

Parshat VaYechi: The Living Gathering of Ancestors

The parshah that recounts the death of Jacob begins: *VaYechi Ya'akov/ Jacob lived*. Some see in this beginning a testimony to unending vitality despite death.

Jacob, aware that his life is ending, says: *I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my ancestors...* (Genesis 49:29).

An ancient interpreter pushes the verse beyond its straightforward reading, making of it the old patriarch's reflection on two possible futures after his death:

If you merit it, you will succeed in having me. If not, when I depart from the world I will go to my ancestors.

In other words, in this rereading of the verse, Jacob says: "When I die, either I am to be gathered into the ongoing life of my people, *or* I am to be buried with my ancestors. You, my children, must determine my future. Am I to be with you, *gathered to my people*, or will I be buried *with my ancestors* in the storied past?"

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, agrees that being "gathered" leads to life beyond a lifespan:

*When someone dies they say of him, he is gathered to his ancestors.
All the time that he lives, his ancestors are gathered in him,
every single cell in his body and his soul representing
one of tens of thousands of his ancestors since the beginning of all generations.*

The gathering takes place within a life which, at its end takes its place within the gathering. The gathering of my ancestors within me fuels my vitality just as it assures theirs.