

Additional Ideas for HaZaK Shabbat D'var Torah

Here are some themes that can be found in Parashat Vayehi. Read them and see if any of them resonate with you and your life. Use one of them to write a D'var Torah to share with the congregation for HaZaK Shabbat. The best D'var Torah is one that the speaker relates to personally. Remember that your D'var Torah should have a connection to the weekly Torah portion and the ideals of HaZaK. Try to include something about your HaZaK chapter, if it fits in with your D'var Torah. Make sure that one of the HaZaK speakers does talk about HaZaK in your synagogue. If you want further ideas or help, please feel free to contact me, Rabbi Lisa Vernon, at the United Synagogue Regional office, (732) 738-4301, or via email at: vernon@usci.org. I would love to see the final copy of your D'var Torah, either before or after HaZaK Shabbat.

Living in the Diaspora: Jacob is concerned about the level of comfort his grandchildren (Ephraim and Menasseh) and children have found living in Egypt [see Ex. 48:3-6; 8-16] (the Diaspora in Jacob's view.) He sees them as having been "grabbed" by the comfort and surroundings in which they were living. How do you see that this parallels our own experiences? How can you (the HaZaK generation) show your children and grandchildren another way? Is it important to do so?

We speak of Diaspora and *golah/galut*. What is the difference between them? In modern times, we think of Diaspora as a voluntary dispersion and *golah/galut* as a forced dispersion, such as that of Roman times or prior to the founding of the State of Israel. How do you see the experience of your generation, living outside of Israel? Should we all go live in Israel? What about visits to Israel, should or shouldn't we all make an effort to visit at least once? What problems do these ideas raise in your eyes? Can and should we (the general community) or you (the HaZaK generation) do anything for ourselves, our children or our grandchildren?

The Experience of Aging: At the beginning of the portion, Jacob appears clear-headed and lucid [Ex. 47:28-48:7]. His conversation with Joseph is reasoned and rational. Later he asks for Joseph's sons and alternately recognizes and then doesn't recognize them [ibid.; Ex. 48:8-9]. Jacob's experience is like that of our elders; parents, grandparents, friends. How do you relate to the ideas, experiences and, perhaps, fears of aging? What is it like to age with dignity (as Jacob did?) How do we relate to the aging process in our society?

Jacob calls his sons to him so that he can give them insight into the future [Ex. 49:1-28]. Instead, he blesses each of them individually and specifically. He relates the words he speaks to them to the actions and experiences of their lives. He appears to have forgotten what he originally was going to say to them, yet his words are still of value to his sons. Although Jacob does not seem to have the same clear thought he once did, his sons still pay him respect, love him and listen to his words. How do we (especially the HaZaK generation) appear to our children and grandchildren? Do our words fall on deaf ears or are we worth listening to? How do we make sure that our children continue to value our words?

As we go through life, it is up to each of us to find meaning and make sense of our own lives. How can we use the messages of Parashat “Vayehi” to find meaning in our lives and make sense of our lives? What can we pass on to our children, grandchildren and those who know us, about our lives and what we have learned?

Blessings: Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons with a formula that has become the basis for blessing our children every Friday night [Ex. 48: 20]. For some of us, this formula has been part of a ritual we performed every week while our sons were living at home (there is a different formula used for girls). For others, we never participated in this ritual. Regardless of what we did with our own children, the idea of becoming a blessing is found throughout this portion. If we practiced the ritual of “Birkat Banim” (Blessing of our Children), how did we adapt when they moved out of our homes, as for college or when they became independent of us? Is it important to continue this ritual with grown children? How do we become a blessing to others? How do we become a blessing for ourselves? How does our life become a blessing? What do we want others to learn about blessings and becoming a blessing from our example?

Ethical Wills: The centerpiece of Parashat “Vayehi” is the blessing that Jacob gives to each of his sons [Ex. 49: 1-28]. While we might not consider Jacob’s words as a blessing in the traditional sense, he is speaking personally to each of his children and summarizing their character as he sees them. In the blessings, Jacob includes a wish or thought for each one, an ethical will to his children and to us, his descendants. What would you like to say to your children and grandchildren? What message or messages would you want them to have as part of their legacy from you? How does one go about writing an Ethical Will? Where does one place such a document so that it is not lost or opened prematurely? Look at some Ethical Wills written through the ages by our ancestors (see list below). Share them with your family or use them in your D’var Torah.

Partial Bibliography of sources for Jewish Ethical Wills:

This I Believe: Documents of American Jewish Life
Jacob Rader Marcus

A Time to Prepare: A Practical Guide for Individuals and Families in Determining A Jewish Approach to Making Personal Arrangements, Establishing the Limits of Medical Care and Embracing Rituals at the End of Life

Richard F. Address (Editor), Commission on Jewish Family Concerns (Editor)

Hebrew Ethical Wills
Israel Abrahams

Ethical Wills: A Jewish Tradition
Jack Riemer (Editor), Nathaniel Stampfer (Editor)

So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills & How to Prepare Them
Jack Riemer (Editor), Nathaniel Stampfer (Editor)

Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury
Jack Riemer, Nathaniel Stampfer (Editor)

Aging and the Aged in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa
Walter Jacob (Editor), Moshe Zemer (Editor)

Continuity and Our Jewish Future: Wisdom sometimes arrives with age, as we see with Jacob, when he speaks to his children before his death. We would want to share some of our wisdom long before we reach the stage that Jacob has in Parashat Vayehi. Certainly we hope that we've learned from our life experiences. Between the time we were young parents raising our own young children and our current level of maturity, we have done a lot of living and learning. Can we pass this on to our children and grandchildren? For example, can we encourage our children to enhance their children's Jewish education? This might range from just talking to our children, to offering to drive grandchildren to and from Hebrew school, all the way up to financial support to allow grandchildren to attend a Jewish Day School. Maybe we can encourage and help our children and their family plan a trip to Israel. Even taking a three generation trip to visit the Jewish Museum or the Holocaust Museum can be a rewarding event. Give your children and grandchildren the gift of Judaism, it's a gift that lasts thousands of years.