that they be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The question is raised, "Why are Ephraim and Manasseh raised above even the patriarchs?". The answers generally fall into two categories:

- 1. Ephraim and Manasseh got along:** The entire book of Genesis is laden with examples of sibling rivalry. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers cannot seem to find any type of harmony between each other. In contrast, Ephraim and Manasseh are considered as having a genuinely loving relationship.

Regarding this rationale, the Hasidic commentator Rabbi Zvi Elimelekh of Dinov states in the *Igra De'Kallah* that *"The two young sons of Joseph had conducted themselves in accordance with the fundamental law of the Torah; namely, that one should neither consider oneself greater than another nor envy another...Seeing this, Jacob expressed the hope that all the children of Israel would be like Ephraim and Manasseh, free of arrogance and envy."*

In this sense, Ephraim and Manasseh are chosen to be blessed because they succeed in doing what even the patriarchs, whom we bless in our tefillot, could not.

- 2. Ephraim and Manasseh would face previously unknown challenges:** With few exceptions, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their families lived their lives as an isolated group, unaffected by the challenges of exile and living in a strange land. However, Ephraim and Manasseh were the first set of siblings who would need to express their Jewishness in a strange place. For this reason, they are blessed, for they faced a challenge not previously experienced.

Regarding this rationale, the Hasidic commentator Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ginsburg states in the *Yalkut Yehudah* that, *"Jacob realized that the time of the exile of his descendents was approaching, and he knew that in exile their Jewishness was in great danger. He therefore blessed them that they should be as Ephraim and Manasseh—the first Jews who were born, grew up, and were educated in exile."*

In this sense, Ephraim and Manasseh are the embodiment of a challenge that most Jews have faced for thousands of years. Since they met the challenge, we can, as well.

Additionally, while people associate Ephraim and Manasseh with the traditional blessing recited at the Shabbat table on Friday evening (i.e. "May the Lord bless and keep you..."), the text in Genesis reveals that they actually received a different blessing (quoted at the beginning of this section). The Rabbinic commentators offer a variety of comments on this blessing, yet one particularly stands out from the Ramban. He states that Jacob asks the name of Abraham and Isaac be laid upon Ephraim and Manassah so that their children, and their children's children, and all who

follow from them, will constantly remember their past, and connect with their people forever (Ramban on Genesis 48:16). In this sense, the blessing given to Ephraim and Manasseh is not merely a blessing for them, but a reminder for all Jewish people throughout time.

### **Questions for Thought:**

- Read the text of the blessing given to Ephraim and Manasseh. What do you think about it? If you had the opportunity to write a blessing to someone in your family, what would it say, and why would you say it that way?
- Two different rationales for why Ephraim and Manasseh were chosen are provided above. Which rationale appeals to you more? Can you think of other reasons to strengthen either approach?
- Following the blessing to Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob gives predictions about the future prospects of each of his sons. Why do you think that Jacob chose to offer a blessing to his grandsons, but a piece of advice and prediction to his sons?

### Discussion 3: Jacob's Assessment of his Sons- Honesty is the Best Policy?

(א) ויקרא יעקב אל בניו ויאמר האספו ואגידה לכם את אשר יקרא אתכם  
באחרית הימים: (ב) הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב ושמעו אל ישראל אביכם:

*And Jacob called to his sons, and said to them, "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days. Gather yourselves together, and hear, you sons of Jacob; and listen to Israel your father." (Genesis 49:1-2)*

**Sparks for Discussion:** Following the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob calls together all of his sons and offers his 'blessings' for the future. However, in contrast to the blessing given to Ephraim and Manasseh, which is decidedly hopeful in tone, Jacob offers a sober analysis of the future prospects of each of his sons. In fact, at times he refers to his sons' future prospects as particularly dire, referring to Reuben as "unstable as water," Simeon and Levi as "lawless," and Benjamin as a "ravenous wolf." In light of these blunt assessments, what can we learn about the nature of Jacob's pronouncements, and the role of giving honest assessments, in general?



In offering a psychological approach to this question, twentieth-century commentator Rabbi Pinchas Peli notes that, as their father, Jacob could give his sons assessments that no one else could tell them. As a result, Peli writes that:

*"our lives often become confused and entangled for lack of a precise definition of who and what we really are...[Jacob's evaluation] was meant to help his children find their proper identity. Such criticism of them would help them find their way towards the future, in which they were destined to assume the roles as heads of the tribes of Israel"* (Pinchas Peli, *Torah Today: A Renewed Encounter with Scripture*).

In this sense, Peli believes that an honest assessment can only be done by a person who truly cares, and Jacob certainly fits that description.

In the well known *Last Lecture* given by the recently deceased Randy Pausch, he too places an importance on the role of honest assessments as a demonstration that someone cares about another person. Regarding criticism, Pausch stated that, *"when you see yourself doing something badly and nobody's bothering to tell you anymore, that's a very bad place to be. Your critics are your ones telling you they still love you and care"*

Another reason is provided for Jacob's honest assessment by Aviva Zornberg, who sees the message from Jacob to his sons as a cautionary tale about the challenges they will face collectively in the future.

According to Zornberg, *"Jacob's children will have to live its absurdity and its pain, its apparently fruitless yearnings, without intoxicating visions of harmony to sustain them. What resolutions, what orderings they achieve, they will have to achieve in the immediacy, the vulnerability, the confusion of their own lives"* (Aviva Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*).

Each of the commentators above assert that while Jacob's analysis may be harsh at times, the harsh analysis is not only proper, but may even help his sons in the future.

### **Questions for Thought:**

- Open a Humash and look at the statements recited by Jacob regarding each of his sons. Do any of these statements surprise you? Are there sons who receive a positive or negative treatment, yet whom you feel do not "deserve it?"
- The overall opinion of most traditional and modern commentators is that Jacob's harsh assessment of many of his sons is a good thing. Do you agree with this opinion? For what reasons might a harsh analysis be a bad thing?
- At this point in the Torah, Jacob's sons are all adults, and Ephraim and Manassah are children. Does the fact the adults receive a more sober assessment, while the grandsons receive a more idealistic one, seem significant to you? If yes, how? If not, why not?