

The Maharal of Prague

Gur Aryeh

Parshas Vayechi

Chumash

(ח) וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה וַיְהִי יְמֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם חִיָּים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים וָאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה
 (28) **Jacob lived in Egypt for 17 years. Jacob's days, the years of his lifetime, totaled 147 years.**

Rashi

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב - Jacob lived. Why is this *parashah* closed up (i.e., doesn't start at the beginning of a paragraph)? Because when our father Jacob passed away, the eyes and the hearts of the Israelites became closed up, troubled by the indicative signs of the bondage that the Egyptians would later begin to impose on them. Another explanation: Jacob wished to reveal to his sons when the end of the exile would be, but it was concealed from him.

[NOTE: the unique feature of this one (Parashat Vayechi) is that it has no visible space or break between it and the preceding portion, making it "completely closed" in a way that stands out from the others. END NOTE]

The Maharal

Why is this Torah portion considered "closed"?

(From Bereishit Rabbah 96:1)

Even though there are several "closed" portions, the question is only asked about this one because it is "closed" in a more complete sense than all the others. Unlike other closed portions, this one has no break at all, as other closed portions typically do.

The distinction between closed (סתומות) and open (פתוחות) portions is as follows: A "closed" portion begins on the same line where the preceding portion ends, leaving a space equivalent to nine letters before it continues. An "open" portion, however, does not begin on the same line but starts on a new line. However, this portion (Vayechi) is "completely closed" (סתומה מכל וכל), as there is no visible break except for the end of a verse, and this is supported by the opinion of the Ramban.

One might question whether, because there is no space at all, this portion is not a separate portion but is instead part of the previous portion. However, we know by tradition that the delineation of open and closed portions was received from Ezra the Scribe, who was meticulous in preserving the Torah of Moshe. If these sections were divided into two portions, it must be by tradition handed down to us.

Additionally, the content of one portion is distinct from the other, so we must understand each as a separate portion in its own right.

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"Their eyes were closed" etc.

Even though, as long as one of the tribes was alive, the Egyptians did not fully enslave them, as Rashi wrote in Parashat Va'era (Shemot 6:15) and in Parashat Shemot, this enslavement was not permanent until after Yosef and all his brothers had passed away. Only then did the enslavement become fully established, as it is written (Shemot 1:6-8): "Yosef died, and all his brothers, and that entire generation... and the new king of Egypt said to his people, 'Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too numerous and too mighty for us.'"

However, after the death of Yaakov, the Egyptians began to enslave them, but this enslavement was not yet permanent. This aligns with what is written here: "Once Yaakov died, they began to enslave them," whereas later it is written that the days of permanent enslavement began only after Levi's death. This implies that the enslavement became fully established only after that point.

[NOTE: Bereishit Rabbah 96:1 It interprets the transition following Yaakov's death, suggesting that while the full-fledged enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt began later (after the death of Yosef and his brothers), a preliminary form of subjugation began immediately after Yaakov's death. This aligns with the midrashic and exegetical tradition, particularly as referenced in Rashi's commentary on the Torah.

Rashi (on Genesis 47:28 and Exodus 1:6) mentions that the Egyptians' respect for the Israelites diminished after the death of Yaakov and subsequently of Yosef and his brothers, leading to the intensification of their enslavement. Bereishit Rabbah elaborates on this sequence, noting the progressive nature of the Israelites' descent into servitude. END NOTE]

"Because he sought to reveal the end"

(Bereishit Rabbah 96:1)

This refers to the end of all exiles. It cannot be explained as referring to the end of the Egyptian exile—why would it have been concealed from him? After all, the end of Egypt's exile was explicitly revealed to Avraham, as the Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to him (Genesis 15:13): "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own for four hundred years." Moreover, there was no command not to reveal it.

One cannot claim that Yaakov was not told when the four hundred years would begin, because if there were a prohibition on revealing the end of Egypt's exile, then even revealing the duration of the exile—four hundred years—would also have been forbidden. Rather, Yaakov sought to reveal the ultimate end, the conclusion of all exiles.

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If you argue that if this was the case, then the "closure" section should have been placed in Parashat Vayechi later, at the verse "And Yaakov called to his sons" (Genesis 49:1), and not at the beginning of the portion, the answer is that it is inappropriate to divide a single, unified subject into two portions. Such a division might make it appear as if everything were one continuous portion. Thus, it would not be fitting to insert a "closure" near Yaakov's death, as the entire topic is interconnected.

Since it was not feasible to create two portions and place the "closure" at the point of Yaakov's death itself, it was hinted at in the beginning of the section, which recounts the days of his life. This marks the beginning of the narrative of his death.