

“Endings” - Parashat Vayechi

1.6.2012

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Charlotte is my 2001 Volkswagen GTI. I bought her after graduating college, paid in full, my name is on the title, the whole nine yards.

Now, Los Angeles is a hard city for a little old car, and she came with almost 100,000 miles to start with, but I loved her and she loved me and that's all that mattered.

Then there was the first time I put gas in the car and realized that my little Charlotte was a picky eater and would only take the high-grade gas. Or when I took her to get an oil change and learned that German cars require more expensive oil. Or when I was driving from Los Angeles to Seattle for Thanksgiving and the car went on strike in Oakland. She's since gone on strike a few more times, and each time, I think to myself -that's it, no more fixing you!- ...but each time, it works out.

So when on Wednesday morning I woke early, determined to fix the latest problem once and for all, I didn't know this was the end. Charlotte had been warning me for a couple of days now, but she still ran just fine, and Volkswagens can be a little melodramatic, so I had avoided dealing with the intermittent flashing red warning.

STOP!
Coolant level!
Check manual!

I tried googling a solution but didn't trust myself to follow the advice given by the various cargeeks out there and so I finally succumbed and drove Miss Charlotte to a small independent repair shop nearby. Bill the mechanic took a solid look under the hood. He quoted me a price and the price was too high. And then he continued - "This is just a stop-gap." he said. "I can fix this. But if you keep fixing problems as they arise, you're just going to end up back here every two months or so." Seeing the look on my face he sat down on his little roll-under-the-car thingy. "Maybe it's time to buy a KIA." he said.

There was no accident, no explosion [thank goodness!]. There wasn't even anything wrong with the car to the naked eye. But it was clear - my love affair with Miss Charlotte was over. Sometimes, we don't know the end is coming.

We think of endings as finales; glitter and fireworks and a general to-do. We think that grandiose experiences deserve, even require, a flashy conclusion. But the end of a thing is not always so noticeable or even noteworthy.

This week we read **Vayechi**, the final portion of the book of Genesis. For the conclusion of such an action-packed section of the Torah, **Vayechi** is pretty tame.

There are only two potentially feather-ruffling moments in the portion - first during Jacob's blessing of his grandsons, Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menasheh and later, when Joseph's brothers make a last gasp third go at being pardoned for the sins they committed against Joseph earlier in life (that whole throwing him into a pit, selling him into slavery, and pretending he was dead thing).

Both of these situations are diffused seamlessly and uncharacteristically...and a little, dare I say it, boringly! Where are the fireworks, where is the end-of-the-book hoopla? We have just been taken through the entirety of the history of our patriarchs and there's no drama?

Apparently not.

The characters of this epic history of ours don't know they're nearing the end of a book of the Torah, nor should they! They just keep living their lives, and learning from their own experiences and those of their ancestors.

The uncharacteristic part about Ephraim and Menasseh is that they get along (unlike virtually every set of siblings we have met up to this point!) Even when Jacob purposefully crosses his hands in order to bless the younger son over his older brother, the two boys simply and patiently receive the blessing from their zadie. Neither seems upset or offended by the switch-up.

Joseph's last communication with his brothers also shows incredible growth - Joseph not only proves forgiving, but even humble - a far cry from his childhood brattiness! When his brothers ask him for forgiveness, he grants it, explaining their actions as all part of God's plan. Their initial cruelty, he said, led to a series of events that helped save lives and that's all that matters.

One recent ending HAS been expected - six days ago we ended 2011, a year full of big news stories.

On the one hand, Osama bin Laden was killed.

On the other, natural disasters completely devastated Japan.

On the one hand, authoritarian regimes were toppled all over the Arab world.

On the other hand, the EU ran out of money.

In our own lives as well, I'm sure we can all list a number of events that we personally lived over the last 365 days, some big and some small, some good and some bad. Births and deaths, new accomplishments and new challenges - aches and pains and all of the recovery time that goes with them.

It has been a long and involved year and American cultural tradition tells us that we are supposed to really mark this separation, to go out with a bang - party, drink champagne, set off fireworks...or if you're my family, stuff yourself with a smorgasbord of desserts.

But I think that the understated nature of this week's portion, the calm and collected conclusion of the book of Genesis, has something to teach us about endings. More than an ending is an event in and of itself, it is, simply, a marker of the passing of time.

The big loud moments (Genesis' more dramatic tales of fighting brothers, our own tales of accomplishment and failure) may be the ones we remember but all the spaces in between those moments, (every day that we get out of bed and go to work or school or out into the garden and merely check off our to-do list for the day) these moments are the only way we get to the memorable ones. Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man teaches that spirituality is much more about the hard mundane work of creating space for spiritual moments than it is about the brief flashes of spirituality that only sometimes result. The world has spent a lot of time talking about the 99% and the 1%, and I won't get into that, but I will say that 99% of the time, we're just living, and that is an accomplishment!

In this Torah portion, the end is not a loud memorable moment - it is part of the space between moments, a simple marker of the passage of time.

Vayechi is about everyday learning and growing - when Jewish parents all over the world bless their sons on Friday night, they say "may you be like Ephraim and Menasseh". These two boys benefited from their quarreling sibling predecessors and learned patience, learned to get along. Joseph also shows his growth - from a young brat who no one likes to a man able to see and accept the ways in which God has worked through him to better the world.

We too have learned and grown from this past year, from the good moments, the bad moments, the ugly moments, and even all those other moments that were neither good bad nor ugly.

Putting 2011 behind us in a blaze of fireworks and haze does a disservice to the year we have just lived. Marking the movement from 2011 to 2012 is important, but not more important than the occurrences of the year itself.

So as we transition from 2011 into 2012 (and I expect we'll all be doing that for at least a few more days - that 2 on the end is still tripping me up!) I encourage us all to take note of the mundane moments, reflect on the memorable ones, and allow the "end" to be just another step along the way.