

# Vaychi @ the DC Beit Midrash

Monday, January 5, 2004; 11 Tevet 5764

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Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading *Parashat Vaychi* from the book of *Bereishit* (Genesis). Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's *Torah* portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chavruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

## ***This week's parasha (Torah portion): Vaychi, Bereishit (Genesis), 47:28 – 50:26***

Parshat Vaychi, the final portion of the first book of the Torah, describes Jacob's actions immediately preceding his death in Egypt, beginning with his making Joseph swear to bury him in the land of Israel. Jacob then gives Joseph's two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, a special blessing which confers upon them the elevated status of being two separate tribes amongst the Children of Israel. Notwithstanding Joseph's protest, Jacob insists on giving the younger Ephraim the right-hand position of primacy during the blessing, stating that Ephraim would be greater. Jacob then proceeds to give each of his other sons their individual blessing, in accordance with their own unique character traits and missions. Jacob passes away at the age of 147 and is brought by his sons, accompanied by a great procession of Egyptian royalty, to the land of Israel where he is buried in the M'arat HaMachpelah alongside his wife Leah, parents Isaac and Rebecca, and grandparents Abraham and Sarah. Upon their return to Egypt, Joseph's brothers fear that he will finally take revenge now that their father is dead. Joseph reassures them that he bears no hard feelings, stating that his being sold into slavery was all part of the Divine plan. The Torah portion concludes with Joseph's death and the Jewish people's promise to carry his bones with them to Israel when they are finally redeemed by God.

(<http://www.tfdixie.com/parshat/vayechi/000.htm>)

## ***This week's sources:***

### **Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac (1040-1105)**

This French sage is regarded as medieval Judaism's greatest teacher. Since his death almost nine hundred years ago, Jews who study either the Torah or the Talmud invariably do so with the help of his commentary. As a young man, Rashi studied Talmud in Mayence (Mainz) and Worms. When he was about 25, he returned to Troyes, France and opened his own Jewish school. However, Rashi refused to draw a salary for his work, earning his living instead from several vineyards that he owned. The last years of his life were marred by the anti-Semitic Crusades that swept over France and Germany starting in 1096. In his Torah commentary, Rashi explains terms both on the basis of peshat (literal meaning) and derash (homiletical or sermonic meaning). He also makes use of words in his vernacular, Old French, for clarification. Rashi's Torah commentary achieved such wide acceptance that it became mandatory for Jews to review the weekly Torah portion with his commentary. In 1475, Rashi's commentary became the first book printed in Hebrew, even before the Torah itself was.

(Excerpted from Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, p 10-12, and Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 180-183.)

### **Babylonian Talmud (c. 500)**

The Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli) is a compilation of discussions on the Mishna, discussions which had been going on some three hundred years already at the time they were written down. Because the Babylonian edition is far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart (Talmud Yerushalmi), compiled around 400, it has become the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law. When people speak of studying "the Talmud," they almost invariably mean the Bavli. The Talmud's discussions are recorded in a consistent format. A law from the Mishna is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The Mishna and the rabbinic discussions (known as Gemara) comprise the Talmud, although in Jewish life the terms Gemara and Talmud are usually used interchangeably. The rabbis quoted in the Gemara are known as Amora'im, explainers or interpreters. In addition to extensive legal discussions (halacha), the rabbis incorporated into the Talmud guidance on ethical matters, medical advice, historical information, and folklore (aggadata).

(Excerpted from Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 150-153.)

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## Jerusalem Talmud (c. 500-550)

The Talmud Yerushalmi, also known as the Jerusalem Talmud, the Palestinian Talmud, and Talmud Eretz Yisrael (Talmud of the Land of Israel), is the Mishna plus a Gemara consisting of the discussions and commentary of Amora'im (explainers or interpreters) from Israel. The Jerusalem Talmud that we have today is incomplete, containing commentary for only four out of the six orders of the Mishna. The Jerusalem Talmud's Gemara is also missing for the tractates Avot and Eduyot, parts of Toharot and other sections as well. Despite extensive scholarship, it still is unclear why this material was not included in the final redaction of the Jerusalem Talmud.

Rabbi Yohanan bar Nappaha was the main redactor of the JT. It was redacted around 500 to 550 CE. Additionally, the name 'Jerusalem Talmud' is a misnomer; it was most likely written in Northern Israel, specifically Tiberias. In general, whenever the JT contradicts the Babylonian Talmud, the law follows the Babylonian. Only on matters where the Babylonian Talmud is silent or unclear does the authority of the Jerusalem Talmud prevail.

The absence of numerous Mishna tractates and chapters, the numerous self contradictions, as well as other internal evidence, suggests that the Jerusalem Talmud was not in fact redacted in the proper sense of the word, but rather was a hasty collection of material. Many scholars believe that the reason for the ultimate acceptance of the Babylonian rather than the Jerusalem Talmud had a lot to do with the power struggles between the two Jewish communities. Thus it can be argued that the poor preservation of the Jerusalem Talmud may be a result of its rejection rather than its cause.

(Adapted from <http://www.shamash.org/lists/scj-faq/HTML/faq/03-16.html>)

## Roald Hoffman, Shira Leibowitz Schmidt

### *Old Wine, New Flasks: Reflections on Science and Jewish Tradition*

W H Freeman & Co.; (September 1997)

*Old Wine, New Flasks* is a unique and provocative look at how science and religion—too often considered at odds with one another—are actually parallel ways of trying to make sense of the same material world, each a voice intertwining with the other to help shape true human understanding. With great humor and wit, the authors—one a Nobel laureate and the other an Israeli-American writer and student of religion—show how daily experience and seemingly innocuous questions can lead to deeper philosophical issues concerning religion, art, and science.

(Adapted from publisher's description from barnesandnoble.com)

### *This week's teacher:*

#### **Shira Fischer**

**[shira@post.harvard.edu](mailto:shira@post.harvard.edu)**

Shira Fischer, a co-founder of the DC Beit Midrash, has lived in Washington, DC, for a year and half. In addition to the Beit Midrash, some of Shira's favorite things are softball, language and grammar, contraception policy, Macintosh computers, and ice cream. She studied biochemistry in college.

### *This week's food sponsors:*

#### **Simma Asher and Kim Krieger**

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