

Jacob's Peaceful Death

I have often wondered about the terms used in describing Jacob's death, as well as about terms used in describing the death of other Biblical figures. Terms such as "expired" translatable also as "breathing his last," are used. I've amused some of my benei-mitzvah students by translating it with the slang expression "he croaked." I've actually seen serious old English Bibles which translate this as "he gave up the ghost," which is now an English idiom but originally came out of passages such as this from Scripture, and it also meant giving up the spirit or giving up breathing. And "croak" gives you the sense that the Hebrew does, that there is a kind of distinctive and "last sigh" vocalization sound associated with the final inhalation and expiration.

Breathing at the very end of life is usually somewhat labored, but not necessarily overly so. It can be a quite peaceful "croak" or sigh, but it's generally somewhat audible. Of course, there are those who don't really get to "breathe their last" when they die: They may be breathing regularly one moment and then suddenly "pass out," never to resume breathing again. Such people we say are "seized by death." We think of such instances as a kind of "sudden death," even though its onset has been long and gradual. Those instances we think of it as more "disturbed," less natural and less peaceful. Being at peace we associate with relaxed inhalation and exhalation, until the effort of breathing becomes too much and the dying person "gives up" breathing anymore with a final groan.

Another term repeatedly used in Jacob's death is a term for "gathering." First Jacob's sons must "gather" around him for his final bedside blessing. The dying process itself is described as involving "gathering" Jacob's legs into the bed and then the enigmatic expression "and he was gathered unto his people." Some associate the term with being buried in a cemetery among one's family or people. But Jacob has not yet been buried in that passage. Another interpretation emphasizes the importance of the Hebra Kadisha and Tahara duties, although Jacob's body is passed over to the Egyptian medical men for embalming. In any case, Scripture sees it as quite important that Jacob's sons be "gathered around" before his death and be able to witness his death. It reminds me of reports of death I've heard and read about from many sources, including my great teacher, Dr. H. I. Sober, of the dying holding on to life despite the greatest pain until a beloved spouse arrives, and even then refusing to die until the spouse says something like "It's OK, you can go now." Hospice chaplains are taught to council family members at the end to relax the suffering patient's concerns about how the living for whom he feels responsible will carry on without him, assuring him that they can carry on, and therefore the patient need not keep struggling and the patient has "permission" to die. That to me epitomizes the relatively "peaceful" death of Jacob with his family members in attendance. Jacob's death is sweet and relaxed in this way, surrounded by his many sons and large family for whom he bore such a burden of responsibility all his life, He is now assured that the family has become reconciled and can carry on without him. It's interesting that Joseph's death is not described quite that way. Joseph must have had his brothers gather when he had them swear an oath to take his bones out of Egypt. Jacob's funeral, of course, as described in the Bible was a major political affair for Joseph and Pharaonic Egypt, a "state funeral" much like President Carter's funeral today as I am writing. But Jacob's actual death itself was his own people. And even Jacob's actual burial seems to have been more private, just among the sons. So there was a big state funeral service at the funeral parlor at Abel-Mitzraim in Transjordan, followed by a small family burial at the cemetery grounds. But Joseph must have had Egyptians in attendance even at his death. Joseph's death was doubtless much less peaceful. Joseph probably had plenty of concern for his family at his death, with good reason, as it turned out. No one comparable to Joseph would arise at Pharaoh's court to succeed him. Joseph had plenty of palace intrigue to worry about, all the more so as his hold on life and power was slipping. Joseph himself gets embalmed like a powerful Egyptian statesman, but no state funeral. So Joseph's death was full of worry. But Jacob could die peacefully.



Shabbat Vayhee

January 10-11, 2025 | 11 Tebet, 5785

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 180 | Haftarah: p. 191 / Kaplan: p. 240 | Haftarah: p. 1090

Bat Mitzvah of Zahava Wiznia

- Candle Lighting | 4:30 pm
Evening Services | Minha with tefillin & Shabbat Arbit | 4:00 pm | Main Sanctuary
End of Fast of Tebet | 5:06 pm
Friday Night Lights will return next week.
There is no choir on Friday night.

- Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary
Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary
Women's Service | 9:00 am | Little Synagogue

At the conclusion of the last word of Genesis, the congregation says:
'חזק ונתחזק - חזקו ונאמץ לבבכם כל המישראלים לה'
Be Strong and let us be Strengthened - Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
All ye that hope for the LORD.

- Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room
Youth Groups | 10:30 am | Fidanque Youth Room
Kiddush Luncheon | following services | Levy Auditorium | Sponsored by the
Wiznia family, in honor of Zahava becoming a Bat Mitzvah
Shabbat Afternoon Class | 3:40 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik
Teen Shiur will return next week.
Evening Services | 4:25 pm
Habdala | 5:16 pm

Weekday Service Times

Mornings: Sunday: 8:05 am | Monday-Friday: 7:05 am
Evenings: Sunday (Minha & Arbit): 4:30 pm | Monday-Thursday (Arbit only): 6:30 pm

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Early bird pricing ends THIS Monday, January 13

Community Shabbat Dinner: Magevet Returns!

Yale's premier Jewish acapella group

Friday Night, Shabbat Shira, February 7

Following Friday Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

Following our Friday evening services – always musically exquisite – registered guests will enjoy a festive Shabbat dinner enhanced by a musical performance by Magevet, Yale University's Jewish acapella group. A co-ed ensemble, comprised of talented undergraduate students at Yale University, Magevet is known for its sweet blend of voices, unique arrangements, and lighthearted sense of humor, and is one of the nation's premiere Jewish a capella singing groups.

(Virtual) Sunday Matinee with Sisterhood

All proceeds will be donated to help families of Israeli soldiers

FINAL FILM DISCUSSION:

Sunday, January 26 | 4:00 pm | Walk on Water (2004)

A link is sent to registrants to watch the film a week before the appointed date, together with a second link to join the Sunday discussion on Zoom.

HESED OPPORTUNITIES

LA Wildfire Relief

Our hearts are with those who have been devastated by the wildfires in Los Angeles, CA. To show our support as a community, **Shearith Israel is collecting donations through the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund** that will be given directly to the Jewish Federation Los Angeles' Wildfire Relief Fund.

To contribute, visit shearithisrael.org/rdf and select "JFLA Wildfire Relief Fund."

Volunteer for Masbia Soup Kitchen

while enjoying a night full of sushi and wine!

For Young Professionals in their 20s & 30s

Thursday, January 23 | 7:00 pm

At West Side Institutional Synagogue (120 W 76th St)

Register at <https://bit.ly/400SNUu>

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Public Safety and Justice - A Conversation

THIS Tuesday, January 14 | 7:00 pm | At The Jewish Center

Free registration required at jewishcenter.org

Join the community for a conversation with Melinda Katz (Queens District Attorney), Sydney Altfield (Teach NYS Executive Director), and Sara Forman (NYSN Executive Director), on public safety, addressing subway and antisemitic crimes, and exploring legislative solutions to strengthen prosecution efforts in Albany.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Zahava Wiznia**, upon becoming a Bat Mitzvah this Shabbat. Congratulations as well to her parents, **Rivka & Marc Wiznia**, and her siblings, **Neta, Dov, and Lev**. The Wiznia Family invites the entire Congregation to a festive kiddush luncheon following morning services, and a Bat Mitzvah program. Main service will be in the Sanctuary, Women's Service in the Small Synagogue, and everyone will join in the Sanctuary following services for the Bat Mitzvah program.

Mazal tob to **Susan & Avery Neumark**, upon their grandson Pinchas Rozenberg becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Pinchas is the son of Alyse & Josh Rozenberg of Bergenfield, New Jersey. Congratulations as well to great aunt and uncle, **Rachel & Jonathan Herlands**, uncle **Hillel Neumark**, and uncle and aunt **Jannah & Jacob Neumark**.

Mazal tob to **Nicole Schreiber & Raanan Agus**, upon the birth of a great grandson, born to their daughter, Gabrielle Agus, and Elie Lerea. Congratulations as well to the proud great grandparents, **Renee & Avie Schreiber**.

Mazal tob to **Wendy & Sidney Ingber**, upon the marriage of their granddaughter, Eva Rose Ingber, daughter of Rebekah Hoenig Ingber and Adam Ingber, to Sammy Merkin of Englewood, NJ.

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LAST CHANCE: Early Bird Offer

Pre-Pay Next Year's Dues at This Year's Rates!

Until January 15, 2025

Note: You must be logged into your ShulCloud account in order to pay your dues.