

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
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**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.**

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Although I am writing my thoughts on December 31, the date on the Devrei Torah packet is January 1, 2021, not December 32, 2020. As we close Sefer Bereishis with Vayechi, we turn from a sefer devoted to individuals and a family to Shemot, the story of how a family becomes a nation. This change in focus seems to me to parallel another transition that should be very familiar to everyone, even though I do not have any references that discuss it.

Throughout Bereishis, individuals have struggled with conflicts among family members. In Vayechi, Yosef reconciles with his brothers, and we have peace within the family. In Shemot, we turn to the question of how the thirteen shevatim (tribes) graduate from separate tribes into a nation, B'Nai Yisrael. There are thirteen shevatim, because Yaakov replaces Yosef with two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. (Rabbi Singer observes that, apparently for kabbalistic reasons, the number of shevatim is always listed as twelve by counting Yosef as one whenever including Levi in the count. For example, only twelve tribes gain territories in Israel, because Levi gains only cities, not its own territory.)

As the thirteen shevatim work on becoming a nation, they have plenty in common. They share the same religion, language, land (promise of land), and heritage (history). Despite these aspects in common, the shevatim are really heterogeneous. They come from four different mothers. Two of the mothers come from Avraham's family (Mesopotamia). The other two come from Bilhah and Zilpah, who were daughters of Lavan's concubines and half of unknown parentage. We have learned during the past Century that Jews presumably come from several different heritages and include inter-marriage with individuals with different genetic backgrounds. For example, Yemenite Jews have darker skin than European Jews. Ethiopian Jews are black and presumably have some different genetic material than European or most Sephardic Jews. For a timely example, see <https://unitedwithisrael.org/israel-begins-2021-with-hundreds-of-jews-returning-from-the-lost-tribes/>. Integrating tribes from different genetic backgrounds, especially after some generations of living separately and developing some different traditions, can generate conflict. In Shemot, we shall see some of these conflicts, both within a single shevat (such as Korach's rebellion) and across tribes (such Reuven's conflict with Moshe).

We should be familiar with issues involved with combining thirteen different groups into one nation – that is how the colonies formed what became the United States. The thirteen colonies shared a common language and land mass. They all practiced freedom of religion, mostly Christian, but also provided religious freedom for Jews. Both the shevatim and the thirteen colonies shared a goal of establishing a nation based on moral laws as the foundation of unification. The founders of the United States were very familiar with the "Old Testament" and quoted it frequently. The struggles over the Articles of Confederation and later the Declaration of Independence and Constitution recall struggles of B'Nai Yisrael, but without the help of God intervening openly in human affairs. Even after establishing the United States, conflicts continued to emerge – large and highly populated states versus smaller and less populated states, north versus south, etc. These conflicts persist even now with very different political views among states along the coasts versus views in most of the interior states.

A number of conflicts that have arisen among B'Nai Yisrael in Sefer Bereishis return as Torah laws later in the Torah. In the United States a number of conflicts end up in litigation, often going up to the Supreme Court for decisions. Creating a nation inherently requires compromise and dedication to elevating interests of a group over desires of individuals. As we

turn to Sefer Shemot, it could be useful comparing the tensions among B'Nai Yisrael with the conflicts of early Americans (as well as those of current Americans).

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, always found ways to make the stories in the Torah relevant to current times. While I do not recall his having compared the struggles in Sefer Shemot to those of the American colonists, this parallel is consistent with what he brought to his Torah discussions every Shabbat. As we turn to a new (hopefully much better) year and a new Sefer, may the lessons in the Torah inspire us to become better citizens in the twenty-first Century.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Nossan ben Pessel, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Milda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tzviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.**

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Hannah & Alan

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### **Drasha: Vayechi: Words Like Arrows**

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1998

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

There is an interesting Midrashic interpretation of two words in this week's portion that seem to contrast starkly with their simple meaning. In fact, on the surface the interpretation seems even to contradict the simple meanings!

Yaakov blesses Yoseph's children and then tells Yoseph, "as for me, I have given you Shechem one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the Emorite with my sword and with my bow."

Rashi explains that after the brothers attacked the city of Shechem in response to the assault on their sister Deena, the Emorites, a neighboring country, tried to conquer Yaakov at his time of weakness, similar to Jordan's joining against Israel in the Six-Day War. They, too, were miraculously defeated.

So Yaakov tells Yoseph that he acquired those lands with his sword and bow. But Rashi and the Targum Unkeles, who is known for his almost literal translation of the Torah, deviate and translate the words bow and sword in a different light. Rashi explains they are wisdom and prayer, and the Targum explains the words as two forms of supplication.

The allegory is understandable. Prayer surely surpasses the pen in its might over the sword. And some prayers, like a sword, are strong and sweeping and affect all those they strike. Others, like an arrow, reach one specific point from a far distance. The question is: we know that Yaakov prayed. Of course, he prayed! Yaakov's prayers are documented throughout the Book of Genesis. He prays throughout his encounters with his adversaries, yet this time he chose to talk about his battle prowess. Why then translate his expression of utensils of war as prayer?

**The Ponovezer Rav, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, of blessed memory, was renowned for his efforts in rebuilding Torah from the ashes of the Holocaust. He established the jewel in the crown of the Torah city of B'nai Berak by building the Ponovez Yeshiva and its myriad affiliate institutions. He built a Yeshiva for pre-teens, another for young men, and still a third for married scholars. He built the Batei Avos, a huge housing complex with hundreds of subsidized apartments for needy families. He built schools for orphaned boys and girls in B'nei Berak, Ashdod, and numerous cities across the State of Israel.**

Often, he would visit wealthy patrons in the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Europe, and appealed to them to contribute monies for the Ponovezer Institutions.

The story is told, perhaps apocryphally, that one particular donor once confronted him in jest.

"Why is it, Rabbi Kahaneman," he wondered, "that all the other Rabbis and Roshei Yeshiva who visit me never mention money? All they talk about is Torah and mitzvos. But you come here and cut right to the chase. You don't talk about Torah or mitzvos. Your appeal, however, is, direct and to the point. You come here and say that you need one hundred thousand dollars to finish a girls school in Ashdod. Why don't you also give me a speech about Torah, mitzvos, and Jewish continuity?"

Rabbi Kahaneman did not draw back. He took the man's hand and looked him in the eye. Then he told him a profound statement. "You know me well. Many fund raisers talk, 'Torah, Torah, Torah,' but they mean money, money. I talk money, but I mean Torah, Torah, Torah."

Our Chazal, who understood the essence of Yaakov's being; who saw his deep faith in running from Esav, fighting with the angel, and confronting the tragedy of Shechem; and who appreciated his travail with Lavan, understood quite well what his bow and sword were. They were very comfortable with the greatness of Yaakov's persona, one steeped in a spirituality constantly connected to his Creator.

They understood that when Yaakov said sword he meant the swift and sharp result of prayer, and when he said bow and arrow he meant the piercing cry of supplication.

Every word, even the seemingly mundane words, of our forebears, were the foundation of our faith and are filled with spiritual meaning. Everything pointed to the One Above.

It is when we as temporal beings preach prayer and espouse faith, that we must be suspect. Do we really mean prayer & faith or are we just talking prayer but thinking bows & arrows?

Good Shabbos!

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### **Vayechi: Preparing for Our Final Moments**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2020

How can we leave behind a blessing once we are gone?

"Va'yechi" – and he lived. Yaakov has come to the fullness of his life and knows that he will soon die. He calls Yosef to his bedside and broaches a subject that maybe Yosef would have preferred to avoid – his death, and the burial arrangements that must follow. "I will soon die. Maybe not today or not this week, or not even this year, but it will happen, and most likely sooner rather than later. So I am instructing you to take care of my burial arrangements – promise me that you will take me back to the land of Canaan and bury me there."

Perhaps at first glance, we are seeing Yaakov taking care of his own needs, making sure that he will be buried with his forefathers. But on another level, what we are witnessing is a tremendous blessing that Yaakov is giving to Yosef. He has given him clear instructions, and when death does finally arrive, Yosef will know what he has to do. Many challenges and much requisite finessing lie ahead for Yosef, but compared to being left in the dark and plagued with self-doubt as to whether he will do the right thing or not, this will be a cakewalk. If we know what we have to do, we can muster the strength and resources to get it done.

[Throughout Tanakh, when someone knows that death is close, they prepare for it. One form of this is what we see at the end of the parsha – they charge those who will be left behind how to live the proper life, and they give them their blessings – articulating their hopes and aspirations for them. Both Yaakov's blessings to his children and King David's charge to Shlomo – "Be strong, and show yourself a man. And keep the charge of the Lord thy God... that you may prosper in all that you do." (1 Kings 2:2-3) — are powerful examples of such charges and blessings.

These are the earliest examples of an ethical will. A strong Jewish tradition, the ethical will has in the past been primarily the domain of scholars, but in recent years there has been a push to democratize this, and to encourage people to share their life and life's lesson with the family they are leaving behind. This is one form of preparing for one's death – strengthening the chain of continuity from one generation to the next.]

But there is another type of preparing, more immediate and concrete. It is about the burial. It is about the estate. And, most significantly, it is about expressing the intervention and end-of-life medical care that one desires, before it becomes too late to let those desires be known.

If we wish to remove not just a burden, but true agony, from our spouse, children, and loved ones, then we will write a living will and assign a health care proxy.

Faced with impossible decisions – to administer CPR or not? to remove the ventilator or not? – without parental guidance, children can be racked with guilt in the moment and for many years after. Did we prematurely end our mother's life? Did we needlessly postpone her death, extending her pain and suffering without purpose?

We must, following Yaakov's example, raise this issue with our children. And – if we are the children in this scenario – then we must raise it with our parents. But, of course, we are so often afraid to do so. What will happen if we talk about it? Will it be an ayin hara? Will our parent's response be, "What, are you waiting for me to die?!"

Whether parent or child – we are quite good at avoiding this discussion. Who wants to think about their own death, or the death of their parents?

So we temporize. We tell ourselves that there is plenty of time, and then before we know it, it is too late. The conversation needs to happen when we begin to think about ours or our parent's death, even if it still seems far in the distance. When the parsha opens, Yaakov is already planning for his death, but it is only later that he actually falls sick and gives his deathbed blessing. While he blesses his children when his death is imminent, the real blessing he gave them was months or years before, when he planned for this moment.

For all we know, our parents will be greatly relieved that we have opened this conversation. But even if there is avoidance, denial, or anger, we have to love and care about them enough to say, "Mom, Dad, I hope that you live to 120 years, but we are all going to die, and I want to know what your wishes are. How can I ensure that I am doing all I can to care for you? What does proper treatment look like to you?" If we can have those conversations with them, then we will be able to give them what they most want and need, and they, in turn, will be able to give us the peace of mind, and the freedom from angst and suffering, that comes with knowing that we have acted according to their wishes.

And it is not only children and spouses who might be left to shoulder such an agonizing moral burden in the absence of clear directives. In recent months, there have been many cases of people dying from COVID-19 who did not leave end-of-life instructions. In the absence of a DNR, doctors and nurses are supposed to perform CPR. But this has cast upon them a huge, often unmanageable, responsibility. As Jordan Kistner wrote in a recent article in the Atlantic:

*Suddenly, performing CPR posed agonizing ethical questions. Chest compressions spewed virus into the air, putting the medical team at extra risk of getting the disease[... and] in most COVID 19*

*cases, CPR was useless [...] as low as 3 percent or less—of COVID 19 patients who receive CPR survive.*

What are health-care professionals supposed to do under such circumstances? Administer CPR or not? Absent clear patient directives, there is only guessing, moral grappling, and so often agonizing guilt and moral exhaustion.

We can't allow ourselves to wait until it's too late to have these conversations. We have to have them now. G-d willing, we and our parents will have many more years to live. But – as hard as this might be to confront – we will all eventually die. It is our responsibility to them and theirs to us, to prepare for the future. It is a tremendous act of love and chesed that parents can do for children and that children can do for parents.

Such conversations will move us from the beginning of the parsha to its end. They will move us from talk of death and burial, to a blessing for the future. For what greater blessing is there than to know our parents' wishes and to be able to act on them when the time demands?

Shabbat Shalom!

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### **Vayiechie: That Little Jar of Blessing**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine\* © 2020 Teach 613

The years that Yakov spent in Mitzrayim were treasured ones. Finally, the family was reunited. Yakov could bask in the knowledge that Yosef was indeed alive and could enjoy the care that Yosef provided for him.

As Yakov neared death, Yosef brought his two sons to Yakov, and asked Yakov to bless them. In requesting the blessing, Yosef invoked a special word. Yosef said, "These are my sons which Hashem granted me, 'Bozeh-With This.'" When Yakov heard this critical word, he concluded that these children were worthy of his blessing. What exactly is "Bozeh- With This," referring to?

The commentaries explain that Yosef showed his father the Kesuba, the marriage document. Although Mitzrayim was known for immoral behavior, Yosef was affirming that the relationship that he set up with his wife was one of loyalty and holiness. These children were born of a holy union, Yosef affirmed, and were worthy of Yakov's blessing.

The word "Bozeh- With This" is used elsewhere in Jewish scripture referring to the knife used for Shechita. In the book of Shmuel (1:14:34) Shaul declared to the people, "And you shall do Shechita 'Bozeh- With This,'" referring to a Shechita knife. In fact, the Ramoh (Yoreh Deah 8) writes that the particular word usage of "Bozeh," is significant. The Ramoh explains that the length of the Shechita knife should be at least 14 fingers, because the Gematria of Bozeh is 14.

Interestingly, I believe there is a connection between these two cases that use the word "Bozeh" so significantly. Both cases pertain to something that is quite mundane, perhaps even forbidden. But with this one little, "Bozeh" item, the situation is quite transformed to become permitted, or even holy.

In the case of Shaul, the simple Shechita knife transformed the animal, which would normally be forbidden, into Kosher food. In the case of Yosef, the simple document transformed his relationship with a woman in Mitzrayim, into a sanctified marriage for which he was most proud.

Sometimes, it is with just a little, "Bozeh- With This," that situations can be transformed from the mundane to the uplifting.

I once read a story of a woman who had an unusual behavior in the kitchen. Whenever she would cook or bake, she would dip her hand into a special ceramic jar that she got as a gift from her mother and add the secret ingredient to the food she was preparing. Her children wondered what the ingredient was, and they wondered if the contents of the jar would ever run out and need to be replaced. But the woman deftly changed the topic whenever she was asked, and her behavior remained a mystery.

One day she was hospitalized with an illness, and her husband needed to do some cooking. He followed some simple recipes, and then thoughtfully wondered if he too should add some of the special spice. He went to the jar and was

surprised to find that it was empty. He wondered what was it that his wife so dutifully went to this jar for if it was empty. He looked into the jar again, carefully, and then noticed a little piece of paper in the bottom of the jar. He took it out and read: "Into all of your cooking and baking, remember to add LOVE."

Sometimes the events and behaviors of our lives are very similar to what might be mistaken as quite ordinary; but it is a little something that makes all the difference. The Jew that recites blessings before and after food, the man or woman who takes 10 minutes of lunch break to study Torah during a busy workday, will transform an ordinary workday and define it. A woman who dips her hand with care into the jar gifted to her by her mother, remembering the ingredient of love, is recalling that she is the nurturer of the family—both physically and emotionally-- and lives with the joy of a job well done. Indeed, often it is a small act, that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos,

\* Rav of Southeast Hebrew Congregation, White Oak (Silver Spring), MD and Director of Teach 613.

## **Lions and Laggards: Thoughts on Parashat Vayhi**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel\*

This week's Torah portion includes Jacob's last words to his sons. He described his fourth son, Judah, as a lion, and stated that the scepter of kingship would never depart from Judah (and his descendants). All the brothers (and their tribes) would turn to Judah for leadership. What did Judah do to deserve this singular role?

The answer may be suggested in the story of Joseph's threat to keep Benjamin in Egypt as his servant. The brothers, believing that Joseph was a ruler of Egypt, were in a terrible quandary. They knew that their father Jacob would be devastated by the loss of Benjamin. They knew that they had to find a way to confront Joseph and make him change his mind.

Reuben was first born. He had a strong, impetuous personality. Why didn't he come forward? Apparently his bravura abandoned him at this moment of crisis.

Simeon and Levi were prone to violent action. They wiped out the men of Shechem. Why didn't they challenge Joseph? Apparently, their courage melted when facing a regal opponent.

Issachar, according to rabbinic tradition, was the family's great Torah scholar. He devoted his days to study and spiritual contemplation. Why didn't this man of God stand up to Joseph? Apparently, his holiness and scholarship did not lead to making him fit for courageous action.

Zebulun, according to rabbinic tradition, was an expert businessman. With all his financial acumen, why didn't he try to make a deal of some sort with Joseph? Apparently, his business skills failed him at this desparate moment.

Indeed, all of the brothers failed to muster the courage and quick-wittedness to stand up to Joseph and fight for their brother Benjamin, for their father Jacob, and for the honor of their family. All except Judah.

Judah's life before this crisis had not been one of uniform courage or brilliance. The Torah makes careful note of his various failings. Yet, Judah's personality undergoes a gradual development. He is able to admit error. He is able to stand up against his brothers in their plan to murder Joseph. And at the critical moment, when Benjamin's life is at stake, only Judah comes forward to challenge Joseph and to risk his own life in the process.

Judah argues with eloquence. He is poised and articulate. He tells Joseph that he will stay in Egypt as a servant instead of Benjamin, but that Benjamin must be returned to his father. Judah is so persuasive and so sensitive to the feelings of his father, that Joseph can no longer hold back tears. Joseph cries. He tells his brothers who he really is. The brothers reconcile. All because of Judah's courage. Judah is a lion. He has the presence of mind and the strength of character that all the other brothers lacked. In that one moment, Judah proved himself worthy of kingship.

All of us face crises in life. All of us confront problems. Many, like Judah's brothers, find themselves unable to take responsibility, to make necessary sacrifices, to act with courage. Many, like Judah's brothers, have various talents--and yet they allow themselves to be silenced in the face of challenge. We need to learn from Judah's example. We need to understand that leadership requires clarity of thought, unshakeable commitment to what's right, and a lion's courage to take action. If kingship was assigned to Judah, the Torah calls on all of us to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." We must be lions, not laggards.

\* Jewishideas.org. <https://www.jewishideas.org/lions-and-laggards-thoughts-parashat-vayhi> **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

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## A Sephardic Vision for Arab-Israeli Peace

By Rabbi Daniel Bouskila \*

For centuries, Sephardic Jews of Arab lands lived in relatively peaceful coexistence with their Arab-Muslim neighbors. While never perfect, life for Jews in Arab lands never reached the horrible pogroms continuously experienced by Jews living under Christian rule in Europe. Indeed, the Golden Age of Spain took place under Islamic rule, and only after the Catholics re-conquered Spain from the Muslims were Jews subject to the brutal inquisition and subsequent expulsion from Spain in 1492.

This relatively peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Jews is a far cry from the state of war between Israel and her neighbors in the modern Middle East. Historians will attribute this change to various political factors in the Middle East and the world, but many today will blame religion as a major stumbling block toward recapturing peace between the two peoples.

But can the voice of religion bring about a positive change? Rav Bension Meir Hai Uziel believed it could.

Born in Jerusalem in 1880 under Ottoman rule, Rav Uziel became the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jaffa in 1911, and was later the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine (1939-1948) and then of the State of Israel (1948 until his death in 1953). As such, he was a leader through three administrations in the land of Israel, and throughout his career — no matter who ruled the land — he sought peace and reconciliation with his Arab neighbors.

A deep believer in the power of religion as a medium to foster positive and peaceful relations, Rav Uziel issued a powerful message to the Arabs following the United Nation Partition Plan in November 1947:

*"To the heads of the Islamic Religion in the Land of Israel and throughout the Arab lands near and far, Shalom U'vrakha. Brothers, at this hour, as the Jewish people have returned to its land and state ... we approach you in peace and brotherhood, in the name of God's Torah and the Holy Scriptures, and we say to you: please remember the peaceful and friendly relations that existed between us when we lived together in Arab lands and under Islamic Rulers during the Golden Age, when together we developed brilliant intellectual insights of wisdom and science for all of humanity's benefit. We were brothers, and we shall once again be brothers, working together in cordial and neighborly relations in this Holy Land."*

Rav Uziel sought to re-create the atmosphere once lived by his Sephardic ancestors, and he felt that the true message of peace was deeply embedded in religious texts. In April 1948, on the last Passover before Israel declared her independence, Rav Uziel issued a stirring message of peace rooted in the Passover narrative:

*"It is not by sword nor by war do we return to our ancestral homeland, as we do not desire war, bloodshed or loss of life. Our sages expressed a deep Jewish value by refraining from reciting the full Hallel (Psalms of Praise) on the seventh day of Passover, for on that day, the Egyptians drowned in the sea, and God declared: 'My beings are drowning in the sea and you sing Hallel?'"*

Rav Uziel then deepens his peaceful message:

*"Indeed, Passover teaches us to love all those around us, including our declared enemies, as it is written: 'You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land' (Deuteronomy 23:8). This means that we do not bear any vengeful grudge toward Egypt or the Egyptians for the suffering and enslavement we endured in their land, rather we only remember that we were strangers in Egypt. We forget all negativity and recall only whatever positive treatment they gave us."*

Mindful that his Arab audience included present-day Egyptian Arabs, Rav Uziel used the Egypt of the Passover story as a subtle hint for contemporary reconciliation between Jews and Arabs. Despite any negative relations between Jews and Arabs, "we do not bear any vengeful grudge toward Egypt and the Egyptians."

In a poetic metaphor on Jews having been strangers and slaves in Egypt, Rav Uziel wrote:

*"We once again reach out to our Arab neighbors in peace, for our sole desire is to live together with you in this Holy Land that is sacred to all nations. Let us engage together in fruitful labor for the sake of peace for all inhabitants of this land. Let us work together, using all of our diversity in religion, beliefs, customs and languages, so that we can build and assure absolute freedom and equality for all inhabitants in this land. Let us together recognize that only God is the ultimate ruler over the earth, for we are all 'strangers in God's world.'"*

As a "lover of peace and pursuer of peace," and as a Chief Rabbi who creatively used his position as a leader and his Sephardic ancestry as a medium to seek peace, Rav Uziel never stopped talking or dreaming about peace between Jews and Arabs.

It's unfortunate that Rav Uziel was not appointed as a special political envoy to help establish political relations with Arab leaders in 1948. Had that been the case, relations between Israel and her Arab neighbors might have taken a very different course.

\* Director of the Sephardic Educational Center (SEC) in the Old City of Jerusalem. Jewishideas.org:  
<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/sephardic-vision-arab-israeli-peace>

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## **Parshas Vayechi – Balancing Act**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\*

Towards the end of this week's Parsha, as we near the end of the book of Bereishis, and its manifold lessons and insights, we find an interesting episode. The Torah relates how Yosef's brothers became concerned that Yosef would take revenge now for what they had done to him – selling him into slavery so many years before. They therefore devised a plan to prevent further strife. They sent a message to Yosef saying that their father Yaakov had asked before he passed that Yosef should please forgive his brothers. They then presented themselves to ask forgiveness and plead for mercy. Yosef was greatly pained that there should be any such concern and makes a great effort to assure them that they have nothing to fear. (Bereishis 50:15-21)

What is perhaps most noteworthy is that the Torah seems to indicate that Yosef's brothers were the ones who sent the message to Yosef. Yaakov had never had any such concerns about Yosef bearing a grudge. It was only Yosef's brothers themselves who had that concern, and because of that they fabricated the message. They lied to Yosef. One of the closing lessons of Sefer Bereishis, referred to as the Book of the Just, is a story of falsehood. One can't help but wonder what message we are to take away from this.

The Ralba"g indeed learns a powerful life lesson from this incident. The Ralba"g explains that Yosef's brothers saw before them two possibilities. One possibility was that strife and discord would come between them again. The other alternative was to engage in falsehood, in an attempt to prevent that discord. The Torah is telling us here that the

damage of strife is significantly greater, and attaining peace is well worth the sacrifice of engaging in the evil of falsehood. The words of the Ralba"g are quite powerful:

*The thirteenth lesson is in character traits. And it is that it is proper for a person to make effort to arrive at peace as much as is possible. For its benefit is exceedingly wondrous in the gathering of the country and in the gathering of the household. And for this it is not proper for a person to be upset if he has to use an action which is somewhat disgraceful as a tool for peace, as is true in the matter of deceit. For it is not proper to distance from a deceit which will bring about such an honorable result. And for this we find that Yosef's brothers used the false story that they told him from their father as a tool to reach peace. And for this reason, our Rabbis ob"m said that it is permissible to lie for peace, and in another place they said it is a mitzva to lie for peace.*

If we study the words of the Ralba"g carefully, perhaps there are two messages in this lesson. First, is the obvious message of the value and primacy of peace. Perhaps, the Torah here is also teaching us a lesson in balancing our options. Falsehood is antithetical to G-dliness. The Gemara in Shabbos 55b tells us that G-d's signature is truth. This is not a small matter. Yet, the Ralba"g says "*For it is not proper to distance from a deceit which will bring about such an honorable result.*" Even something so flawed can be worth the price.

This is perhaps the most fundamental lesson of life. G-d did not create a perfect world, where the best option is always available. We will often find ourselves in situations where we have to choose between two second rate options, or worse between the lesser of two evils. Our responsibility in living as Torah Jews is not to achieve perfection in every situation we are faced with. Rather, our responsibility is to perfect ourselves and our character and intellect through the way we handle and face every situation we are faced with. Our responsibility is to find the proper balance within the reality we face. Sometimes, this may mean accepting options we would never accept under any other circumstance. Sometimes this may mean sacrificing in ways we would never otherwise consider. Whatever the situation, living as a Torah Jew means to accept the reality as G-d has given it to us, and to choose between the options before us, whatever they may be. It is this message of balance which is taught at the end of Bereishis, the Book of the Just.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

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### **Dvar Torah for Vayechi: Happy New Year**

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

I remember 365 days ago, I sent an email out with the corny eye joke that probably everyone made. Every optometrist probably thought, "2020 is my year."

Looking back though, it seems 2020 will be remembered for reasons other than bad jokes. With every issue that has come up, people have blamed 2020. With the recent earthquake in Croatia, we all have seen reactions like, "It's 2020. What did you expect?" Humanity has this deeply held belief that this specific rotation that the earth made around the sun deserves blame for the problems that have recently faced our globe.

Mankind's relationship with the stars is nothing new. In the time of the Patriarchs, many believed that they controlled our fate. The modern version of this would be scientific determinism. According to this system, we are a part of nature and we cannot escape the cause and effect of all the various cellular and cosmic happenings over which we have placed the arbitrary moniker called "being alive."

But as we finish the book of Genesis this Shabbat, we can't help but see a counter vision. Hashem takes Avraham above the stars and says "so will be your children." They serve you. You are above them, not a part of them. God created the world in 7 days but told Avraham the mitzvah of circumcision would be on the 8th day; the number that throughout Jewish tradition signifies rising above the "natural."

In shul, we've had many discussions in our journey through Genesis this year about the many instances where we find interplays between the numbers 7 and 8. To be a Jew means to know that we have a Godlike capacity that God placed within us which we can use to fight against the fates. So maybe instead of blaming 2020, we look to the Being outside the natural system and use our protests and prayers with Him to help steer us into a better 2021.

But that's definitely not the only thing we should do. The Talmud states that the constellations (i.e. natural rules) do not apply to the nation of Israel, but that doesn't mean we aren't linked to it. To do so would deny the truth of our bodily nature. Man does not live by bread alone, but we still need bread.

The Talmud and all of Jewish tradition insist that we do not rely on miracles and we should seek out remedies within natural law. We go out of the system when we tap into our Godly selves, but God wants us to take that new perspective and bring it into the beautiful system of natural law that He made. The miracle of the flame on Channukah fills us with wonder and admiration at the natural law that causes carbons to combust in a way that gives us light every day. To put it another way, we would much rather be in a situation where even the laws of nature say we're healthy and okay rather than having to constantly only be in an 8th day mindset. I can thank God for vaccines and our work through nature while still happy to know our spiritual essence can rise above it.

As Jews, even in our wishes we wish others that they should thrive within nature. "Mazal" means constellation, so when we say "Mazal Tov" we wish that this person have everything he or she wants within this world. There are times we must look beyond nature to see the blessings, but we wish that ideally, you should have blessings that are easily recognizable as such.

So with that in mind, let me wish you a Mazal Tov for 2021!

Shabbat Shalom!

\* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL.

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### **Rav Kook Torah Vayechi: Jacob Did Not Die**

Third-century scholar Rabbi Yochanan made an astounding claim regarding Jacob:

*"Rabbi Yochanan stated, 'Our father Jacob did not die.'*

*Rabbi Nachman asked, 'Was it in vain that they eulogized Jacob and embalmed his body and buried him?'*

*Rabbi Yochanan responded, 'I derive this from a verse: 'Fear not, Jacob My servant... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity' (Jeremiah 30:10). The verse likens Jacob to his offspring: just as his offspring lives, so too, Jacob lives.'"* (Ta'anit 5b)

What did Rabbi Yochanan mean that Jacob did not die? If he intended to say that Jacob's soul is still alive, that requires no verse — the souls of all righteous people are eternal. And if he meant that Jacob's body did not die, several verses explicitly state that he died (for example, "Joseph's brothers realized that their father had died" (Gen. 50:15)).

The medieval Talmudic commentary Tosafot explains that, when describing Jacob's death, the Torah only says that he "expired," not that he "died" (Gen. 49:33). We need to examine the difference between these two verbs.

Also, why did Rabbi Yochanan make this claim of eternity only for Jacob, and not for Abraham and Isaac?

#### **Two Aspects of Death**

When a person dies, two things occur. First, the bodily functions (breathing, pumping of the heart, and so on) cease. This is called geviya, expiring. The natural cessation of bodily functions is a sign of a virtuous, well-lived life, since an unhealthy and profligate lifestyle brings about an early demise of the body.

The second aspect of death concerns the soul. After the sin of Adam, death was decreed in order to allow the soul to purify itself from its contact with the body's physical drives and desires. Death purges the soul of those sensual influences that distance one from true closeness to God. The aspect of death that cleanses the soul is called mitah.

Thus, Solomon wrote that "Love is strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6). How is love like death? Just as death purifies the soul from the body's physical wants, so too, a truly intense love for God will overwhelm any other form of desire.

### **The Impact of Intermediate Actions**

All actions that we perform during our lifetime make a deep impression on our souls. The soul is influenced not only by our ultimate goals but also by the intermediate actions we take to achieve those goals. Sometimes, these actions are themselves worthy means for attaining our goals, and their impact on the soul is a positive one.

At other times, a specific goal is achieved via means that contradict the overall objective. This is like scaffolding that is erected when building. The scaffolding is needed to aid in the construction, but is removed once the building is complete. So too, these temporary means will be canceled after the goal is attained, and their impure influence on the soul must be purged.

### **Jacob's Family was Complete**

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are called the Avot (forefathers), since the main objective of their lives was to father a holy nation.

Abraham and Isaac's efforts towards this goal included using means that needed to be relinquished once the objective is attained — i.e., they bore and raised Ishmael and Esau. Even though these offspring contested the true goal of the Avot, they were needed in order to accomplish their overall aim. Therefore, the Torah uses the word mitah to describe Abraham and Isaac's death. It was necessary to purge the influence of fathering and raising these non-Jewish nations on their souls, since this occupation conflicted with their soul's inner mission.

But while the souls of Abraham and Isaac required the cleansing effect of mitah, Jacob's "bed was complete." All of his children were included within the people of Israel. Jacob did not need to occupy himself with any transitory means; all of his efforts were eternal, in line with God's design for His world. Therefore the verse says, "For I, God, have not changed; and you, the children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). The eternal nature of the Jewish people is particularly bound to Jacob, the forefather who "did not die."

In certain respects, Jacob did die, but this was only in personal matters, due to the baseness of the physical world and its negative influence upon the human soul. That was not the true essence of Jacob's soul. When the Torah describes Jacob's passing, it does so in terms of his life's goal, as the father of the Jewish people. The Torah does not use the word "death," since there was no need to purge his soul of its ties to its worldly occupations.

This explains why we do not find in the Torah that Jacob's sons eulogized their father. Only the Egyptians did so — "A profound mourning for Egypt" (Gen. 50:11). Jacob had assisted the Egyptians by bringing the years of famine to an early end. From the standpoint of the Egyptians, Jacob had died, and the connection of his soul to these matters was severed. Therefore, the Egyptians had reason to mourn.

But Jacob's sons, who knew that Jacob was still alive with them, had no need to eulogize their father.

(Gold from the Land of Israel pp. 95-98. Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 242-251.)

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### **Jewish Time (Vayechi 5777)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

Different cultures tell different stories. The great novelists of the nineteenth century wrote fiction that is essentially ethical. Jane Austen and George Eliot explored the connection between character and happiness. There is a palpable continuity

between their work and the book of Ruth. Dickens, more in the tradition of the prophets, wrote about society and its institutions, and the way in which they can fail to honour human dignity and justice.

By contrast, the fascination with stories like Star Wars or Lord of the Rings is conspicuously dualistic. The cosmos is a battlefield between the forces of good and evil. This is far closer to the apocalyptic literature of the Qumran sect and the Dead Sea scrolls than anything in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. In these ancient and modern conflict narratives the struggle is "out there" rather than "in here": in the cosmos rather than within the human soul. This is closer to myth than monotheism.

There is, however, a form of story that is very rare indeed, of which Tanakh is the supreme example. It is the story without an ending which looks forward to an open future rather than reaching closure. It defies narrative convention. Normally we expect a story to create a tension that is resolved on the final page. That is what gives art a sense of completion. We do not expect a sculpture to be incomplete, a poem to break off halfway, a novel to end in the middle. Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is the exception that proves the rule.

Yet that is what the Bible repeatedly does. Consider the Chumash, the five Mosaic books. The Jewish story begins with a repeated promise to Abraham that he will inherit the land of Canaan. Yet by the time we reach the end of Deuteronomy, the Israelites have still not crossed the Jordan. The Chumash ends with the poignant scene of Moses on Mount Nebo (in present-day Jordan) seeing the land – to which he has journeyed for forty years but is destined not to enter – from afar.

Nevi'im, the second part of Tanakh, ends with Malachi foreseeing the distant future, understood by tradition to mean the Messianic Age:

*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.*

Nevi'im, which includes the great historical as well as prophetic books, thus concludes neither in the present or the past, but by looking forward to a time not yet reached. Ketuvim, the third and final section, ends with King Cyrus of Persia granting permission to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to their land and rebuild the Temple.

None of these is an ending in the conventional sense. Each leaves us with a sense of a promise not yet fulfilled, a task not yet completed, a future seen from afar but not yet reached. And the paradigm case – the model on which all others are based – is the ending of Bereishit in this week's sedra.

Remember that the story of the people of the covenant begins with God's call to Abraham to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to a land which I will show you". Yet no sooner does he arrive than he is forced by famine to go to Egypt. That is the fate repeated by Jacob and his children. Genesis ends not with life in Israel but with a death in Egypt:

*Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place". So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt. (Gen. 50:26)*

Again, a hope not yet realised, a journey not yet ended, a destination just beyond the horizon.

Is there some connection between this narrative form and the theme with which the Joseph story ends, namely forgiveness?

It is to Hannah Arendt in her *The Human Condition* that we owe a profound insight into the connection between forgiveness and time. Human action, she argues, is potentially tragic. We can never foresee the consequences of our acts, but once done, they cannot be undone. We know that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous the consequences of his deed, he can never undo it . . . All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom.

What transforms the human situation from tragedy to hope, she argues, is the possibility of forgiveness:

*Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover...*

Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

Atonement and forgiveness are the supreme expressions of human freedom – the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation. Only those who can forgive can be free. Only a civilisation based on forgiveness can construct a future that is not an endless repetition of the past. That, surely, is why Judaism is the only civilisation whose golden age is in the future.

It was this revolutionary concept of time – based on human freedom – that Judaism contributed to the world. Many ancient cultures believed in cyclical time, in which all things return to their beginning. The Greeks developed a sense of tragic time, in which the ship of dreams is destined to founder on the hard rocks of reality. Europe of the Enlightenment introduced the idea of linear time, with its close cousin, progress. Judaism believes in covenantal time, well described by Harold Fisch: “The covenant is a condition of our existence in time . . . We cooperate with its purposes never quite knowing where it will take us, for ‘the readiness is all’.” In a lovely phrase, he speaks of the Jewish imagination as shaped by “the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled”.

Tragedy gives rise to pessimism. Cyclical time leads to acceptance. Linear time begets optimism. Covenantal time gives birth to hope. These are not just different emotions. They are radically different ways of relating to life and the universe. They are expressed in the different kinds of story people tell. Jewish time always faces an open future. The last chapter is not yet written. The Messiah has not yet come. Until then, the story continues – and we, together with God, are the co-authors of the next chapter.

\* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. See <https://rabbisacks.org/jewish-time-vayechi-5777/>

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## **The Concealed 'End of Times': An Essay on Vayechi**

By Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) \*

### **The veiled ketz**

Jacob calls his sons and says to them, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what will befall you in the end of days.”<sup>1</sup> But in practice, Jacob’s prophecy merely relates to distant times and does not reach the actual end of days.

Rashi’s comment on the subject is well known: “‘Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you’ – he wished to reveal the ketz, but the Shechinah departed from him, and he began to speak of other things.” To be sure, after the departure of the Shechinah, Jacob does not suddenly become an ordinary person speaking of ordinary things. After all, his words here are still words of prophecy. Although those “other things” do not relate to the actual end of days, still, they refer to the distant future, hundreds and thousands of years ahead. Thus, the Shechinah does not depart completely; it is still with him to a certain extent.

Jacob attempts to cut through the veil that conceals the events of the future, but he is stopped at a certain stage. Why does this happen to him?

According to the Yalkut Shimoni<sup>2</sup> and other midrashim, a great dread falls upon Jacob, as he does not understand why this has happened. Concerned, he asks his sons, “Are you all believers?” They answer him, “Hear, O Israel: God our Lord, God is one.” When the time of the Messiah’s coming was concealed from Jacob, he was overcome with anxiety that perhaps not all the tribes were worthy of blessing. After hearing their answer, he is encouraged, and the Shechinah rests upon him once again.

What emerges from the midrash is that this concealment, the curtain that stands before Jacob, is neither a result of sin nor a result of a defect in his sons or in himself. Jacob faces something else, which does not let him see through to the end of days. This is a phenomenon that we all experience: At one point or another, every person wants to know what will happen in the distant future, but this is always denied him.

### **Limitations of the audience**

Why can't Jacob reveal the ketz? When a person describes things or situations that lie within the range of his perception, he has words, concepts, and modes of expression for this. But when Jacob must speak of a phenomenon that is beyond his audience's range of perception, it turns out that he lacks the vocabulary to express himself. How can we explain to someone who has been blind from birth what other people see in the world? How can we explain to someone who is colorblind the difference between green and purple? These are things of which the listener has an utter lack of understanding. In such a case, there is a block, a real barrier in communication.

In other words, there are some fundamental gulfs that are impossible to bridge. Nothing can be said to get one's ideas across; any attempts to do so would be meaningless. The problem of how to talk about the incomprehensible, how to describe what cannot be described, is a problem that has no solution. At the point of transmitting the essence, there is a curtain that blocks the audience's view. It is not a matter of finding the right words, because the right words simply do not exist.

Consider, for example, the Maaseh Merkavah, Ezekiel's vision of the workings of the divine chariot. We take for granted that the angels, the ofanim, and the holy chayot are spiritual entities, or, as Maimonides put it, "separate intellects."<sup>3</sup> But when we read Ezekiel's account, he seems to be describing physical forms, as if these are creatures that one might see at some kind of bizarre zoo. What is happening here? Ezekiel sees the holy chayot, and for some reason he is compelled to describe them in words. Though he sees and feels the reality of his vision, he lacks the right words to describe it. Instead, he settles for the inaccurate language of physical descriptions.

This point is part of the reason that the Shechinah departs when people begin to speak of the end of days. Jacob sees all the way to the true ketz; not just "until he arrives in Shiloh,"<sup>4</sup> but even afterward, after the end of the exile. When he tries to tell his sons about this, he discovers that this is a vision that cannot be communicated – not because he is not permitted to do so, but because any attempt to speak about it is irrelevant.

There is a recurring prophecy in Tanach – "every man will sit under his grapevine or under his fig tree"<sup>5</sup> – that is meant to describe a condition of wealth and tranquility. Yet there are many people today who, if promised a future in which all they do is sit under a tree, would be completely uninterested – they would rather attend a nightclub instead. The prophecy tries to describe a future of wealth and harmony, but this can only be communicated using the range of concepts that people have. We can make an effort to describe the future using the most beautiful words that exist, but my message will only be successful if it is couched in terms of what is presently meaningful to our audience. When we have to transcend these bounds, anything we say will be incomplete. We are unable to describe things that are not within the range of the human imagination; even if we are able to comprehend these things, the concepts turn out to be meaningless without the proper tools of expression.

### **No eye has seen**

The ability to relate to the end of days is limited not only by short-comings of human nature, but also by something more basic: -limitations in the nature of reality. Reality allows us to relate only to things that belong to the plane of being, experience, and action in which we exist. Just as we cannot fit a large object into a small receptacle, we cannot fit anything into a vessel – a concept, a description, or a figment of our imagination – that cannot receive or contain it.

This idea is expressed in the following talmudic passage: "All the prophets prophesied only regarding the days of the Messiah, but regarding the World to Come, 'No eye has seen, O God, but You.'"<sup>7</sup> No prophet's eye has seen what God will do for those who wait for Him; it can be seen by God's eye alone. The Talmud then asks, "What is it that 'no eye has seen'?" Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi said, 'This refers to the wine preserved in its grapes since the six days of Creation.'"

Similarly, the Talmud states<sup>8</sup> that in the World to Come, the righteous will partake of the Leviathan's flesh. Both of these rewards for the righteous – the wine preserved in its grapes since the six days of Creation and the Leviathan preserved in salt by God even before the creation of man – are things that have never existed in the realm of human experience.

These descriptions of the World to Come are beyond our limits as human beings. It is a promise of things that we have never seen and cannot hope to comprehend.

The end of days is a period that “no eye has seen” – it is beyond our perceptual range, beyond the human conceptual ability that exists in the reality of the present day.

When we speak of the ultimate ketz, we refer to what cannot be seen or understood. When we speak of what will happen in the future, we can reach a certain point until we are stopped by a thick curtain. Even those who can see through this curtain cannot bring back a report of what they have seen. They cannot relate what they have beheld, because there can be no point of comparison to it, nothing in their lexicon to describe it.

In our generation, because of the many technological advances we continuously witness, we have a better sense of the gulf between the reality of this world and the reality of the World to Come. Products are invented, the likes of which we could not have even dreamed beforehand, whose existence we could not have imagined.

This also explains a puzzling talmudic statement: “Three come unawares: the Messiah, a found article, and a scorpion.”<sup>9</sup> At first glance, this statement raises a question: What does it mean that the Messiah comes unawares? After all, there are always Jews who pray for, talk about, and concern themselves with his coming. The entire Jewish people mentions the Messiah, in one form or another, in its prayers. So how can it be that he will come unawares?

The answer is that the Messiah whom everyone talks about, and whose coming everyone prays for, is not the Messiah who will actually arrive. We have no way of knowing or imagining what will happen when the Messiah comes, because his coming is something that “no eye has seen.” It is inevitable, then, that the Messiah will come unawares, because no one really knows what to expect.

An example of this problem can be seen in the Or HaChayim’s commentary on Parshat Acharei Mot. As a rule, the book is written as a standard commentary, each section according to its particular case. In Parshat Acharei Mot, however, something interesting happens: The author attempts to describe the experience of man’s contact with what is beyond him. Some of the language in the commentary is confusing: It is evident that the author felt and understood certain things that he was unable to communicate with his readers. It is the same block that Jacob encountered when he sought to reveal the ketz, the same block that inherently exists in these matters, and there will be no full solution for it until the end of days.

## **Developing sensitivity**

The inability to define certain things has ramifications beyond esoteric discussions of the divine chariot and the end of days. The expression, “the heart cannot reveal to the mouth,”<sup>10</sup> appears in connection with all sorts of subjects, for not everything that a person thinks can be expressed easily in words. There also exists a much more complex and difficult situation, when “the heart cannot reveal to the heart,” that is, that the heart cannot reveal even to itself. These are difficulties that every person experiences at one point or another in his lifetime.

The Talmud<sup>11</sup> presents a list of things that are concealed from us: the day of a person’s death; the day of consolation; the full depth of justice; that which is in another person’s heart – and the list goes on. The connection between these things is that they are all impossible to determine.

Why is it impossible to know what is in another person’s heart? Because everything that a person draws from deep inside him he must communicate through an intermediary mechanism, the translation from thoughts and feelings into words. The listener then transfers the matter from those words into his own heart. My contact with another person’s heart is, at best, twice removed from the source; there is no possibility of direct contact, of one spirit truly connecting with another.

We constantly try to solve the difficulty of communicating what is in our heart to the best of our ability, since that is the only way that a person can have an impact on the world around him. We hope that the other person not only hears our words, but is able to translate them back in his own heart while maintaining some of the purity of the original emotion. To be sure, the content of a person’s heart is difficult to formulate in words, but if there is true resonance between two people, between two beings who are otherwise entirely separate, then while perhaps it cannot be said that each person knows what is in the other’s heart, at least they are on the same wavelength.

There are some skills that are not included in any course of study, yet everyone must learn them. Sometimes a person must dedicate much of his life to these skills. One of these skills is the ability to develop a keen sense for things that cannot be said. Every Jew has his own inner dilemmas, but everyone shares the universal problem of faith – whether it is faith in God, or in other things. In matters of faith, anything that can be studied or articulated in words is irrelevant and unhelpful. If only we had a kind of window that would give us a direct view of God's glory! But there is no such window. What remains is the responsibility to learn to sense, to intuit, that something exists that is beyond our comprehension, beyond the range of man's ordinary perception, and to learn to relate to it. We must reach a point where we have, in addition to the vague awareness that such a thing exists, the maturity to understand that there is more to explore on the other side of the curtain, a continuation of our path. There may be no way to reach it, see it, or explain it, but it is possible to sense what lies on the other side of existence.

Our task, in any form of faith, is to develop an awareness that beyond the place that I know lies a place that I do not know. If we can accomplish this task, we can truly claim to have experienced even that which "no eye has seen."

**FOOTNOTES:**

1. Gen. 49:1.
2. 157
3. Guide for the Perplexed, I:49.
4. Gen. 49:10.
5. Mic. 4:4.
6. Is. 64:3.
7. Berachot 34b.
8. Bava Batra 74b.
9. Sanhedrin 97a.
10. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:10.
11. Pesachim 54b.

\* Rabbi Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) (1937-2020), one of the leading rabbis of this century and author of many books, was best known for his monumental translation of and commentary on the Talmud.

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## Get Past the Resentment

By Chana Weisberg \*

In Vayechi, Joseph and his brothers returned from burying their father, Jacob. Joseph stopped at the pit that his brothers had thrown him into. His brothers became frightened, saying: "What if Joseph will hate us, and will pay us back the evil which we did to him?"

The brothers appealed to Joseph, cautioning him that his father had warned him not to take revenge.

Jacob, in fact, had never done so; he would not suspect Joseph of revenge. Nor did Joseph ever intend for vengeance. He made a detour at the pit—not to reignite negative memories, but to have the opportunity to recite the blessing we are commanded to say at a place where a miracle was performed for us.

Joseph wept that his brothers had suspected him of such behavior. He reassured them: "Don't be afraid. Am I instead of G d? You intended evil, but G d meant it for good . . ."

How was Joseph able to get past his suffering without harboring any grudge against his brothers?

On the day his brothers sold him as a slave, Joseph had been a vulnerable teenager. His comfortable life as his father's beloved son was changed forever. His brothers had acted callously and cruelly. But as far as Joseph was concerned, that was something between them and G d. What happened to him—being sold as a slave, descending to Egypt, becoming Pharaoh's viceroy and, ultimately, saving his family from famine—was all G d's grand plan.

Joseph reached an awareness that G d is in control of everything; therefore, his brothers had done nothing to him outside of G d's design.

Too many of us hold on to what feels like justifiable resentment. In truth, the resentment only perpetuates and prolongs our own hurt.

Joseph teaches us how to get past this: Surrender to the knowledge that all that happens to you is part of G d's benevolent plan. The individual who wounded you may have intended evil, but that is between that individual and G d. As far as you're concerned, your life is following the exact script that G d wants for you.

This realization helps us begin to rid ourselves of the heavy burden of anger, resentment, and hate. It also allows us to open ourselves up to receive the good that G d has in store for us.

— from Shabbat/deLights \*

\* **Shabbat DeLights** is a collection of essays on the Torah portion by acclaimed author, editor and teacher, Chana Weisberg.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
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#### Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

#### Moving Forwards

The book of Bereishit ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Jacob's sons. Joseph's brothers were afraid that he had not really forgiven them for selling him into slavery. They suspected that he was merely delaying his revenge until their father died. After Jacob's death, they express their concern to him. But Joseph insists:

"Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21)

This is the second time Joseph has said something like this to them. Earlier he spoke similarly when he first disclosed that he – the man they thought was an Egyptian viceroy called Tzophnat Pa'anach – was in fact their brother Joseph:

"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45:3-8)

This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have suffered. But it also establishes another important principle: the idea of Divine Providence. History is not, as Joseph Heller called it, "a trash bag of random coincidences blown open in the wind." [1] It has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is at work behind the scenes. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends," says Hamlet, "rough-hew them how we will." [2]

Joseph's greatness was that he sensed this. He saw the bigger picture. Nothing in his life, he now knew, had happened by accident. The plot to kill him, his sale as a slave, the false accusations of Potiphar's wife, his time in prison, and his disappointed hope that the chief butler would remember him and secure his release – all these events that might have cast him into ever-deeper depths of despair turned out in retrospect to be necessary steps in the journey that eventuated in his becoming

second-in-command in Egypt and the one person capable of saving the whole country – as well as his own family – from starvation in the years of famine.

Joseph had, in double measure, one of the necessary gifts of a leader: the ability to keep going despite opposition, envy, false accusation and repeated setbacks. Every leader who stands for anything will face opposition. This may be a genuine conflict of interests. A leader elected to make society more equitable will almost certainly win the support of the poor and the antagonism of the rich. One elected to reduce the tax burden will do the opposite. It cannot be avoided. Politics without conflict is a contradiction in terms.

Any leader elected to anything, any leader more loved or gifted than others, will face envy. Rivals will question, "Why wasn't it me?" That is what Korach thought about Moses and Aaron. It is what the brothers thought about Joseph when they saw that their father favoured him. It is what Antonio Salieri thought about the more gifted Mozart, according to Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*.

As for false accusations, they have occurred often enough in history. Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and burned at the stake. A quarter century later she was posthumously declared innocent by an official court of inquiry. More than twenty people were put to death as a result of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692-3. Years later, as their innocence began to be perceived, a priest present at the trials, John Hale, admitted, "Such was the darkness of that day... that we walked in the clouds, and could not see our way." [3] The most famous false accusation of modern times was the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent who was accused of being a German spy. The Dreyfus affair rocked France during the years 1894 and 1906, until Dreyfus was finally acquitted.

Setbacks are almost always a part of the life-story of the most successful. J. K. Rowling's initial Harry Potter novel was rejected by the first twelve publishers who received it. Another writer of a book about children suffered twenty-one rejections. The book was called *Lord of the Flies*, and its author, William Golding, was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

In his famous commencement address at Stanford University, the late Steve Jobs told the story of the three blows of fate that shaped his life: dropping out of university; being fired from Apple, the company he founded; and being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Rather

than being defeated by them, he turned them all to creative use.

For twenty-two years I lived close to Abbey Road in North London, where a famous pop group recorded all their hits. At their first audition, they performed for a record company who told them that guitar bands were "on their way out." The verdict on their performance (in January 1962) was: "The Beatles have no future in show business."

All this explains Winston Churchill's great remark that "success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

It may be that what sustains people through repeated setbacks is belief in themselves, or sheer tenacity, or lack of alternatives. What sustained Joseph, though, was his insight into Divine Providence. A plan was unfolding whose end he could only dimly discern, but at some stage he seems to have realised that he was just one of many characters in a far larger drama, and that all the bad things that had happened to him were necessary if the intended outcome was to occur. As he said to his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God."

This willingness to let events work themselves out in accordance with providence, this understanding that we are, at best, no more than co-authors of our lives, allowed Joseph to survive without resentment about the past or despair in the face of the future. Trust in God gave him immense strength, which is what we will all need if we are to dare greatly. Whatever malice other people harbour against leaders – and the more successful they are, the more malice there is – if they can say, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good," they will survive, their strength intact, their energy undiminished.

[1] Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 74.

[2] Hamlet, Act 5, scene 2.

[3] Quoted in Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present*, vol. I (Pearson, 2001), 94.

#### Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"Gather together and I shall tell you what is to happen at the end of the days" (Genesis 49:1) The portion of Vayechi, and the entire Book of Genesis, concludes with Jacob's deathbed scene in which he "reveals to his sons what will befall them at the end of the days," expressing the various strengths and

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weaknesses of each of his heirs and foretelling what each tribe will contribute to the great collage of future Jewish history. He is both Jacob the father of a family as well as Israel the father of a nation – and he leaves the world in the fullness of his success as a parent who has finally united his family and as a patriarch who has established the guidelines for an emerging nation with a mission to unite the world.

Jacob is indeed called by our Sages “the chosen one of the Patriarchs.” What made him deserve this very special accolade? What is the unique contribution which he made to the legacies of Abraham and Isaac? Our Sages compare Abraham to a mountain, Isaac to a field and Jacob to a house (or household) (Pesahim 88a)

Apparently, the secret to a successful family – as well to a successful nation, which is after all, a family “writ large” – is to be found within the persona of Jacob, perhaps even within the very blessings he bequeaths to his sons. What is it? The major challenge to each of the Patriarchs was that of succession. Each needed to identify which of the children in the next generation would be the bearer of the Abrahamic legacy. The major struggle within Jacob’s life was the deception he perpetrated upon his father, albeit at the behest of his mother, to wrest away the blessings Isaac had meant to bestow upon his older brother, Esau.

This act of deception, no matter how justified it may have been in the light of the characteristics of each of the brothers, was to haunt Jacob for the rest of his life: He is deceived by Laban, who argues that in his place the younger sister does not receive a prize before the elder; he is deceived by his sons who tell him that a wild beast tore apart his beloved Joseph; and he is even deceived by Joseph who, while dressed up as the Grand Vizier, requests that Jacob send Rachel’s only remaining son, Benjamin, to Egypt.

His punishment goes even further: His beloved Rachel dies before her time because she deceives her father Laban by stealing his household gods (in the Mari and Nuzu documents from that time, the one who got the household gods also received the parental inheritance).

And Jacob seems to be so resentful of his loving mother’s role in suggesting and facilitating his deception that the Bible mentions his weeping over and providing the burial for his nurse Deborah with ne’er a mention of Rebekah’s death and Jacob’s mourning over her.

Now, at the end of his life, the time has come for Jacob to bless his own sons. In previous commentaries, I have maintained that Isaac wanted to give the material blessings to Esau and the spiritual “messianic” blessings to Jacob, whereas Rebekah had insisted that both

areas of leadership must go to the same son, to Jacob.

And indeed, Joseph’s dreams expressed his mastery in both the realm of the material (the 11 sheaves of grain bowing down to his sheaf) as well as of the spiritual (the 11 stars bowing down to him). Logic would indicate that Joseph would receive both of these blessings from Jacob.

But this is not to be the case. You will remember that, in the past, the rejected son was ousted from the family: Ishmael was actually banished from Abraham’s household and Esau left the ancestral homeland for Seir-Edom. Jacob has learned that different strengths may warrant different blessings, that in a true family one victor need not be the recipient of all with the loser going into exile. A family – much like an orchestra – provides the possibility for different individuals (or tribes) each playing the instrument they can play best for the ultimate achievement of a harmonious symphony.

Hence Judah receives the spiritual blessing of the scepter of messianic leadership, the ingathering of all of the nations to Jerusalem when the world will be at peace (Gen. 49:10). And Joseph receives the blessing of material fruitfulness (the ten tribes, especially Ephraim and Manasseh) and the physical ability to overcome the arrows of our enemies (ibid. 22-26). Jacob succeeded in uniting his family and in giving a charge to the tribes for a united nation. The latter has yet to be achieved – and therein lies the prescription for the true coming of our redemption.

#### The Person in the Parsha

**Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

#### Each One Is One of a Kind

I was very embarrassed by her sharp rebuke. But looking back, I realize that the lesson I learned from her brief criticism was more valuable than most of my other training experiences.

It happened about forty years ago. I had the good fortune to attend an intensive workshop which was designed to teach young mental health professionals the basic skills of the method known as psychodrama. The workshop leader was a world famous psychodramatist, expert in both the complexities of the human psyche and the art of improvisational theater.

Psychodrama is a technique whereby a person’s inner emotional conflicts are acted out in dramatic fashion under the direction of a skilled clinician. It is similar, but much more powerful, than what is known as role-playing.

Early on the second day of the workshop, I volunteered to play the therapist for another member of the group, let’s call him Charles, who played the patient. Charles told of the challenges he was facing with certain key persons in his life. I suggested that he act out

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one of these conflicts in a particular fashion. I, of course, was convinced that my suggested strategy was brilliant and insightful, until, only about two or three minutes into the exercise, the workshop leader thundered: “That’s your psychodrama! That’s not Charles’ psychodrama!”

At that precise moment, I learned to appreciate that what was going on inside of me was based upon who I was, and was very different from what was going on within Charles’ mind. Those words of rebuke taught me a lesson to remember forever: I am different from you, and you are different from me. We are all very different from each other, exquisitely and irrevocably different.

This lesson was well understood by our forefather Jacob. In this week’s Torah portion, Vayechi, just before Jacob dies, he blesses all of his sons and two of his grandsons. He bestows these blessings upon them separately, fully aware that no one blessing fits them all.

The Torah sums up the entire deathbed drama with these words: “...their father spoke unto them and blessed them; every one according to his blessing, he blessed them.” (Genesis 49:28). No two blessings were alike.

I have often thought that the greatest blessing that they each received was the message: “You are special. You are not the same as your brother. You have different personalities, different strengths, different talents, and therefore you each have a different destiny.”

When I read this week’s Torah portion, I am struck with wonder by the dazzling array of metaphors which Jacob uses: “unstable as water... weapons of violence...a lion’s whelp... a colt bound to a tree... the blood of grapes... the shore of the sea... a large boned donkey... a hind let loose...a bowed shoulder... a judge... a serpent on the road... a troop upon their heel... fat bread.” Diversity, uniqueness, complexity, individuality. That’s the message.

Every parent and every teacher must learn this basic lesson. Teachers and parents must treat each child individually, and must assure that each child comes to know his or her specialness.

Our sages throughout history have imparted this lesson to us. For example, Maimonides, in his fascinating review of the early life of Abraham, writes: “...and he reasoned with each and every person according to that person’s intelligence, until he convinced him of the truth.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodah Zara, 1:3). Again, when instructing us of our duties at the Passover Seder, he tells us that it is a mitzvah to relate the story of the Exodus to each child according to his or her intellectual ability. A very young child must be told stories, one with limited mental capacity must be given concrete examples, older and wiser children can be taught in a more abstract

fashion. "Everything must be done according to the particular intelligence of the child." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz U'Matza, 7:2)

Among my favorite essays on the subject of education was the one written by the late Rabbi Elimelech Bar Shaul, once the Rabbi of Rehovot. He wrote, "If we give more to one who is only capable of receiving less, then we have given him nothing. And if we give less to one who can receive more, we have failed our mission, and worse – the student may come to think that there is no more, or that there is no more for him."

Giving too much to one with a lesser capacity can frustrate him irremediably. Giving too little to one with a greater capacity shortchanges him and cheats him, and worse – may alienate him forever.

Jewish mystics see human differences as but part of the Almighty's cosmic design. Thus, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap, a mystic in the tradition of his master, Rav Kook, writes: "There is no duplication in the universe. Just as no two people are perfectly alike, so there are no two things, in all of universe, that are alike. Each person, like the grains of sand on the seashore, has a special quality and a special novelty."

Mystic or realist, appreciating our differences is our vital task as Jews, as human beings, and as residents of the Almighty's cosmos.

#### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissacher Frand**

#### **Yisroel Bowed Down Towards the Head of His Bed**

After Yosef acceded to his father's request and swore to him that he would bury him in the family gravesite in the Land of Canaan rather than bury him in Egypt, the Torah records that "Yisroel prostrated himself toward the head of the bed." [Bereshis 47:31]. Rashi brings the teaching "from here we have a source for that which the Sages said – that the Divine Presence of G-d is present above the head of one who is ill." Therefore, Yaakov Avinu, despite the fact that he was ill and weak, turned around and bowed to the head of the bed (the location of the Shechina's Presence).

I saw an interesting thought in a sefer called Tiv HaTorah: Why is it that the Shechina is on the top of the bed of a sick individual? The Tiv HaTorah suggests that the reason is that when a person is lying sick in bed, he thinks that perhaps the Ribono shel Olam has abandoned him. He thinks that the Almighty is angry with him and is punishing him. Chazal say that this is not the attitude a person should have. A person should have the attitude that in spite of my illness and in spite of my suffering, it is NOT because the Ribono shel Olam hates me. For whatever reason it may be, He wants me to go through this – either as atonement or for whatever reason – but regardless, this is for my good!

Therefore, Chazal tell the sick person – you should know that in this debilitating state that you may be in, the Ribono shel Olam is still here with you. Do not give up hope and do not feel abandoned. Do not feel like an outcast.

The author brings an incident (I actually know the person with whom this happened). There was a Jew named Rav Herschel (Tzvi) Kowalsky. He was a big Talmid Chochom. He once learned b'Chavrusa (one on one study partner) with the Chazon Ish. He was the Rosh Kollel of the Socochover Kollel in Eretz Yisroel in Bnei Brak. He was a holy man. At the end of his life, when he was sick, he suffered. When people came into him, they gave him kvitlach (small pieces of paper such as are inserted between the cracks of the Kosel) containing their names and personal prayer petitions. He would take the kvitlach and put them near the top of his bed. He said the top of a sick person's bed is like the Western Wall. Just as our Rabbis say the Divine Presence has never left the Kosel haMa'aravi, so too they tell us the Divine Presence is located by the top of the bed of a sick person.

The point we are trying to convey is that a person should never feel abandoned by G-d at the time of illness or frailty that confines them to bed. On the contrary, Chazal tell us that the Divine Presence rests at the top of the bed of a sick person.

#### **Old News Is Good News**

As an introduction to the Torah's narration of the blessings Yaakov gives Yosef's two sons, the pasuk says, "Now Israel's eyes were heavy with age, he could not see; so he brought them near him and he kissed them and hugged them." [Bereshis 48:10] Prior to blessing Ephraim and Menashe, Yaakov tells Yosef "I did not imagine seeing your face, and here G-d has shown me even your offspring." [Bereshis 48:11]

Now let us ask, when did it first happen that Yaakov Avinu found out that Yosef was alive finally saw him after their long separation? It happened at the end of Parshas Vayigash — 17 years prior to the Torah's narration in Chapter 48 where Yaakov takes ill and Yosef brings in his two sons to their grandfather to receive his blessing. What is going on now that suddenly, 17 years later, Yaakov is commenting to Yosef that he never expected to see him again and G-d was so good to him that he showed him even Yosef's children! This is old news! Why is he saying it now?

The answer is that to most people, something that happened 17 years ago is old news. We tend to forget it. Man's nature is that despite the magnitude of an event, as time goes on, it tends to become less and less memorable. We forget how amazed we were. We forget how grateful we were to the Almighty at the time for His kindness to us.

## **Likutei Divrei Torah**

Do we remember our wedding and how grateful we were at that moment that we got married? Do we remember the first time our wife had a baby, how thrilled we were when we had our first child? Do we remember how thrilled we were that we had the merit to march our children down to the Chuppah? Yes, we remember – but it becomes 'Old News'. Perhaps on an anniversary, these events come to mind, but the excitement of the moment certainly fades with time.

The pasuk is trying to teach us that to Yaakov Avinu, in spite of the fact that this happened 17 years ago, nevertheless, every single day he was in a constant state of giving gratitude to the Almighty for His Kindness to him. It was constantly on his mind.

#### **"Gorgeous" — Is This The Way We Brag When Speaking About Our Children?**

The final observation I would like to share is one that I heard in the name of Rav Shmuel Berenbaum (1920-2008), former Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn, NY.

In Parshas Vayechi, when Yaakov Avinu is on his deathbed, he calls in each of his sons and gives them individualized Brochos. As we know, some of these final charges to his children do not exactly sound like blessings. However, in truth, they are all Brochos. As we have said many times, the biggest Brocha that you can give anybody is to point out to him his strengths and his weaknesses so that he will know what he should do with his life. That is what Yaakov Avinu was in effect doing over here with his sons.

Even by his three oldest sons – Reuven, Shimon, and Levi – where Yaakov pointed out their foibles, those were Brochos. He was telling them "You have these character traits and you need to work on them the future. In fact, the advice was taken to heart by the Tribe of Levi. Chazal say that Shimon and Levi were both zealots (ka'naim) and Yaakov pointed it out to them. Levi, at least, was able to perfect that attribute of zealotry. That is why the Tribe of Levi stood up for that which was right at the time of the Eigel Hazahav (Sin of the Golden Calf).

All of these Brochos have a common denominator – even though some of them sound more like blessings and some almost sound like curses – but they are all Brochos because they have one intent: To point out the strength and ability of each individual Shevet and what they should do with their lives. This knowledge is the biggest Brocho that anyone can receive.

This is fine for virtually all the Shvatim: In Yehudah, Yaakov sees Kingship, in Yissacher, he sees Torah learning, in Dan, he sees the ability to judge, etc., etc. The pattern proceeds through all the Shvatim until we get to the Tribe of Yosef. In Shevet Yosef, it does not

seem – at least at first blush – as if Yaakov is saying any of Yosef's strengths.

"Ben Poras Yosef, Ben Poras Alei Ayin" [Bereshis 49:22]. I looked up the Art Scroll translation of Ben Poras Yosef. It says, "Yosef is a charming child." But it gets better than that. "Bnos Tza'ada Alei Shur". Rashi interprets: The girls of Egypt would step along the wall to gaze at Yosef's beauty. Yosef was gorgeous. He was handsome. He had, l'Havdil, the looks of a celebrity. This was true to such an extent that they treated him like a celebrity. The Egyptian girls climbed the walls to get a glimpse of the righteous Yosef.

Is this how a father talks about a Jewish child? Have you ever heard someone talk about a Chosson that way? People say: He's bright, he's clever, and so forth. Would someone brag and say about a son or future-son-in-law: "He is drop-dead good looking!"? Nobody talks like that. This is not the Jewish way of speaking! Yehudah is Malchus (Kingship); Yissacher is Torah; Levi is Zealotry; Dan is Judgment. Yosef? Gorgeous! Is that a description of his inner character traits?

And then, "They embittered him and became antagonists; the masters of arrows hated him." [Bereshis 49:23] Rashi interprets: His brothers, who had sharp-tongues like arrows, hated him.

So let us put it all together: Yosef is gorgeous; he is handsome; all the girls swooned for him; and his brothers hated him! I still don't see the Brocha here. Where is the definition of his character traits (Kochos haNefesh)? Where are the strengths?

Rav Shmuel Berenbaum says something very interesting. It is a very current idea. People gravitate to people who love them and admire them; people tend to stay away and part company from people who do not treat them nicely and are not kind to them and do not appreciate them.

Rav Shmuel Berenbaum said this is a certain context. We are all painfully aware of a plague that has affected our community for 15, 20 or 25 years now. That is the phenomenon of the "Drop-Out" / "Off the Derech" youth. These children are raised in what seems to be wonderful homes but for some reason they just throw it all away. They leave home and hang out on the streets with the worst of people.

There can be numerous causes for this complex issue. Rav Shmuel Berenbaum suggests that one of the causes can be that such a child does not feel loved by his family, by his peers, by society, by frum society. The kids on the street – they "love" him. They treat him nicely. They treat him with respect.

So where is this kid going to go? "In my school, they treat me like dirt. My parents are always down my throat. Nobody loves me. 'They' (on the street) love me." So where is

this kid going to hang out? This is human nature. People will go and will gravitate and will associate with other people who they feel love them, appreciate them, and care about them.

Now we understand the "Brocha" of Yosef and we understand the "Kochos" (strengths) of Yosef. The brothers – the 'religious Jews' – they hated Yosef. They spread slander about him. They tried to harm him. He came to Egyptian society and he found the girls were swooning over him. Everybody loves him.

If you were Yosef, what would you do? "I am going to junk this 'Yiddishkeit' thing. Who needs it? My brothers – the 'frumer'?" Ha! They treat me like mud! Hey! These Egyptian girls, they cannot get enough of me! So where am I going to go?" And what did Yosef do? He remained a loyal Jew. He remained steadfast to his religion, in spite of the fact that the Egyptian girls swooned and the brothers hated him.

This shows strength of character. This shows commitment. This is the same strength of character that Yosef demonstrated when he was tempted by the wife of Potiphar. He remained steadfast. He was a young man, 17 years old, with no support system, no family, and nothing to hold him back. He withstood the test. This is a strength that testifies to the nature of his personality. That is what Yaakov Avinu was emphasizing here in his blessing to Yosef. The strength of Yosef was that in spite of the fact that the daughters of Egypt, who climbed the walls to get a look at him, loved him and in spite of the fact that his brothers hated him, nevertheless he remained a faithful Jew.

This then follows the pattern of the blessings to the other Tribes – which was to point out their strengths and weaknesses which is the biggest Brocha someone can give.

#### Dvar Torah

#### Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

#### You can live forever!

Jacob never died. This extraordinary statement is recorded in the Gemara, (Mashechet Ta'anit). There we are told how Rav Nachman and Rabbi Yitzchak were exchanging words of Torah, and when they came to Jacob our Patriarch, Rabbi Yitzchak declared, "Ya'akov Avinu lo met" – "Jacob, our Patriarch never died".

Rav Nachman challenged him: "In the Torah we read how he was eulogised, he was embalmed, he was buried. So how can you say Jacob never died?" Rabbi Yitzchak replied: "I learn it from a scriptural source in the book of Jeremiah Chapter 30. There, the prophet tells us about the promise of Hashem, that the day will come when the children of Jacob will be reunited in the Holy Land at a time of redemption. Therefore, 'Ma zar'o ba'chayim

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af u'ba'chayim' – since his descendants are alive, he too is alive."

Since Jacob influenced so many people who internalised his values and passed them on through the generations, he is considered still to be alive. We often reflect on the immortality that our souls can attain, through life in Olam Habah – the world to come. But the Gemara wants to teach us that there is an additional form of immortality which we can attain here, in this world.

In the Book of Bereishit, there are two parshiot which have in their titles the term 'life'. They are 'Chayei Sarah' and 'Vayechi'. 'Chayei Sarah' means 'the life of Sarah' but if you look at the content of the parasha, it is all about her death. And similarly, 'Vayechi', our parasha of this week, describes the death of Ya'akov, the death of Yosef – the death of that entire generation. But the message is very clear: because Sarah's values continued to be cherished and to be transmitted throughout the generations, the parasha is called 'Chayei Sarah' – Sarah is alive! Similarly, Ya'akov is very much alive even to this day! We speak about him and reflect upon his great teachings and therefore the parasha is called 'Vayechi' – because he lives on and on.

There is a double message for us here. First of all, we can guarantee that our forebears remain alive through us – through all the good deeds that we perform. And secondly, we can attain our own immortality by touching the hearts and moulding the minds of as many people as possible. If Jacob is still alive today, so too, we can be alive forever.

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#### OTS Dvar Torah

#### A Blessing for Two, A Blessing for All Time

#### Rabbi Benjy Myers

As parents and educators, it's crucial that we develop two character traits in our children. The first is the ability to live harmoniously with their siblings, and remember that we are all "children of one man", even at times of strife. The second – to be able to withstand foreign influences.

Just before the children of Israel become a nation and begin their long period of servitude in Egypt, we read of an event that could cause the rift in the family to resurface, and perhaps even lead to another family feud. The brothers are on their way back to Egypt, after burying Jacob, and fear that now, Joseph would exact his revenge on them. From the moment Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers, it seems that the reason Joseph didn't repay them in kind was to avoid causing hardship to his father, Jacob. Now, however, after Jacob's death and burial, it is time to settle the score. This isn't what happens, however. Joseph reflects this in his own words to his brothers:

"But Joseph said to them, 'Have no fear! ... although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present

result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.’ ... Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Genesis 50, 19-21).

This is precisely what happened. Joseph took care of his brothers and their families until his dying day. Joseph was the last person to be quoted in the Book of Genesis, and this statement of his reflects both compassion and his request to his brothers: you will be leaving here – but please, don’t forget me when you return to the Promised Land.

This isn’t the only event we encounter in the parsha that could have led to a rift in the family. When Jacob gives Joseph’s sons their blessings, we once again fear they might revert to the state in which one child is favored over another, resulting in envy, contempt and vengeance. As Jacob approaches Menashe and Efraim, he crosses his hands, placing his right hand on the head of his youngest grandson, Efraim, in spite of the fact that the right hand symbolizes honor and birthright, and should have been placed on Menashe’s head. Joseph tries to correct his father, but his efforts were in vain. Jacob was determined to give the greatest blessing to Efraim, claiming that he was “greater than him [Menashe]”. In light of developments in the Book of Genesis leading to this point, we would expect a serious drama to have ensued. One son would have been favored and the other would have been banished, and this would have led to a heated argument between the brothers. It would have caused something to happen, but ultimately, nothing happens. Nothing at all.

The brothers accept the blessings without fanfare. As brothers.

The children of Israel are on the verge of becoming a nation, just before a long period of servitude in Egypt, but here, finally, we see that this family succeeds in staying together, maintaining a relationship founded on love, fraternity, peace and friendship. There was no jealousy, competition, or family dispute here. Now that they can all live side by side and become role models for proper family life, it is time for the next stages in the development of the patriarchal dynasty – servitude, a period when the family’s numbers swell, evolving into a nation, when the promise in the Brit Ben Habetarim (the “covenant of parts”) is fulfilled, and when they receive the rights to the Promised Land. Jacob’s sons’ development into a nation, the nation of Israel, entails a new challenge – resisting Egyptian culture and maintaining their unique identity, a principle expressed in the Midrash: “This teaches us that Israel were set apart there, that their food, clothes, and language was different than the Egyptians’ (Pesikta Zutarta, parshat Tavo, page 46a).

As parents and educators, it’s crucial that we develop these two character traits in our children: the ability to live harmoniously with

their siblings, and remember that we are all “children of one man”, even at times of strife, able to manage the conflicts and disputes between them accordingly. What, then, is the second character trait we must instill in our children? The ability to resist foreign influences leading them down questionable paths. All of this education starts in the home, and eventually permeates out.

We encounter these two character traits in parshat Vayechi. After great efforts, Jacob’s sons learn how to live together. It was a long process, fraught with difficulties, but ultimately, they succeeded. By overcoming the difficulties he faces – perhaps even thanks to those difficulties – Joseph succeeds in teaching his sons to tread down the right path. They withstand these two temptations particularly well.

In his book, Rabbi Yaakov Kamanetsky states the following: “Efraim was more prone to becoming consumed in Egyptian culture than his brother was. By the time Efraim was born, Joseph had already become well acclimated in Egypt, a fact reflected in Efraim’s name, which is derived from ‘Hashem has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.’”

Jacob laid his right hand on Efraim’s head because it was Efraim who had to resist the greatest temptations. Menashe’s name, in contrast, expresses the fact that when he was born, Joseph was still somewhat influenced by his father’s house. Efraim, however, symbolizes Joseph’s integration into Egyptian society, and this is why he needed a more powerful blessing. Jacob was wise enough to realize that Joseph’s sons, who were born and who had grown up within a foreign culture, far from the influence of their extended family, needed additional support. The Torah emphasizes Jacob’s blessing of these two grandchildren, but not any of the other grandchildren. Jacob understood the need to drive home the fact that they are an integral part of the family – “They shall be like Reuben and Simeon for me...”. Naturally, physical and cultural distance takes its toll, making it all the more important to impress upon them that they were sons of Jacob, sons of Israel, with all that this entails.

When we bless our children, we don’t do so in the name of our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Instead, we invoke the names of Efraim and Menashe, two brothers who grew up in a foreign land, within a hostile culture, and had nonetheless succeeded in maintaining their close bonds and their relationship with their grandfather, Israel. These are the things we wish to instill in our own children. As they prepare to emerge from our homes and connect to the nation, we must, first and foremost, stress the importance of family, close bonds, peace and fraternity. We must impart in them the connection to our tradition and our effort to meet all of the challenges life deals out. If we are wise enough to teach these things to our

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children and convey the message that they are an inseparable part of the family, we’ll be able to ensure these virtues live on when they – and us – leave our homes and venture out into the world around us.

We are all the children of one man. May it be Hashem’s will that we will be able to truly sit together, as brothers, and face the challenges and obstacles of the wider world.

We shall only grow stronger, together.

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### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

#### Rabbi Hershel Schachter Kavod haTorah

A year ago, Jews all over the world celebrated the siyum hashas of the daf yomi by demonstrating a great deal of kavod haTorah. Talmud Torah (to learn Torah) and kavod haTorah (to give honor to the Torah) are two of the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos. The celebration in New York took several hours, and some raised an issue - what does one choose when faced with a conflict between these two mitzvos? Which takes precedence? Instead of spending hours upon hours traveling to and from the location of the siyum, listening to the derashos and the nigunim, and participating in the dancing, perhaps one should have chosen to stay behind and spent those precious hours learning? (As Rabbi Besdin zt"l would have famously worded it, to study it rather than about it.)

When Moshe Rabbeinu was on Har Sinai for forty days and forty nights receiving the Torah, did he stand or did he sit? The Gemara (Megillah 21a) points out an apparent contradiction between two pesukim regarding this. The Gemara presents several suggestions to resolve the apparent contradiction. One of the answers given by the Gemara is that when Hakadosh Baruch Hu taught him the difficult and complicated dinim, he sat; but when he was learning the easier halachos he would stand. Rav Soloveitchik said in the name of Rav Chaim Volozhiner the following interpretation of this passage: out of kavod haTorah, we ought to always be required to stand while learning Torah. However, when one is learning a difficult and complicated halacha, and standing will take away from his understanding of that din [because when one is in an uncomfortable position it is much harder to concentrate], since in this situation there is a conflict between the mitzvos of talmud Torah and kavod haTorah, the mitzvah of talmud Torah takes precedence and he should sit.

Every so often a yeshiva student asks me such a shayla: he was placed in a shiur where he is not really learning well - for whatever reason - and wants to switch to a different shiur where he knows that he will learn much better, but this might cause a diminishing of kavod haTorah with respect to the first rebbe. Which of the mitzvos takes precedence: kavod haTorah or talmud Torah? My attitude always is that chayecha kodmim l’chayey chavercha

(see Bava Metziah 62a), that first I have the right to take care of my own needs, and only afterwards am I obligated to take care of the needs of others and consider them as if they too were my needs. Not only does this apply when one is in danger of losing his life (as is the case in Bava Metziah where this view of R' Akiva has been accepted over the view of ben Peturah), but even in a case of hashovas aveida, the Gemara (Bava Metziah 33a) tells us that aveidaso va'avaeidas rabbo, shelo kodemes. The Rema (Shulchan Aruch, end of Choshen Mishpat 388:2) states that if a flood is expected, I may build a wall around my field to protect it even though by doing so the flood waters will be redirected and fall onto a neighbor's field and cause damage. I have the right to protect my property, and my protecting my property by constructing the wall does not make me an adam hamazik.

In the case of the student in yeshiva, even though I myself am obligated to show kavod haTorah, my mitzvah of talmud Torah still takes precedence over my mitzvah of kavod haTorah. However, we still have a halacha that one must rise to show respect for his rebbe even when one is in the middle of learning and even though this will cause a certain degree of bitul Torah. When one is in the middle of working on a complicated Gemara or Tosafos and must interrupt his train of thought in order to stand up for one's rebbe, it will most probably require a few moments until he will be able to get back into the swing of what he was working on. The Gemara (Kiddushin 33b) at first quotes an opinion that a student of Torah in the middle of learning ought not to stand for his rebbe, presumably because when there is a conflict between talmud Torah and kavod haTorah the mitzvah of talmud Torah takes precedence. But the final conclusion of the discussion is not so. We sometimes apply a principle of bitulah ze'hu kiyuma (see Menachos 99b), that the bitul Torah involved in showing kavod haTorah by standing when the rebbe enters will bring with it a blessing from heaven to be more matzliach in learning than otherwise expected, so to engage in that bitul Torah would be a wise investment which will pay off later to cause more success in learning.

All those who participated in the big siyum hashas last year were certainly very inspired by the most impressive demonstration of kavod haTorah. [The non-Jewish police, guards, and workers were most inspired, despite the fact that they didn't really appreciate what it meant to complete the Talmud Bavli with a daily commitment, summer and winter, rain or shine, etc. kal vachomer the bnei Torah. The Gemara (Berachos 17b) comments that twice a year all the non-Jews in the city of Mechasia witnessed a tremendous degree of kavod haTorah at the time of the two yarchei kallah...]. Our participating in this great ma'amad should turn out for all of us to be a most valuable investment of our time, and turn out to inspire

us to learn much more than we would have otherwise learned! Bitulah ze'hu kiyuma!

### Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

#### The Gravity of His Concerns

Yissachar is a bony donkey, lying between the boundaries. He saw (Menucha) a resting place, that it was good, and the land, that it was pleasant, and he bent his shoulder to bear [burdens], and he became an indentured laborer. (Breishis 49:14-15)

Issachar is a bony donkey: He bears the yoke of the Torah, like a strong donkey which is laden with a heavy burden. — Rashi

There seems to be a paradox in this brief description of Yissachar. On the one hand we get the impression of someone who is very physical and materially attuned, weighted down by gravity and concerns for creature comforts. He is portrayed as "a bony donkey", "lying between boundaries", scouting out good resting places, and the pleasantness of the land. On the other hand we discover that he bends his shoulder to work hard and carry the yoke of Torah. That would put him in an entirely different category than the original portrait. So which is it? What is he? Is he a materially or a spiritually oriented person?

Here is one of many possible approaches to this riddle. The Talmud (Sukka 52B) makes the following alarming statement, "One who is greater than his friend has a greater Yetzer (Hara)!" It's a little counter intuitive. How is that possible!?! We can understand that the Yetzer Hara of a wicked person is a tropical storm category five but the Yetzer Hora of the Tzadik should already be a spring breeze. How do we make sense of this statement?

I remember reading someplace that the sainted Chofetz Chaim felt about himself that he had a tendency for anger. That doesn't mean at all that he acted on it or it ever manifested itself in his lifetime.

After all he was a Kohen, which was originally from Levi who was severely warned about his anger by father Yaakov. Recognizing this feature in his personality forced him to move himself far from the possibility of causing harm to others in a moment of unguarded anger. In that process of distancing himself from any detection of negativity made him into the Tzadik he would become and motivated him to sensitize the world by teaching about the damaging force of Loshon Hora. Without that potentiality of negativity he could never have achieved such a monumental life of pure positivity.

Reb Tzadik HaKohen says that that area where we struggle the most is where the possibility of our greatest achievement lies. I knew a very generous person who realized early he had a cruel streak. In the curing of that trait he

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opened up wellsprings of kindness which was his everlasting legacy.

When the Torah tells us that "HASHEM "saw everything he created and it was Tov Meod- Very Good", the Talmud has an interesting spin on this that perhaps now we can easily understand. "Tov Meod Zu Yetzer Hara!- "What's very good is the negative inclination!" How so? The very good of the person is embedded in his negative tendency. With a Yetzer Hara a person is driven to become either crazy or great but he cannot remain neutral.

So too with Yissachar! He saw that the land was sweet and resting was good and that was a deep concern. He could have contented himself to sit poolside and sip martinis a whole day but he realized that by yielding to the weight of his natural physical composition he was heading nowhere and fast. Therefore, he needed to curb his nature and he ultimately succeeded in spite of and also because of the gravity of his concerns.

**Weekly Parsha VAYECHI**

**Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

At the end of the book of Bereshith, as we read in this week's Torah reading, there is little warning as to what the very next Torah reading will discuss and describe. The transition, from the benign and idyllic last years of the life of our father Jacob, is a harsh reality of servitude and slavery visited upon his descendants.

From the biblical narrative, it appears to have been sudden and unexpected. However, we already read in this week's concluding Torah reading of the first book of the Bible, that both Jacob and Joseph speak of redemption from the sojourn in the land of Egypt and a return to the land of Israel.

From the nuances of their words and the hope and prayer that they expressed, it is obvious that they wish to warn the Jewish people that their future lay not in the land of Goshen or the flesh pots of Egypt but rather their stay in Egypt, no matter how many centuries long, should be viewed as only a temporary one.

In this, our forefathers indicated to us that this would be the pattern of Jewish history throughout the ages and that no matter how long the Jewish people would live in countries and areas outside of the land of Israel they should never view those societies as being permanent.

The remarkable thing about Jewish history is how repetitive it has been. If the Jewish presence in ancient Egypt was only for a few centuries, the presence of the Jews in areas such as Babylonia, Egypt, and Eastern Europe generally was for many more centuries than that of Egypt. We are all aware that all those societies came to an end, Jewishly speaking, as did ancient Egypt.

The last words of Jacob and Joseph were to the effect that the Lord would take the Jewish people from Egypt and return them to their ancient homeland, the land of Israel. It is this final message of the book of Bereshith that haunts them and follows the Jewish people throughout the biblical narrative of the remaining four books of the Torah.

Whenever troublesome challenges arose, regardless of the great miracles of survival the Jewish people were blessed with, there always was an element within the people that said it was preferable to return to Egypt rather than continue the struggle for Jewish identity and independence that only the land of Israel could guarantee to them.

Apparently, Jacob and Joseph were aware of this tendency towards weakness and assimilation within their descendants.

Their final message to all future generations of the Jewish people concentrated on the belief that the Lord would certainly redeem the Jewish people from all exiles, whether benign or cruel, and restore them to the challenge of independent nationhood in the land of Israel. That is why at the conclusion of this week's Torah reading we will repeat our ancient model and prayer to be strong and to strengthen ourselves and others for the tasks that always lie ahead.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

**In My Opinion STORIES**

**Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

One of the most fundamental lessons in public speaking is the ability, or rather the necessity, of the speaker to tell a story to illustrate the message that is being delivered. People remember stories much longer and with much greater nostalgia than learned interpretations and abstract thoughts and ideas. And if the story is somehow humorous – and the only humor that is acceptable in such instances is self-deprecating humor about one's own inadequacies and foibles – then the story will have even a greater impact on the brain and memory of the listeners.

A story well told and with a distinct moral message is truly a goldmine for the public speaker. And if we think about the events of our everyday personal lives, we will soon discover that there never is a shortage of stories that can be used to illustrate life and human interaction. So, in the broadest sense of our understanding of life, other human beings and current events, we all become storytellers.

The good story influences the future generations of our families, students, and even mere acquaintances. There is no story that is as powerful as the life we live. I think that is the reason why people are so interested in stories about others, especially stories about leaders, holy individuals, and outstanding scholars. This is certainly true in Jewish society, but I have a strong suspicion that it is universally true, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated and intellectual. The entire entertainment industry, such as it is, is dependent on the ability to tell a good story in an attractive and popular way.

Stories took a turn in Jewish life to become holy. In the Chasidic world, stories became the vehicle of information, education, and connection between the holy leader of the group and its followers. Stories were entitled to be exaggerated beyond the limits of true accuracy and reality. They took on a life of their own, adding wonder and hope, knowledge and inspiration and a glimpse of a world that was not tarnished and tainted by human weaknesses.

The great rebbe of Kotsk summed up the matter succinctly when he stated: "A Jew who believes all of the stories of Chasidim is a fool, and he who believes none of them is a heathen."

Just as it required skill to tell a story properly, it also requires skill on the part of the listener to hear the story properly to absorb the message and moral lesson that the story is meant to impart. The story is the outside garb, with the message and moral the internal seed that is meant to be planted within the mind, heart, and soul of the listener. It is this facet of storytelling that has made it so popular in the Jewish world throughout the centuries.

In the simplest terms, all of our history is merely one long story, where the details are important but the message of the story – the eternity of the Jewish people and its connection to Torah, redemption and the land of Israel – is even more important.

I am currently working on completing a book of stories, both personal and communal. Over the many decades of my life, I have been able to collect many stories, most of them from ordinary personal experiences in life. For a long period of time, I found that the best source of my stories, which I then related to my congregation in my Shabbat sermons, was simply shopping in a supermarket in my neighborhood. Something always happened there, from which a story could be made, and a moral lesson derived. The supermarket was such a treasure trove of interesting people and incidents that I often went there even when I had nothing to purchase, simply to view the crowd and take in the experience.

When I began writing the book of stories, I thought that it would be a lighthearted account of human foibles written with compassion, with a certain tinge of mockery. I soon discovered that the book was writing itself in a far more serious vein than I had originally imagined or even intended. Even the most lighthearted of stories contain within them strong lessons for life and moral implications. But the writing of the book is another story, and this is not the place or time for its telling.

Shabbat shalom

Berel Wein

**Moving Forwards (Vayechi 5781)**

*Rabbi Sacks zt'l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.*

The book of Bereishit ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Jacob's sons. Joseph's brothers were afraid that he had not really forgiven them for selling him into slavery. They suspected that he was merely delaying his revenge until their father died. After Jacob's death, they express their concern to him. But Joseph insists:

"Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you

and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21)

This is the second time Joseph has said something like this to them. Earlier he spoke similarly when he first disclosed that he – the man they thought was an Egyptian viceroy called Tzophnat Pa’aneach – was in fact their brother Joseph:

“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Gen. 45:3-8)

This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have suffered. But it also establishes another important principle: the idea of Divine Providence. History is not, as Joseph Heller called it, “a trash bag of random coincidences blown open in the wind.”<sup>[1]</sup> It has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is at work behind the scenes. “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,” says Hamlet, “rough-hew them how we will.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Joseph’s greatness was that he sensed this. He saw the bigger picture. Nothing in his life, he now knew, had happened by accident. The plot to kill him, his sale as a slave, the false accusations of Potiphar’s wife, his time in prison, and his disappointed hope that the chief butler would remember him and secure his release – all these events that might have cast him into ever-deeper depths of despair turned out in retrospect to be necessary steps in the journey that eventuated in his becoming second-in-command in Egypt and the one person capable of saving the whole country – as well as his own family – from starvation in the years of famine.

Joseph had, in double measure, one of the necessary gifts of a leader: the ability to keep going despite opposition, envy, false accusation and repeated setbacks. Every leader who stands for anything will face opposition. This may be a genuine conflict of interests. A leader elected to make society more equitable will almost certainly win the support of the poor and the antagonism of the rich. One elected to reduce the tax burden will do the opposite. It cannot be avoided. Politics without conflict is a contradiction in terms.

Any leader elected to anything, any leader more loved or gifted than others, will face envy. Rivals will question, “Why wasn’t it me?” That is what Korach thought about Moses and Aaron. It is what the brothers thought about Joseph when they saw that their father favoured him. It is what Antonio Salieri thought about the more gifted Mozart, according to Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus*.

As for false accusations, they have occurred often enough in history. Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and burned at the stake. A quarter century later she was posthumously declared innocent by an official court of inquiry. More than twenty people were put to death as a result of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692-3. Years later, as their innocence began to be perceived, a priest present at the trials, John Hale, admitted, “Such was the darkness of that day... that we walked in the clouds, and could not see our way.”<sup>[3]</sup> The most famous false accusation of modern times was the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent who was accused of being a German spy. The Dreyfus affair rocked France during the years 1894 and 1906, until Dreyfus was finally acquitted.

Setbacks are almost always a part of the life-story of the most successful. J. K. Rowling’s initial Harry Potter novel was rejected by the first twelve publishers who received it. Another writer of a book about children suffered twenty-one rejections. The book was called *Lord of the Flies*, and its author, William Golding, was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

In his famous commencement address at Stanford University, the late Steve Jobs told the story of the three blows of fate that shaped his life: dropping out of university; being fired from Apple, the company he

founded; and being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Rather than being defeated by them, he turned them all to creative use.

For twenty-two years I lived close to Abbey Road in North London, where a famous pop group recorded all their hits. At their first audition, they performed for a record company who told them that guitar bands were “on their way out.” The verdict on their performance (in January 1962) was: “The Beatles have no future in show business.”

All this explains Winston Churchill’s great remark that “success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

It may be that what sustains people through repeated setbacks is belief in themselves, or sheer tenacity, or lack of alternatives. What sustained Joseph, though, was his insight into Divine Providence. A plan was unfolding whose end he could only dimly discern, but at some stage he seems to have realised that he was just one of many characters in a far larger drama, and that all the bad things that had happened to him were necessary if the intended outcome was to occur. As he said to his brothers, “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”

This willingness to let events work themselves out in accordance with providence, this understanding that we are, at best, no more than co-authors of our lives, allowed Joseph to survive without resentment about the past or despair in the face of the future. Trust in God gave him immense strength, which is what we will all need if we are to dare greatly. Whatever malice other people harbour against leaders – and the more successful they are, the more malice there is – if they can say, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good,” they will survive, their strength intact, their energy undiminished.

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### Shabbat Shalom: Vayehi (Genesis 47:28-50:26)

#### Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “Gather together and I shall tell you what is to happen at the end of the days” (Genesis 49:1)

The portion of Vayehi, and the entire Book of Genesis, concludes with Jacob’s deathbed scene in which he “reveals to his sons what will befall them at the end of the days,” expressing the various strengths and weaknesses of each of his heirs and foretelling what each tribe will contribute to the great collage of future Jewish history. He is both Jacob the father of a family as well as Israel the father of a nation – and he leaves the world in the fullness of his success as a parent who has finally united his family and as a patriarch who has established the guidelines for an emerging nation with a mission to unite the world.

Jacob is indeed called by our Sages “the chosen one of the Patriarchs.” What made him deserve this very special accolade? What is the unique contribution which he made to the legacies of Abraham and Isaac? Our Sages compare Abraham to a mountain, Isaac to a field and Jacob to a house (or household) (Pesahim 88a)

Apparently, the secret to a successful family – as well to a successful nation, which is after all, a family “writ large” – is to be found within the persona of Jacob, perhaps even within the very blessings he bequeaths to his sons. What is it? The major challenge to each of the Patriarchs was that of succession. Each needed to identify which of the children in the next generation would be the bearer of the Abrahamic legacy. The major struggle within Jacob’s life was the deception he perpetrated upon his father, albeit at the behest of his mother, to wrest away the blessings Isaac had meant to bestow upon his older brother, Esau.

This act of deception, no matter how justified it may have been in the light of the characteristics of each of the brothers, was to haunt Jacob for the rest of his life: He is deceived by Laban, who argues that in his place the younger sister does not receive a prize before the elder; he is deceived by his sons who tell him that a wild beast tore apart his beloved Joseph; and he is even deceived by Joseph who, while dressed up as the Grand Vizier, requests that Jacob send Rachel’s only remaining son, Benjamin, to Egypt.

His punishment goes even further: His beloved Rachel dies before her time because she deceives her father Laban by stealing his household gods (in the Mari and Nuzu documents from that time, the one who got the household gods also received the parental inheritance.)

And Jacob seems to be so resentful of his loving mother's role in suggesting and facilitating his deception that the Bible mentions his weeping over and providing the burial for his nurse Deborah with ne'er a mention of Rebekah's death and Jacob's mourning over her.

Now, at the end of his life, the time has come for Jacob to bless his own sons. In previous commentaries, I have maintained that Isaac wanted to give the material blessings to Esau and the spiritual "messianic" blessings to Jacob, whereas Rebekah had insisted that both areas of leadership must go to the same son, to Jacob.

And indeed, Joseph's dreams expressed his mastery in both the realm of the material (the 11 sheaves of grain bowing down to his sheaf) as well as of the spiritual (the 11 stars bowing down to him). Logic would indicate that Joseph would receive both of these blessings from Jacob.

But this is not to be the case. You will remember that, in the past, the rejected son was ousted from the family: Ishmael was actually banished from Abraham's household and Esau left the ancestral homeland for Seir-Edom. Jacob has learned that different strengths may warrant different blessings, that in a true family one victor need not be the recipient of all with the loser going into exile. A family – much like an orchestra – provides the possibility for different individuals (or tribes) each playing the instrument they can play best for the ultimate achievement of a harmonious symphony.

Hence Judah receives the spiritual blessing of the scepter of messianic leadership, the ingathering of all of the nations to Jerusalem when the world will be at peace (Gen. 49:10). And Joseph receives the blessing of material fruitfulness (the ten tribes, especially Ephraim and Manasseh) and the physical ability to overcome the arrows of our enemies (ibid. 22-26). Jacob succeeded in uniting his family and in giving a charge to the tribes for a united nation. The latter has yet to be achieved – and therein lies the prescription for the true coming of our redemption.

Shabbat Shalom!

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**Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message - Vayechi 5781-2021**

**"Revealing the Time of the Coming of the End of Days"**

*(Updated and revised from parashat Vayechi 5761-2001)*

**Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald**

This week's parasha, parashat Vayechi, is the only "sealed" parasha in the Torah, meaning that there are no empty spaces between last week's parasha, Vayigash, and this week's parasha, Vayechi. Usually each new parasha begins with a new paragraph, or is separated from the previous parasha by a space of at least 9 letters. But, Vayechi begins as if it were a continuation of last week's parasha.

The biblical commentator Rashi, opines on the opening verse of our parasha (Genesis 47:28): *לְפָהָרֶת שָׁהַזְּזָה* Why is this parasha sealed? Rashi responds by citing the reason found in Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 96:1) that Jacob attempted to reveal the time of the end of days to his children, but lost his power of prophecy. Consequently, the parasha is sealed.

The famed Chassidic master, the Sefat Emet, explains that the reason the Al-mighty does not allow the time of the "End of Days" to be revealed, is because if the Jewish people knew when the ultimate redemption would come, they would not really feel the pain of גָּלִילָה –galut, and exile would no longer be exile.

The great 19th century commentator of the Bible, the Malbim, notes in his commentary on the book of Daniel, that the time of the end of days is hinted at in the final verses of the Book of Daniel. In fact, the Malbim actually calculates the exact time that the redemption is to arrive. When the Malbim's commentary was published, there was a great outcry, and the Malbim received many letters from rabbis denouncing his eschatological calculations. Many of the protesters cited the rabbinic calumny, warning that, (Sanhedrin, 97b), *תִּפְחַד עֲצָמָן שֶׁל מְהַשְּׁבִי נְקָצָן*, "Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end of days." – which was their way of saying, "They should drop dead!"

The Malbim responded to his critics with the following parable: A Jewish merchant from Poland and his young son traveled to Leipitzig, Germany. In those days, long before trains, the trip, made by wagon,

took several weeks, and required staying over in many cities and lodging in numerous places. A journey of such length to Leipitzig was considered a big event and required weeks of preparation. Finally, the day of departure came and the family accompanied the father and son to the wagon, to begin their arduous journey.

After traveling several miles, the son turned to his father and asked, "Father, is the journey to Leipitzig long?" Instead of responding, the father gave his son a nasty look. The son quickly understood that his question was considered foolish, one that he would not dare ask again.

And, so, they traveled, for days and weeks, from city to city, from town to town, from inn to inn, until one day the young boy suddenly saw his father turn to the wagon driver and ask him, "Are we far from Leipitzig?" This bothered the boy, who turned to his father and asked, "When I asked if the journey to Leipitzig was long, you gave me a dirty look as if I had asked the most foolish question, and now you yourself ask the same question?"

The father responded by saying, "It's true that we both asked the same question. The difference was in the timing. You asked the question when we first set out on the journey, just as we got on the wagon, and took the first steps in a long and dangerous road of hundreds of miles. If a person asks at the beginning of a journey, while there is still a long way to go, it is a silly question. But, now that we are close to the end of the journey, and there are only a few miles left before us, now, it is entirely proper to ask about the remaining distance to Leipitzig."

And so it is, explained the Malbim, with regard to the end of days. When we, the Jews, were first exiled, our holy rabbis understood that before us was a long and treacherous journey that would continue for thousands of years. This journey would be filled with terrible tests and suffering. Had the time of the end of days been revealed to our people, how long and distant it would be, the people would have lost hope and would have been filled with depression and despair. All efforts to bring the end of days would have been extinguished and all hope would have vanished. For, after all, who has the strength to traverse such an endless path? And, who has the tenacity to hope for redemption, which is so far away? That is why our rabbis said, "Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end of days." Let no one dare reveal how long this journey is.

But now, at a time when all signs indicate that, thank G-d, we are close to the end of galut, that the end of exile is near, and that the journey is about to come to a conclusion, now it is permitted to point out, that yes, we have reached the end of the journey and we can indeed reveal what the remaining distance to Leipitzig truly is. Thus the Malbim responded to his critics.

The rabbis of Talmud predicted that the end of days would be a very difficult period. They speak of *חַבְלִי מִשְׁיחָה* –Chevlai Mashiach, the travail of the arrival of the Messiah, *מִלְּמַתָּה גָּזָן* the wars of the great nations, and *דִּינָן שָׁלִגְיָה פְּנִים*, the judgment of the valley of Hinom.

When I first composed this parasha commentary in 2001, I was in Israel, and saw first-hand how difficult is this period of redemption. Mothers and children were being murdered by Palestinian terrorists, and Arafat was demanding sovereignty over the Kotel, the Western Wall. There was even talk of giving up Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount. Now we have seen the sudden development of peaceful relations, known as the Abraham accords, between the State of Israel and several Arab countries.

Let us hope and pray that the *גָּאֹוְלָה* —ge'ulah, the ultimate Redemption, is not far off, and that the few miles left to "Leipitzig" will not take very long. May we soon behold the dawning of the Messianic era, and may the travail of this very long and arduous journey in galut finally come to an end.

*May you be blessed.*

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**Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

**Dvar Torah Parshat Vayechi**

**Our Covid-19 journey – how should we respond to its uncertainty?**

It has no beginning.

Every parsha starts at the beginning of a fresh paragraph. There's either a short gap or a longer gap before it. Parshat Vayechi, however, has no beginning. It flows directly on from the end of the previous week's parsha. So why is this the case?

The 15th Century scholar Rav Meir Yechiel of Ostroff gives a beautiful peirush. He tells us that when the 70 souls of the family of Yaakov Avinu came down to Egypt, they didn't know at what point in their journey they were.

Confusion

There was so much doubt, so much confusion. They knew they were going into exile. But how long would it last? Would it be happy? Would it be trying? When would their redemption come? When would they be going back to their land?

Because the beginning, the middle and the end of their journey was not known to them, that's why the beginning of the parsha is not clearly defined.

What was the response of Yaakov Avinu during those challenging times of uncertainty? In a word: Beracha. Blessings.

Yaakov Avinu counted his blessings, and he wanted those around him to do likewise. In particular at that moment he appreciated his family. Coming right at the end of the book of Bereishit – the book of the dysfunctional family – Yaakov Avinu wanted to bring his divided family together, and he showed them how his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe, got on so well together – a model for future peaceful domestic coexistence.

Blessings

Berachot, blessings, are what Yaakov Avinu gave to his family. Vayechi is full of them: a blessing for each and every child, a blessing for his grandchildren, charging us to bless our children likewise for all time. Indeed, the blessings of Yaakov Avinu as presented in Vayechi continue to provide inspiration for us to this very day.

I believe that all of this is highly relevant to us at this very point on our journey of Covid-19. Ever since the pandemic commenced, we've known we're on a journey but it's been a very challenging time for us because usually, you can plan ahead. We know when we'll be working, when our holiday period will be, and we're able to put things in the diary. But even now as the vaccines are starting to be rolled out, we don't know what's waiting around the corner for us – no point in this journey is clearly defined for us – so what should our response be?

It should be berachot.

Just like Yaakov Avinu, we need to count our blessings. We need to step back and prioritise what is really important in life and like Yaakov Avinu, highlight how crucial our families must be for us all.

In addition we need to bless others, to let them know how much we appreciate them, to give them words of praise and also to invest in the future. The pandemic presents us with many challenges. These are trying times – people are dying, people are ill, people have lost their jobs, people are lonely and there is an increase of mental illness. But together with that, like Yaakov Avinu, let's invest now in our future. And through our actions, our deeds and our blessings, may we provide an inspiration now for all time to come.

Shabbat shalom.

*Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.*

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### **Rabbi Yissacher Frand - Parshas Vayechi**

#### **Yosef's Motivation Reassures Yaakov; Yosef's Legacy Empowers Us Do Not Tell Your Father "I Am Doing It for You;" Tell Him "I Am Doing It for Me"**

Yaakov made Yosef take an oath (shavua) that he would not allow him to be buried in Egypt but would bring his body back to Eretz Yisrael for burial in the Cave of Machpelah. Yosef's response was, "I will act according to your words." [Bereshis 47:30]. According to the simple reading of the pasuk, Yosef is positively responding to Yaakov's shavua and agreeing to bury him in Eretz Yisrael.

The strange thing over here is that if a parent asks his child to please bury him in Eretz Yisrael, every son would comply with such a request without taking an oath. For some reason, it seems that Yaakov felt very

uncomfortable here, to the extent that he forced his son to take an oath to corroborate this commitment.

I saw an interesting interpretation in the sefer Darash Mordechai by Rav Mordechai Druk, which may be upsetting to us, but unfortunately, sometimes, it can be very true. He cites an observation from his mother. In Birkas HaMazon, we say "V'Na al tazricheinu Hashem Elokeinu Lo l'ydei matnas basar v'dam v'lo l'yedei halva'asm" – We ask that our livelihood come straight from the Almighty and not via "gifts from flesh and blood." Rav Druk's mother asked – why do we use this expression "gifts from flesh and blood" in the Bentching – why not "gifts from man" (matnas Adam)? She answered – this means we should not need to ask for help from our own "flesh and blood" – i.e., our children – to take care of our financial needs. No one wants to be dependent on his children for support.

There is a famous oft-quoted statement: One mother can take care of ten children, but ten children cannot take care of one mother. Lo l'ydei matnas basar v'dam is not referring to "people in general", but specifically to our own flesh and blood, our children. Please Hashem, let it be that I do not need to come on to the largesse of my children for my basic needs.

The Shaloh haKadosh in fact says (and one has to be the Shaloh'h haKadosh to suggest such a bold idea) that when Yaakov arrived in Egypt and was greeted by Yosef, Yaakov said "Amoosa ha'Paam" (Let me now die) [Bereshis 46:30]. The usual interpretation was that Yaakov expressed happiness: I can now die a happy man that I have been reunited with my beloved son Yosef. The Shaloh'h states that Yaakov was saying "Now that I am going to need to be dependent on my son Yosef to support me and provide for my needs here in Egypt – I would rather die!"

With this thought in mind, we can understand two things. First, we can understand why Yaakov was so nervous about his funeral arrangements that he made Yosef take an oath. Yaakov was very uncomfortable with the whole idea of asking his son for a favor. Second, we now have a new insight into Yosef's response: "I will act according to your words." It does not mean "I am going to go ahead and fulfill your wishes and bury you in the Land of Canaan." Anochi E'eseh kiDvarecha means "I also am going to do as you say. I also want to be buried in Eretz Yisrael!"

Yosef is saying to his father – the reason I am going to fulfill your request is not for your sake. I am going to do it for my sake because I want to be buried there as well! The greatest way of assuring that I will be buried in Eretz Yisrael is that when my children see that I schlepped you back to Eretz Yisrael, I can assume they will do the same for me. Yosef was in effect putting Yaakov's mind at ease. "Dear father, do not consider this a favor you are asking from me. It is in no way an imposition on your son because I am not doing it for you. I am doing it for me!"

#### **Not Why Weren't You Like Yosef? But Rather Why Didn't You Use the Spiritual Power That Is Our Legacy from Yosef?**

The Rambam [Yesodei HaTorah 5:10] paskens that if someone violates Torah law without being forced to, but merely as a callous and wanton act of disrespect for the Word of G-d, he has desecrated the Name of G-d (Chillul HaShem). This is not a case of someone who has a strong desire for pork or a lust to engage in promiscuous activity, rather, this speaks of someone who violates Torah law out of spite (l'hach'is). The Rambam continues that if a person does a mitzvah or refrains from doing an aveirah for no ulterior motive (not for seeking honor or reward or fear of punishment) but simply because it is the Will of G-d – he has Sanctified the Name of G-d. He gives as an example of this, Yosef's refraining from sin when tempted by the wife of Potiphar.

If a person sits in the privacy of his home – nobody sees him, nobody watches him, nobody knows what he is doing – and yet he refrains from doing an aveirah simply because the Ribono shel Olam said so, that is a Kiddush HaShem, by definition.

There is a famous Gemara [Yoma 35b]:

To the wicked person they say (prior to Judgement in the Next World) "Why did you not engage in Torah study?" If he says, "I was handsome and entangled with my evil inclination," they say to him "Were you any

more handsome than Yosef?" They say about Yosef HaTzadik that each and every day the wife of Potiphar would attempt to seduce him with words. It was a daily battle and yet he went ahead and refused her advances – not because of fear or honor but solely to fulfill the Will of the Almighty. We tell the wicked person: "Look at Yosef!" The Gemara concludes that Yosef is me'chayev ha'Resha'im. He is the paradigm of a handsome person who was tempted to sin by beautiful women, and yet he withstood those temptations.

The Sefas Emes asks a question here: We tell a wicked person "Why were you not you like Yosef?" The wicked person can have a quick comeback: "I was not like Yosef because my name was not Yosef haTzadik!" Suppose someone tells me "You know Rav Chaim Kanievsky has this big chumra that he observes – why don't you keep that chumra?" I will tell him "I don't know if you haven't noticed this, but I am not Rav Chaim Kanievsky! I am not on that spiritual level!" How can the Heavenly Court come to a new arrival and ask him "Why were you not like Yosef?" The answer he will give is obvious: "I am not Yosef! Yosef was the classic Tzadik Yesod Olam – what do you want from me?"

In order to understand the Sefas Emes' answer to this question, we must first grasp the implication of a pasuk in this week's parsha: The brothers were afraid of what Yosef might do to them after Yaakov died. He called them and said to them: "Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good: in order to accomplish – ka'yom ha'zeh – that a vast people be kept alive." [Bereshis 50:19-20].

What does the expression ka'yom ha'zeh (literally – like this day) mean in this sentence? The English translation in many Chumashim is "it is as clear as day". But the Be'er Moshe suggests another interpretation which is based on an earlier pasuk in Sefer Bereshis. When Yosef was faced with the seductive temptations of Potiphar's wife, the pasuk says "Va'yehi ka'yom ha'zeh" (and it was like on this day) [Bereshis 39:11]. The Be'er Moshe says the "Ka'yom ha'zeh" in Parshas VaYechi is alluding to the "Ka'yom ha'zeh" in Parshas VaYeshev. Meaning – Egypt was an amoral society, immersed in promiscuity. Not one Jewish woman in all the years of servitude had a willful promiscuous relation with someone other than her husband. Who gave Klal Yisrael the power to do that? It was Yosef HaTzadik. The fact that Yosef HaTzadik withstood the temptation and did not have a promiscuous relationship with Potiphar's wife gave Klal Yisrael the ability to withstand the temptations they would encounter in Egypt until they left over 200 years later!

Just like we all know that the ability to be moser nefer (experience martyrdom) comes from Avraham Avinu and we received so much from the Avos via the principle of Ma'asch Avos Siman L'Banim, similarly, the ability to withstand the temptations of sexual immorality in Egypt came from Yosef – the fact that he did not commit adultery with Potiphar's wife.

Says the Be'er Moshe: That is the meaning of "Ka'yom ha'zeh". Yosef tells his brothers – It is all part of the Master Plan to keep the people alive – not only alive physically, but alive spiritually as well! Do you know how your descendants will have the power to do that during two hundred years of Egyptian servitude? "Ka'yom ha'zeh". It was because ON THAT DAY I was able to overcome my Yetzer HaRah. The Ribono shel Olam placed me in that compromising position so that I should pass the test and pass on to my descendants the ability to withstand such tests. So too, He placed me in this situation, so that I could provide for your material needs at this time.

If that is the interpretation, we can now understand the answer of the Sefas Emes. The Sefas Emes says that when the Gemara says in Maseches Yoma that a person will be asked "How come you could not control your evil inclinations?" and they will cite for him the example of Yosef HaTzadik, they are not saying that they expect him to be like Yosef HaTzadik. They are saying "You have as a heritage, as a legacy from Yosef HaTzadik, the ability to do the same thing! That is part of your DNA."

It is not like saying "Why are you not like Rav Chaim Kanievsky? It is more fundamental than that. We are not saying you should be like Yosef. We are saying Yosef did something for the spiritual DNA of Klal Yisrael – that forever after they should have the capability of withstanding such temptation.

This is what the Rambam means in Yesodei HaTorah when he gives the example of Yosef HaTzadik as the classic Sanctifier of the Name of G-d. When Yosef told his brothers "G-d put me in Egypt – Ka'yom ha'zeh – he not only meant to save Klal Yisrael from hunger, but to give them the spiritual power to withstand temptations like he himself withstood 'On that day'."

*Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com  
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**Vayechi: Brothers in Prejudice**

**Ben-Tzion Spitz**

*A great many people think they are thinking when they are really rearranging their prejudices. - Edward R. Murrow*

Jacob, the patriarch of the family, the father of the twelve brothers who will form the future nation of Israel, is on his deathbed. He calls his sons into his room so that he can bless them and share with them his prophetic visions of their future.

Out of all the siblings, there are only two that he refers to as "brothers," Shimon and Levi. But the context is not a positive one. Jacob's parting statement to them reads as follows:

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel."

To put it mildly, Jacob's final words to Shimon and Levi seem to be the opposite of a blessing.

The Bechor Shor on Genesis 49:5 focuses on the word "brothers" and tries to dig deeper into Jacob's meaning and use of the word. He explains that Jacob is referring to a very basic principle of human socialization. Shimon and Levi were "brothers" in their nature, their disposition, and their prejudices. As a result, they regularly hung out with each other. They both possessed the trait of anger. Their ill will and negative thoughts reinforced each other and led them to violent and dangerous actions (the destruction of the city of Shechem and plotting to kill Joseph). The two of them formed their own echo chamber. When they thought perhaps that they were rationally discussing a topic, they were merely validating their dangerous ideas and emotions.

In that context, the Bechor Shor quotes perhaps the original formulation of "birds of a feather flock together" (attributed to William Turner, 1545), quoting the Babylonian Talmud (completed circa the year 500) "All fowl will live with its kind, and men with those like him" (Tractate Baba Kama 92b), a line which derives from the even older Book of Ben Sira 13:17 (circa 200 BCE) where Ben Sira writes "All flesh loveth its kind; And every man him that is like unto him."

In any case, Jacob's prophecy came to fruition. The descendants of both Shimon and Levi were dispersed throughout the territory of Israel, in part, to prevent their getting together and seeking future destructive council with each other.

While it is often nice to seek like-minded people, when it's about negative perspectives, it's better to seek out others.

*Dedication - To the Israeli Medical system for their incredible vaccine distribution effort.*

*Shabbat Shalom*

*Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.*

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**Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz**

**Parashat Vayechi**

**Different but Complementary**

In this week's Torah portion of Vayechi which concludes the book of Genesis, we listen to Jacob blessing his sons as they stand around his bed at the end of his days. Jacob bequeaths a blessing and a purpose to each son. A tribe is going to come of every son and the twelve tribes together will form a nation. Jacob's words shaped the nation and defined the different tribes as a mosaic made of pieces that are different from one another but that complement each other and form one big picture together.

Two of the tribes – Issachar and Zebulun – got blessings from Jacob that were connected and complementary. Zebulun was blessed with a skill for maritime trade: "Zebulun will dwell on the coast of the seas; he [will be] at the harbor of the ships, and his boundary will be at Zidon" (Genesis 49, 13). And Issachar was blessed with the ability to withstand carrying heavy loads: "Issachar is a bony donkey, lying between the boundaries... and he bent his shoulder to bear [burdens]..." (Ibid Ibid, 14 – 15). Our sages explained that this was not a physical burden but rather a spiritual one, carrying the yoke of the Torah: "...for Zebulun would engage in commerce and provide food for the tribe of Issachar, and they (the tribe of Issachar) would engage in (the study of) Torah" (Rashi). Meaning, Zebulun would support Issachar who dedicated his life to the study of Torah.

This begs an explanation since we know a person cannot pay another to keep commandments for him. Can you imagine someone paying his friend to put tefillin on for him, or to make kiddush on Shabbat for him? Of course not. So how is learning Torah different? Why is it enough for the tribe of Zebulun to support the tribe of Issachar? Furthermore, since Torah learning is required of each person to shape his personality, how could the tribe of Zebulun be exempt from it?

Actually, the sages did not mean to say that the tribe of Zebulun was exempt from the commandment to learn Torah. Like every Jew, they also had to learn Torah every day. A Jew cannot live a spiritual life with G-d at its center without learning Torah. We learn Torah not only because we are commanded to do so, but also because we are aware of its tremendous power to change and repair our ways. Even the tribe of Zebulun learned Torah.

But there is another facet to Torah learning that is national rather than personal. In addition to individuals learning Torah, the entire nation has a national obligation to learn Torah and raise people who will serve as the intellectual layer of G-d worshippers, teachers of halacha (Jewish law) and spiritual leaders. This is the entire nation's commandment. Every Jew must fulfill it, either by dedicating his life to learning Torah and teaching, or by supporting someone learning Torah for the benefit of the entire nation.

A national mission cannot be carried out by the entire nation. Every person has different and unique talents and there is no reason to expect everyone to carry out identical missions. Every Jew does his job, one that suits his talents and abilities, and together – when each person does his best to fulfill his own personal role – we create a nation on the foundations of Torah.

When there is no expectation of everyone to behave identically, social tensions are also reduced. Every group, every tribe, and every person understands that one person's job is not necessarily another person's. My mission is not his so there is no reason to be angry at someone who is devotedly fulfilling his own special mission. The twelve tribes were different from one another. They were not expected to be similar, let alone identical. But they were all required to follow the path of Torah, the path of G-d, to live a life of loving-kindness and justice. When this is understood, love and solidarity can exist, with each tribe and each group contributing its own unique contribution to the building of the entire nation.

*The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.*

### **Rav Kook Torah**

#### **Vayechi: Jacob Did Not Die**

#### **Chanan Morrison**

Third-century scholar Rabbi Yochanan made an astounding claim regarding Jacob:

Rabbi Yochanan stated, 'Our father Jacob did not die.'

Rabbi Nachman asked, 'Was it in vain that they eulogized Jacob and embalmed his body and buried him?'

Rabbi Yochanan responded, 'I derive this from a verse: 'Fear not, Jacob My servant... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity' (Jeremiah 30:10). The verse likens Jacob to his offspring: just as his offspring lives, so too, Jacob lives.' (Ta'anit 5b)

What did Rabbi Yochanan mean that Jacob did not die? If he intended to say that Jacob's soul is still alive, that requires no verse - the souls of all righteous people are eternal. And if he meant that Jacob's body did not die, several verses explicitly state that he died (for example, "Joseph's brothers realized that their father had died" (Gen. 50:15)).

The medieval Talmudic commentary Tosafot explains that, when describing Jacob's death, the Torah only says that he "expired," not that he "died" (Gen. 49:33). We need to examine the difference between these two verbs.

Also, why did Rabbi Yochanan make this claim of eternity only for Jacob, and not for Abraham and Isaac?

#### **Two Aspects of Death**

When a person dies, two things occur. First, the bodily functions (breathing, pumping of the heart, and so on) cease. This is called geviya, expiring. The natural cessation of bodily functions is a sign of a virtuous, well-lived life, since an unhealthy and profligate lifestyle brings about an early demise of the body.

The second aspect of death concerns the soul. After the sin of Adam, death was decreed in order to allow the soul to purify itself from its contact with the body's physical drives and desires. Death purges the soul of those sensual influences that distance one from true closeness to God. The aspect of death that cleanses the soul is called mitah.

Thus, Solomon wrote that "Love is strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6). How is love like death? Just as death purifies the soul from the body's physical wants, so too, a truly intense love for God will overwhelm any other form of desire.

#### **The Impact of Intermediate Actions**

All actions that we perform during our lifetime make a deep impression on our souls. The soul is influenced not only by our ultimate goals but also by the intermediate actions we take to achieve those goals. Sometimes, these actions are themselves worthy means for attaining our goals, and their impact on the soul is a positive one.

At other times, a specific goal is achieved via means that contradict the overall objective. This is like scaffolding that is erected when building. The scaffolding is needed to aid in the construction, but is removed once the building is complete. So too, these temporary means will be canceled after the goal is attained, and their impure influence on the soul must be purged.

#### **Jacob's Family was Complete**

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are called the Avot (forefathers), since the main objective of their lives was to father a holy nation.

Abraham and Isaac's efforts towards this goal included using means that needed to be relinquished once the objective is attained - i.e., they bore and raised Ishmael and Esau. Even though these offspring contested the true goal of the Avot, they were needed in order to accomplish their overall aim. Therefore, the Torah uses the word mitah to describe Abraham and Isaac's death. It was necessary to purge the influence of fathering and raising these non-Jewish nations on their souls, since this occupation conflicted with their soul's inner mission.

But while the souls of Abraham and Isaac required the cleansing effect of mitah, Jacob's "bed was complete." All of his children were included within the people of Israel. Jacob did not need to occupy himself with any transitory means; all of his efforts were eternal, in line with God's design for His world. Therefore the verse says, "For I, God, have not changed; and you, the children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). The eternal nature of the Jewish people is particularly bound to Jacob, the forefather who "did not die."

In certain respects, Jacob did die, but this was only in personal matters, due to the baseness of the physical world and its negative influence upon the human soul. That was not the true essence of Jacob's soul. When the

Torah describes Jacob's passing, it does so in terms of his life's goal, as the father of the Jewish people. The Torah does not use the word "death," since there was no need to purge his soul of its ties to its worldly occupations.

This explains why we do not find in the Torah that Jacob's sons eulogized their father. Only the Egyptians did so - "A profound mourning for Egypt" (Gen. 50:11). Jacob had assisted the Egyptians by bringing the years of famine to an early end. From the standpoint of the Egyptians, Jacob had died, and the connection of his soul to these matters was severed. Therefore, the Egyptians had reason to mourn.

But Jacob's sons, who knew that Jacob was still alive with them, had no need to eulogize their father.

(*Gold from the Land of Israel* (now available in paperback) pp. 95-98. Adapted from *Midbar Shur*, pp. 242-251)

Illustration image: 'Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph' (Jan Victors, 1650)

### Shema Yisrael Torah Network

#### Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Vayechi

פרק ו' יי' תשפ"א

ויהי יעקב בארץ מצרים

**Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt. (47:28)**

Rashi asks (based on a *Midrash*), "Why is this *parsha setumah*, closed?" Despite the fact that *Vayechi* begins a new *parshah*, it is "closed." This means it is not set off by the usual number of spaces that would normally mark it as distinct from the previous *parsha*. (In other words, when there are no spaces it is difficult to discern the beginning of a new *parsha*.) Rashi offers his responses. I would like to focus on a meaningful explanation which *Horav Nissan Alpert*, zl, renders.

Life (can be – and is) unpredictable and mysterious. Life is like a "closed book," its final chapters elusive and hidden until one reaches the end. Some individuals cannot tolerate the suspense of reading a mystery novel. Thus, they turn to the pages at the end of the book to find out what happens at the end before they actually read the book. This cannot be done with life. Man is formed from clay (*Adam, yesodo mei afar*), and he goes through life wondering when his end will come. When he is in a period of distress he wonders from whence will come his salvation. We all know that good might emanate from situations that appear (to our mortal vision) to be absolutely bad and vice versa. We never know when – or from where – our salvation will be delivered. (The only thing that we know for certain is that whatever will come, it will come from Hashem.)

Yaakov *Avinu* lived in the land of Egypt. Did the Patriarch ever imagine that the "Egyptian years" would be the best ones of his life? Did he believe that one day he would be reunited with Yosef? Certainly, he hoped that the education and inspiration that he imparted to Yosef would infuse him with positive spiritual character and moral traits, but did he ever dream that Yosef would achieve and maintain *tzaddik, righteous, status?*

Life is filled with surprises – some good and some that are not so (to the mortal eye) good. At the end of the day, the term *olam* (the Hebrew word for world), which shares its *shoresh, root*, with *he'elam/ne'elam*, concealment, is very appropriate. Life is a *parsha setumah*, closed book. We live in an *olam*, world, in which much of life is *ne'elam*, concealed. How do we do it? How do we successfully, confidently, navigate the sea of life? *Bitachon, trust in Hashem*. Without it, we are *ne'evad, lost at sea*.

We have no dearth of stories which demonstrate the significance of *bitachon* and to the lengths to which our people have gone in their commitment to Hashem. The following is a classic story which I remembered this morning, as a good friend rushed out early from *davening* to be at an important business meeting. The story was related by the venerable *Bobover Rebbe*, zl, *Horav Shlomo Halberstam*.

A follower of *Horav Mordechai Chernobyl*, zl, had a particular habit which he revealed when he visited the *Rebbe* to petition his blessing. The *Rebbe* asked the *chassid* to recount his daily schedule. "First, I go to the market to purchase goods and wares for my business.

Then, I go to *shul* to *daven*. Following *davening*, I go to the market to sell my wares at a profit."

The *Rebbe* wondered, "Why do you start your day by purchasing wares and only afterwards *daven*?" The man replied, "The good merchandise is available early in the morning. If I wait until after I *daven* to purchase my wares, I would be selling inferior quality, because that is all I would find."

It seemed like a common-sense response, one that any of us might agree is acceptable. The *Rebbe* countered with a story about a *melamed*, itinerant Torah teacher, who earned his livelihood by journeying from town to town teaching children Torah. He would eke out a meager livelihood from a profession that kept him on the road and away from home most of the year. In the meantime, his wife and children lived on the debt they incurred, which he paid when he returned home. Understandably, his year's salary meant a lot to him, since it had already been spent.

The teacher was paid for his services with various coins: the wealthy paid with gold; the middle class "preferred" silver; those of more modest means paid with nickel or copper. The teacher made a money belt for himself in which he divided his coins into four pouches. After a year of teaching, he packed his bag and prepared for his journey home.

As the first *Shabbos* of his return trip approached, he knew that he had to remove his money belt and find a place to leave it for safekeeping. At first, he decided to bury it, but, when he saw people in the distance, he became paranoid and alarmed. Pressed for time, he decided the only alternative was to make a dash to the local Jewish inn and pray that the innkeeper with whom he would hopefully deposit the belt was honest and upright. This was a year's earnings, which he could not afford to lose.

His doubts coursed through his mind the entire *Shabbos*. The innkeeper was accustomed to this, since many a Jewish traveler left his money with him for *Shabbos*. As soon as *Maariv*, the evening service of *Motzoei Shabbos* began, the innkeeper brought the money belt to the teacher to allay his fears. "Do not worry," he said. "It is all there – every coin." To the amazement of the innkeeper, right in middle of his supplications, the teacher began counting his coins. (I guess some things do not change.) First came the gold coins, which were all there. The he opened the pouch containing the silver coins and ascertained that everything was there. He then proceeded to do the same with the nickel and copper coins. At this point, the innkeeper, who had observed the entire process, was shocked and a bit perplexed.

"I do not understand you," the innkeeper began. "When you saw that all of your gold and silver coins were intact, why did you not trust me then? Yet, you continued to count the ridiculously less valuable nickel and copper coins."

At this point, the *Chernobyl Rebbe* turned to his *chassid* and asked, "I want to present you with the same question that the innkeeper asked the teacher. Every single morning, you wake up and observe that Hashem has returned your *neshamah*, soul, your body, your very life – which is the equivalent of (the teacher's) gold and silver coins. If Hashem can be "trusted" to return the valuables, what makes you think that He will not provide for your livelihood (your nickel and copper coins)? I think you should work on increasing your trust in Hashem and believe that He will give you the physical sustenance that you require. You have no need to rush off to purchase your goods before you *daven Shacharis*. Hashem takes precedence." P. S. Things have not changed. When we rush out of *davening*, we show where our priorities lie and how much trust we have that all will be provided for us.

ויברך את יוסף ... יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי ... ויברכם ביום ההוא לאמר בך  
בברך יישראאל

**He blessed Yosef ... shall bless the lads and shall call them my name... And he blessed on that day, saying: "In you shall Yisrael (be) blessed."** (48:15,16,20)

Yaakov *Avinu* actually gave two blessings: one to Yosef, and one to Ephraim and Menashe. Upon reading the text of the blessings, however, we confront an anomaly: Yaakov actually directed the blessing

meant for Yosef at his sons – Ephraim and Menashe. The blessing that Yaakov *Avinu* gave to Ephraim and Menashe was all about Yosef. Concerning Yosef's blessing, the Torah writes, *Yevareich es ha'naarim*, "He (Hashem) should bless the lads," while, concerning Ephraim and Menashe, the Patriarch said, "In you (singular), shall *Yisrael* be blessed," which implies that the blessing was to him. *Horav Yisrael Belsky*, zl, posits that these blessings touch upon the greatest blessing one can give a father: that he have children that will do him proud, children who will be a credit to him and his legacy. Likewise, every child wants (or should want) that his parents be considered blessed people on account of him. Knowing that one is a source of pleasure and satisfaction to his parents is an amazing blessing. We may suggest that when children have parents of whom they are proud, it is a blessing. Knowing that your "last name" does not cause you grief as a result of a parent's ignoble reputation is a blessing. Furthermore, I think the Torah is alluding to a double-edged responsibility that parents and children have towards one another. A father/mother should think twice before undertaking an activity that might shed ignominy upon their children's good name – and vice-versa.

These blessings, however, have greater significance, as the *Rosh Yeshivah* explains. Parents are a link in the transmission of *Yiddishkeit*/Jewish heritage to their children, the next generation. When parents eschew their responsibility to live up to the elevated lifestyle of *emunah* and *bitachon*, faith and trust in the Almighty, bequeathed to them by our forebears, they have failed not only themselves, but also their progeny. If parents do not live up to their obligations to Hashem, the continuity of the blessing is severed, and, rather than inherit blessing, their children are heirs to a curse.

When Shifrah and Puah, at risk to their own lives, saved the Jewish infants, Hashem gave them a unique reward. The spiritual trait, *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, which gave them the fortitude to do what was right, despite the decree of the evil despot, Pharaoh, became their permanent trait and legacy transmitted through the generations to the members of their respective families: *Malchus Bais David* – the Davidic dynasty; the Houses of *Kehunah* and *Leviyah*. Thus, descendants of Shifrah and Puah became heirs to a noble, eternal spiritual gene: *yiraas Shomayim*. The houses of *Kehunah* and *Leviyah* and *Malchus Bais David* – spiritually represented the material/physical leadership of the eternal Jewish nation. Their blessing was not a one-time deal, but rather, a blessing of *nitzchiyus*, eternity, that will never be lost.

When Yaakov blessed Yosef through his children, he signified that the entire Patriarchal legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov would flow through Yosef to his children, with no distortion or diminishment in any way. He blessed Yosef that he should be able to transmit his spiritual inheritance without embellishment, in its entirety. This is all fine and well, but singling out two grandsons and granting them tribal status is, in and of itself, a recipe for envy. To bless the one son who was at the center of the controversy between the brothers, which ultimately was the reason for so much strife and so many years of anguish, seems to be counterproductive. Yaakov *Avinu* knew all this, and he certainly was not naïve. Yet, he believed that *Klal Yisrael* would understand that they will always have one individual who stands out, who is blessed with extraordinary capabilities, and who, despite all of his unique attributes, remains unpretentious and self-effacing. The Patriarch prayed that *Klal Yisrael* would view these lads with *nachas* and admiration, not with envy. He prayed that their success not fall prey to the destructive power of the evil eye, and that they garner respect, not opposition; admiration, not envy. At the end of the day, one should not go out of his way to call attention to himself or his child, but, at the same time, stunting a gifted child just because of what others might say is just as wrong. The only true competition that we have in life is ourselves. As such, we must strive to be the best that we can be, thereby fulfilling our own individual potential.

בְּךָ יְבוּרֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאָמֵר יְשִׁימֶךְ אֲלָקִים כָּאָפָרִים וּכְמַנְשָׁה

**By you shall *Yisrael* bless saying, "May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe."** (48:20)

Yaakov *Avinu* assured Yosef that, throughout the ages, Jewish parents would bless their sons that they grow up to be like Ephraim and Menashe. Why should these two grandsons of Yaakov, children raised in the pagan, hedonistic society that Egypt epitomized, be the paradigms of Jewish parents' hopes for their children? At first blush, the mere fact that they "made it" in Egypt speaks volumes about them and their upbringing. If so, Yaakov would be speaking only with regard to the *galus* Jew, who is challenged by the non-Jewish, assimilationist environment. This is obviously not the case. Yaakov spoke to all Jews, under all conditions, whether they are living in *Yerushalayim* with the *Bais Hamikdash* extant, or in *galus*. Ephraim and Menashe are the exemplars of the *ben Torah* for whom every parent wants his son to aspire to become. Why? What made them so special – even more than the *Shevatim*, Tribes, that included the greatest leaders of *Klal Yisrael* from whom the nation is nurtured?

*Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel*, zl, explains that Ephraim and Menashe exemplified the Torah Jew who overcame the phenomenon of *yeridas ha'doros*, the decline of the generations. This general concept posits that the further removed we are from *Har Sinai*, the weaker we are spiritually. *Chazal* (*Shabbos* 112b) state the inevitable rule: If the previous generations were like angels (we perceive them to be angels), then we are humans (we may call ourselves human beings). If the previous generations were humans, then we are like donkeys." (Obviously, this *Chazal* begs explanation.) On the surface, maintaining our spiritual status quo is an uphill challenge. This becomes even more challenging when we view our lives through the lens of the previous generations. They achieved so much despite the many challenges and obstacles which they had to confront. Ephraim and Menashe not only remained totally committed and wholly observant in a spiritual climate that was anything but conducive to spiritual growth, but they were able to achieve tribe status. They were counted as Reuven and Shimon. Concerning their spiritual growth, they experienced no generational decline. This is the blessing that we give our children: Be like the great leaders of the previous generation. Let them be your models; let them be your lodestar and inspiration.

How did Yosef merit not one, but two sons, who triumphed over the malady of *yeridas ha'doros*? *Rav Elya Baruch* explains that Yosef lived with *d'mus d'yukno shel Aviv*, an image of his father, constantly before him. Even in the cesspool that was Egypt, in the dungeon, against the seductive force of Potifar's wife, his father's image was always present in his mind. He was never alone. Surely this is how he raised his sons. When Ephraim and Menashe grew up, they saw Yaakov *Avinu* before them at all times. He was not merely their grandfather, he was their father, their *Rebbe*. Their father presented everything that they learned as coming from Yaakov. Is it any wonder that they achieved tribal status? They lived as Yaakov's sons!

This is the form of *chinuch*, Torah education, we received in *Telshe Yeshivah* sixty years ago. My *Rebbeim* and *Roshei Yeshivah* were, for the most part, survivors of the Holocaust. They had themselves been students in *Telz*, Lithuania, and the scene of learning, coupled with the image and intensity of their saintly *Rebbeim*, was fresh in their minds. When we had *shiur*, it was almost like a group of young, American boys being transported to the little classroom in the *mechinah* of *Telz* Europe. Our *Rebbeim* spoke about their *Rebbeim* as if they were present. The image they presented to us was palpable. We were imbued with love for Torah and a competitiveness to excel. We were competing, however, with *talmidim* from *Kamenitz*, *Grodno*, *Slabodka*, *Baranowitz*. We were in a different milieu. Our *Rebbeim* had never left; so they invited us to join them.

With regard to the *d'mus d'yukno shel aviv* (or *imo*) (*Yerushalmi Horiyos* 2:5) that saved Yosef from falling prey to Potifar's wife's advances, I wonder how many of us are concerned regarding the personal *d'mus d'yukno* that we present to our children. Yosef was saved from disaster due to the image his father presented to him. Our children grow up with the values we impart to them through instruction and by our demeanor. They might forget the instruction, but the demeanor will remain with them throughout their lives.

אל תיראו כי התחה אלקים אנו ואהם השבתם עלי רעה אלקיים חשבה לשובה  
"Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended the harm, G-d intended it for good. (50:19,20)

In the last few *parshiyos*, we have been reading about Yaakov Avinu's sons, the *Shivtei Kah*, Twelve Tribes of *Klal Yisrael*, the closest link to our Patriarchs from whom our Nation descends. We refer to them by name and relate their activities; their sale of Yosef, followed by their encounter with the viceroy of Egypt, aka, Yosef; their ensuing remorse over their lack of empathy with his pain; their being supported by Yosef in Egypt; and, finally, their apology and request for absolution for their misdeed. Reading all this, we might lose sight of the greatness of these individuals. They were no simple human beings; they were refined to the level of Heavenly Angels in the guise of men. Their "failings" were relative to their extreme level of spirituality. Their successes were indicative of their spiritual edification. Clearly, they were not typical human beings.

When Yaakov Avinu was *niftar*, passed away, the brothers noted that Yosef's relationship with them had been altered. The camaraderie that seemed to prevail during Yaakov's life suddenly came to an end. The brothers worried that the time of reckoning had arrived, since their father was no longer alive to protect them. The brothers attempted to assuage the feelings they perceived Yosef was holding against them. *Targum Yonasan ben Uziel* teaches that the brothers sent the sons of Bilhah to speak with Yosef. During the debacle that preceded the controversy and eventual sale of Yosef, he had been closest with them. Since they were the sons of a co-wife who had originally been a maid-servant, Yosef was able to identify with them. They were all more or less in the same boat. *Bnei Bilhah* presented to Yosef, on behalf of all the brothers, their sincere apologies for what had occurred years earlier. They even claimed that their saintly father had instructed them to speak with Yosef and that Yosef should acquiesce and absolve them.

*Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 100:8), quoted by *Horav Eliyahu Svei*, zl, identify Yosef's specific behavior that indicated a change in attitude towards them: When their father was alive, Yosef ate his meals with his brothers. Following Yaakov's passing, Yosef no longer invited them for dinner. Apparently, out of respect for Yaakov, he had eaten with them. That reason no longer applied. This concerned them.

Yosef replied to their unasked query: "You thought that I was angry and preparing to take revenge. It could not be further from the truth. When Father was alive, he had me sit at the head of the table, superseding Reuven, the first born, and Yehudah, the monarch. I acquiesced out of profound respect to our father. Now, I just cannot do it. I will not sit at the head of the table when Reuven and Yehudah sit at regular places. It is not my place to lord over my brothers. On the other hand, as viceroy of Egypt, it would be disgraceful for me not to sit at the head of the table. To circumvent the problem, I do not eat together with you. If I cannot do it respectfully, I will not do it."

The *Rosh Yeshivah* views this *Chazal* as a characterization of the incredible spiritual/moral character of Yosef *HaTzaddik*. For seventeen years, at the behest of his father, Yosef sat at the head of the table. We become complacent creatures of habit after a few weeks. Yosef did this for seventeen years! Yet, the moment his father passed, he refused to return to the head of the table. It belonged to Reuven or Yehudah. No one but Yosef would question his place at the head of the table. It was not right. His brothers superseded him. Reuven was the firstborn, a position which elicited respect. Yehudah was royalty, and, as a monarch, he was obligated to sit at the head of the table. Only one solution could resolve this problem. He would not join them for the meal.

As the *Rosh Yeshivah* asks: Can we imagine what it means to sit in an exalted place/position for seventeen years and immediately rescind it? Just like that? These, the *Rosh Yeshivah* posits, are not the actions of a human being. These are the actions, the sensitivity, of a *malach*, angel. We now have a glimpse into the world of the *Shivtei Kah*.

#### *Va'an Tefillah*

– ברכת Kohanim. The Priestly Blessing.

The last blessing of *Shemoneh Esrai* is the blessing of Peace. Without *shalom*, we are in a negative state and unable to enjoy the preceding blessings. Rather than explain the blessings, I will relate a vignette that occurred shortly after the *Brisker Rav*, zl, moved to Yerushalayim. The *Rav* *davened* at home with a *minyan*, quorum, comprised of exactly ten worshippers. He had one issue concerning the *minyan*. In *Eretz Yisrael*, real *Kohanim* recite *Bircas Kohanim* every day. In order to achieve this, it is critical that one member of every *minyan* be a *Kohen*, unless the *minyan* can "borrow" a *Kohen* from another *minyan*. As *Rosh Hashanah* loomed closer, the *Rav* was able to obtain the services of a *Kohen* who, albeit *davening* at another *minyan*, would arrive at the end of *Mussaf* for the Priestly Service. He regretted that he could not join them for *Shacharis*. *Mussaf* arrived, but the *Kohen* did not. He *davened* at another *minyan*, which took its time with *Shacharis*.

The worshippers at the *Rav's minyan* were becoming impatient. Some suggested that they begin *Mussaf* without the *Kohen*. The *Rav* was immovable. They would wait as long as it would take. After a while, the *Kohen* arrived filled with apologies, and the service commenced. When *davening* had concluded, the *Rav* turned to his select group of worshippers and said, "You have much to learn from the *Chassidim*. They travel for days, weeks, even months, in the blazing heat and frigid winter, through pelting rain and freezing snow, for one purpose: to spend *Yom Tov* with their *Rebbe*. Why do they come? They yearn for that *brachah*, blessing, which the *Rebbe* gives them. It melts away all the trouble, and the entire journey becomes worthwhile. You have the opportunity to receive *Bircas Kohanim*, concerning which Hashem declares, *V'samu es Shemi al Bnei Yisrael v'a'ani Avracheim*; 'And they will place My Name on *Bnei Yisrael*, and I will bless them.' Yet, for Hashem's blessing you, too, are too anxious to wait a mere half hour!"

לעילוי נשמה לאה בת ר' זלמן ע"ה נפטרת י"ד טבת תג'ג.ב.ה

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#### *The Four "Exiles"*

*By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff*

In several places in Tanach and midrashim, there is reference to the Jewish people being subjected to four exiles. Most midrashim and commentaries understand that the four empires (or exiles) that ruled over the Jewish people described by Zechariah (Chapter 6) and Daniel (Chapters 2 and 7) refer to Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome (see, for example, Ramban, *Bereishis* 36:23 and *Bamidbar* 24:20). However, the *ibn Ezra* (Daniel 2:40) and others disagree, noting that the Roman Empire has long disintegrated, and a new "empire," that of the Moslem Arabs, swept across a huge tract of the world. The *ibn Ezra* concludes that since Greek and Roman culture were very similar, the third gulos is Greece and Rome together, and the Arabs are the fourth.

Golus Bavel

We are, unfortunately, very familiar with the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash by Nevuchadnetzar the King of Bavel, much of which is described in various places in Tanach. The city and country of Bavel was in Mesopotomia, literally, the area "between the rivers" – the Tigris and the Euphrates – which form the center of the contemporary country of Iraq. To this day, descendants of the Jewish communities who lived in Iraq, where Jews lived for 2,500 years, are referred to as Jews of Bavel. Persia

Not many years after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, the powerful empire of Bavel was overrun by the Persian Empire. The Jews were now under the authority of a new nation. Many Jews spread across all 127 provinces (which probably means 127 major cities and their environs) of the new empire, and they were certainly known in the capital city of Shushan, located in modern Iran. Although Persia and Greece are known as malchuyos, their relationship to the Jews does not fit the classic definition of an exile or a diaspora, since the Jews were not driven from the country where they lived. Persia overtook Bavel, and thereby changed the culture and indeed geography of where Jews

lived, but it is not accurate to say that we were “exiled” to new places. It is, however, accurate to say that, under the new management, Jews now spread out from Bavel to the entire ancient world.

By the way, this period of time coincides with the end of the period of the Tanach. The books of this era include Esther, Chaggai, Zecharia, Malachi, Daniel, Ezra and Nechemiah. Under Persian rule, Jews were permitted to return to Eretz Yisroel and build the second Beis Hamikdash. From a Torah perspective, the leadership of the Jewish people is the group called the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, the Men of the Great Assembly. Among the many things they developed was our structure of tefillah and brochos, as well as many takanos. One of these takanos created the current structure of our kerias haTorah in which we call up at least three people and read at least ten pesukim.

Greece, or more accurately, Hellenism

According to all opinions (I will explain shortly what I mean), the next “exile” was Greece, or, probably more accurately, the Greek culture and philosophy that spread across the entire Middle East and included sections of Europe and Africa and what is usually called “south Asia.”

Alexander the Great, referred to by Chazal as Alexander Mokdon, Alexander of Macedonia, swept away all before him. His father, Philip of Macedonia, expanded from his small country in north-western Greece (or south-western Balkans, depending on which term is considered politically correct this week) and eventually conquered all of Greece -- no small accomplishment, when you realize that the Greeks were frequently at war with one another, and each city was in its own country. Building on his father’s conquests, Alexander established the largest empire the western world had known to his day -- from the Balkans to India, and even extending southwestwardly to include Egypt.

From a Jewish perspective, Alexander’s era coincides with the end of the period of the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, and the beginning of the era of the Mishnah. We have all heard the story of how Alexander dismounted and prostrated himself to Shimon Hatzadik, who was the kohein gadol, and was the last of the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah. In acknowledgment of Alexander’s sparing the citadel that is the Beis Hamikdash and the city of Yerushalayim, at this time a fully functional and Jewish city again, the Jews of the era accepted upon themselves to name their sons after Alexander, thus forever making his name, and its Jewish shortening, Sender, into Jewish names.

As a conqueror, Alexander made his worst mistake when, at the age of 33, he got sick and died. Although he left an heir, the baby was not given any opportunity to create a dynasty. Alexander’s empire was divided among his generals, several of whom did succeed in creating dynasties. From a Jewish perspective, the two generals that were most important were Ptolemy, who ruled from Alexandria, Egypt, which soon became the location of the largest Jewish community in the world, and Seleucus, who set up his capital in Antioch, then considered part of Syria. Although the geographic and familial origins of the empire were no longer Greek, the culture spread by all the Hellenistic empires was completely Greek and a very powerful cultural influence.

One of the Seleucid emperors, Antiochus Epiphanes, went on a rampage to destroy Judaism, including the mitzvos of bris milah, Shabbos, the study of the Torah, and various other takkanos as we know from the Chanukah story. Golus Yovon was a spiritual golus, not a geographic one. It was a war between religion and assimilation. This was probably the first instance of Jewish history in which the main fighters against the Torah were Jews – self-hating Jews, whom we call the Misyavnim, who were intent on assimilating completely into Greek culture, or redefining their Judaism so that it has nothing to do with anything Jewish or G-dly. (Does this not sound very familiar?)

Rome

According to most opinions, the fourth golus is that of Rome, which, after establishing control of the ancient world from Britain to India, eventually obliterated the Beis Hamikdash and the city of Yerushalayim, murdered thousands, and possibly millions of Jews, driving the Jews from our homeland and ruthlessly annihilated the post-churban state of Bar Kochba with incredible cruelty and bloodshed. At the time of the Mishnah and Gemara, Jews had already dispersed as far west as Spain,

and another aftermath of the Roman conquests was that Jews spread first to Rome, northward to northern Italy and eventually to Germany and France, thereby creating Ashkenazic Jewry. In the course of many centuries, descendants of these Jews moved eastward, forming the vast Jewish communities in Poland, Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe.

As we mentioned previously, The ibn Ezra contends that the Arab Empire was the fourth malchus. How does the existence of the Arab empire fit into the picture according to others? Many In answer to the ibn Ezra’s observation that there was subsequently an Arab empire, many understand that the Christian world, and then its sequel, the modern golus, are all continuations of Rome. Others contend that the Arabic culture, which in the time of Middle Ages was heavily immersed in Greek thought, science and medicine, can also be considered a continuation of the previous goluyos. Some commentaries explain that the statue representing the “fourth empire” in Daniel is made of clay mixed with iron – an allusion of the travails of Rome combined with the Arabic caliphates and conquests.

The Arabs

As I mentioned above, according to the ibn Ezra, the fourth malchus is that of the Arabs. This malchus is a bit different from the others, in the sense that it was never ruled by one individual king or one dynasty. Mohammed, himself, succeeded only in conquering a few cities in the middle of the Arabian Desert. But his spiritual descendants eventually conquered from the Pyrenees Mountains that border between France and Spain, through the northern third of Africa, including also all the countries immediately south of the Sahara Desert -- Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Sudan, Nigeria -- the entire Middle East, almost all of western Asia and south Asia, as far east as the Spice Islands, now called Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. This “empire” ruled a wide band from the Atlantic Ocean through the Indian Ocean, until it reached the Pacific.

A lesson!

The actual two destructions of Judea are technically not miraculous. Both catastrophes took place according to the normal course of events. How could tiny Judea, located at a very strategic crossroads of three continents, have avoided falling prey to the rising Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman and Arab powers?! Indeed, the location of Judea was the most unfortunate one possible for a small state that wished to protect its independence.

It was not Judea’s downfall that was miraculous. The miracle was the existence of Judea, an existence for which every natural prerequisite was absent. It could exist only because of Divine intervention, and this is true to this day – when we look to Hashem for His Leadership, we are safe

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[https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2020/parsha/ryud\\_vayechi.html](https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2020/parsha/ryud_vayechi.html)

**Rabbi Benjamin Yudin**

**No Strings Attached**

As we complete the book of Bereishis we must constantly remind ourselves that there are no Bible stories or narratives, only Bible lessons. Parshas Vayechi begins with Yaakov beseeching Yosef that he not be buried in Egypt. This request is couched by requesting of Yosef, “chessed v’emes.” Rashi, citing the Medrash, teaches that chessed that is done with the dead is chessed shel emes as one cannot anticipate any reciprocation from the dead.

In reality I believe the Torah is teaching us not only this particular lesson which has provided the name of the burial societies throughout the millennia of “chessed shel emes”, but is teaching the very important principle that ideally all of one’s chessed is to be performed without the expectation of reciprocation. Thus, we find in the long narrative that the Torah devotes to Eliezer’s finding a wife for Yitzchak, when Rivkah complies with Eliezer’s noble requests, he thanks Hashem (24:27) “who has not withheld chasdo v’amito - His kindness and truth - from my master.” Clearly, we are not dealing with any service or favor to the dead, but rather the Torah is portraying chessed on the highest level. Note that the Seforno (24:22) explains why Eliezer gave Rivkah the jewelry in recognition of her service even before he asked her for her

name and her family as he was astonished by her genuine altruism, not asking or expecting anything in return. An example of chessed shel emes.

Similarly, we find in the book of Yehoshua (2:12-14) that Rachav, who hides the two spies sent by Yehoshua and saves their lives, requests of them that they swear that just as she has done chessed with them, they too will do chessed with her family by saving them when the Jewish people conquer the land. The spies respond to her that when Hashem gives us the land, we will do with you chessed v'emes. The commentary Metzudas Dovid teaches that they responded that unlike you who are certainly performing chessed but looking for reciprocation in kind, we will extend to you chessed in its pristine form namely without reciprocation.

I believe the following can shed additional light on the term emes with its being devoid of personal subjectivity. The Rambam in chapter 2 of Moreh Nevuchim responds to the following question: at first glance it seems bizarre that when Adam defies G-d and eats from the forbidden fruit, he is rewarded for his transgression. After all, the unique characteristic that separates man from the animal is his intelligence, so is it not strange that after defying his Creator he is rewarded with the knowledge of good and bad? The Rambam answers that indeed Adam had intelligence prior to his eating, as we are told in the first chapter of Bereishis, that he was created in the image of G-d, understood by Bereishis Rabba (8:11) "lehavin u'lehaskill - to understand and to gain wisdom." Therefore, continues the Rambam, prior to Adam's sinning his level of intelligence was absolute, namely true and false. Now, man imbibed the knowledge of good and bad. His original knowledge was objective, now he has the gray area of subjectivity.

This may be clearly understood in the following way. For one man to hit another one is bad; this is a true statement. However, if you tell two men to put on shorts, sneakers, and gloves, call it boxing, call it a sport, it is now acceptable for one man to hit another even if, as often time happens, it can lead to serious injury. Prior to his eating, man's intelligence was objective; like two and two equals four, similarly his values were pure, straight forward, without subjectivity. All this changed with much gray overshadowing the prior black and white perspective.

In Eishel Chayil, Shlomo Hamelech refers to the Torah as Toras Chessed. The Talmud reminds us that the Torah begins with Hashem's chessed of providing clothing for Adam and Chava, and ends with His chessed of burying Moshe. We are commanded to do chessed as the Torah teaches (Devarim 28:9), "vehalachta b'drachav", to go in his image, to emulate Hashem. As He is the practitioner of constant chessed

shel emes, meaning all of His kindness is done with complete and total altruism, as the Ramchal says in Derech Hashem, "Derech hatov le'haytiv - the nature of The Good One is to extend goodness." Hashem created a magnificent world and showers mankind with abundant blessings every second of their existence without needing nor expecting anything in return.

Thus, before performing a chessed, be it bikur cholim, nichum aveilum, or hachnasas kallah, one should ideally say I am about to fulfill the mitzvah of vehalachta b'drachav, emulating Hashem. One should strive to therefore extend help, whenever possible, anonymously, not leaving the recipient of your kindness with the feeling of indebtedness to you.

Case in point; a beautiful story occurred to reflect this message well. A boy with dyslexia and special needs was taught for many months the wrong haftorah. When the family realized the mistake it was much too late to even attempt to teach him the correct one. They asked the late Reb Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l if anything could be done and he ruled that the boy should read the haftorah he studied. He instructed the father to tell the gabbai and congregation that this was in accordance with Rabbi Auerbach's teaching. Anticipating that the congregation might be troubled and concerned regarding the legitimacy of the ruling, the aged rabbi, who was close to 80 years old at the time, walked from Shaarei Tzedek to Sanhedria to personally be present for the reading of the haftorah. What could Rav Shlomo Zalman have anticipated to receive from the family? He exited and taught all of us how we are to perform chessed v'emes, chessed of the highest order.

COVID has hit all of us in a most devastating way. Among the many harsh consequences has been the imposed social distancing which has manifested itself in disallowing one to have Shabbos and yom tov guests. Too many individuals who live alone and who are isolated by the pandemic have suffered greatly from this imposition. It behooves us to act as Avraham Avinu, whose behavior is highlighted in Avos Drav Noson (7:1) which compares the chessed of Avraham and Iyov. Iyov responded generously to all who came to his home and asked for food and shelter. In contrast, Avraham Avinu initiated chessed by searching for guests and providing them with chessed v'emes. We too must find ways to extend our concern and compassion in creative ways during these trying times.

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לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
ቢילא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה

## Parashat Vayechi: A Family Becomes a Nation

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

This week's parsha closes Sefer Bereishit (Genesis). As we prepare to close the book on this sefer, it is important to briefly review its broad themes.

### SEFER BEREISHIT: A QUICK LOOK BACK:

#### TZELEM ELOKIM:

Bereishit's earlier parshiot recount the events which lead to the creation of a special group of people meant to maintain a close relationship with Hashem. At first, it appears that Hashem 'hopes' to establish a close relationship with all of humanity; all people are created in the "image of God" ("tzelem Elokim"). We noted that the Torah implies that humanity's being patterned after the image of God is not simply a description of human nature, but a tripartite \*mission\*:

- \* Humanity is to emulate Hashem's creativity by procreating.
- \* Humanity is to emulate Hashem's mastery by mastering the created world.
- \* Humanity is to emulate Hashem's moral perfection by behaving morally.

"Tzelem Elokim" is not handed to us on a silver platter, it is a mission. Humanity is granted the basic potential to achieve mastery, creativity, and morality, and is charged to actualize this potential. We are not born "images of Hashem"; we are born as mirrors, so to speak. The choices we make determine whether we will stand before Hashem, reflecting His image, or face in other directions, and therefore reflect things other than His image.

#### FAILURE AND DISAPPOINTMENT:

If "tzelem Elokim" is a mission, then it can be failed. Indeed, humanity begins to disappoint early on. Adam and Hava's older son, Kayyin (Cain), murders his brother, failing as a tzelem Elokim (as demonstrated from the text). Kayyin's descendants readily absorb his example of readiness to murder, clearly a basic moral failure. Kayyin and his "line" are eventually replaced by Shet (Seth) and his descendants.

As humanity grows beyond the proportions of a single family, its moral failure becomes epidemic. Humanity successfully exercises mastery and creativity, inventing crucial industrial processes, musical instruments, and agricultural methods. But morally, humanity has failed. Hashem 'regrets' having created humanity and destroys all of the failed "tzelem Elokim"s along with the animal kingdom, saving only the righteous Noah and his family.

The destruction of the world "uncreates" creation, reversing the step-by-step process of creation with a parallel step-by-step process of destruction. But the seeds of recreation are planted before destruction: Hashem commands that all species be preserved in preparation for the step-by-step recreation of the world. In reestablishing the world, Hashem repeats to Noah and his family the three-part "tzelem Elokim" mission, this time stressing the prohibition of murder in order to address humanity's past failure to achieve the moral part of the "tzelem" mission.

#### A NEW PLAN:

Hashem's "disappointment" leads Him to change the original plan of maintaining a close relationship with all of humanity. Consequently, the next major event the Torah reports is the appearance of Avraham. Until this point, we hear nothing of "special" nations and "special" lands, of Hashem's being "the God" of a particular nation. Avraham's appearance changes all this. Hashem has decided that while humanity at large has failed the tzelem mission, a special group of devoted individuals can achieve this mission (and perhaps eventually lead the rest of humanity closer to this goal).

#### SELECTION: AVRAHAM:

At this point, we began to focus on the selection of the Avot and the rejection of various figures along the way. The Torah presents the greatness of the Avot as emerging from their successfully meeting the challenges with which they struggle. The strength the Avot display as they develop is what makes them Avot. We traced the growth of Avraham's trust in

Hashem from his initial uncertainty of Hashem's promises, to the breathtaking faith he manifests at the Akeida (Binding of Isaac). Along the way, we learned about Avraham's struggles for justice (saving Sodom), his courageous self-sacrifice (saving Lot from captivity), and other lessons too detailed to sacrifice to synopsis. We also examined the rejection of Yishmael for his vicious, cynical sniggering.

### **A HOLD ON ERETZ YISRAEL:**

We paused at Hayyei Sara to look at the perspective of the Avot on Eretz Yizrael as a place to \*live,\* not merely a place to make "posthumous aliyah." Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Mahpela focused our attention on his insistence on establishing a permanent personal hold on a piece of the holy ground and his joy at being able to establish permanent \*residence\* there (not merely permanent \*decedence\* there). The same pattern appears later with regard to other Avot, who consistently stress the \*field\* of Mahpela -- the place of fruit-bearing, living trees -- and do not focus only on the cave, the place of burial. As we will see shortly, this theme recurs as Sefer Bereishit comes to a close.

### **YA'AKOV, "ISH TAM":**

We turned our attention to the development of Ya'akov, through his deception of his father and brother, his development under Lavan's careful "tutelage," and his heroic self-transformation in facing Hashem's angel and his brother Eisav. His triumph arrives when he merits the blessings of spiritual destiny which Yitzhak had given him in potential twenty years before. The change of Ya'akov's name to Yisrael signifies a change in his character, in his approach to challenges. We also noted the rejection of Eisav as leader of God's future nation and found text-grounded justification for this rejection.

### **YEHUDA AND YOSEF:**

We next turned to the development and selection of Yehuda and Yosef as leaders among Ya'akov's sons. We first traced Yosef's development from self-centeredness and immaturity (noted by Hazal and criticized freely by them and medieval commentators) to Hashem-centeredness, maturity, generosity, and greater mastery of the complexity of leadership. Next, we examined Yehuda's development, pinpointing his greatness in his ability to courageously admit wrongdoing and learn from it, and his capacity for self-regeneration in taking responsibility for his brothers and protecting his vulnerable father's feelings. In this context, we briefly touched upon Re'uvein's mistakes (Hazal refer to him as a "bekhor shoteh," a "foolish first-born"), which, despite his courage, spell his rejection as leader of Ya'akov's sons.

Most recently, we traced Yosef's manipulation of his brothers in his effort to see if they have done teshuva (repented) for selling him and learned the lessons of responsibility necessary for the family to reunite and continue to grow toward its destiny as a nation.

### **TAKE IT PERSONALLY:**

In all of these discussions, our aim has been to understand the Torah and to try to take "personally" all of the lessons these stories offer us in conducting our own lives.

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### **PARASHAT VA-YHI: TRANSITION**

When you write a coherent essay, you make sure (or you ought to, anyway) to structure your paragraphs so that the paragraphs "hold hands" -- you embed transitions in the end of each paragraph and the beginning of the next paragraph in order to communicate to your readers that you are "shifting gears," shifting focus to a new idea, and in order to draw them with you as you move on.

Parashat Va-Yhi is just such a transition. Sefer Bereishit follows the relationship between Hashem and humanity from its universal beginnings to its focus on a small group, and then through the process of the selection of great individuals ("Avot") to found and lead that group. Sefer Shemot develops a different theme: the creation of a national consciousness and national character (see also Abravanel's introduction to Sefer Shemot, which expands on this theme). Parashat Va-Yhi is the transition between the "individuals" theme of Bereishit and the "nation" theme of Shemot.

Imagine that you didn't know that Sefer Bereishit ends with Parashat Va-Yhi. What signs of transition to a new theme could you find in the parasha?

### **"NO JEW WILL BE LEFT BEHIND" (apologies to MBD):**

Sefer Bereishit follows a pattern of selection and rejection of sons: Yitzhak is chosen and Yishmael rejected, Ya'akov is chosen and Eisav rejected. In contrast, Parashat Va-Yhi confirms all of Ya'akov's sons as members of the future nation, participants in the destiny promised to Yisrael by E-l Shad-dai (recall Parashat VaYishlah). Although some sons are singled out in our parasha for criticism or praise, the fact that no one is rejected despite his flaws shows that Hashem (and Ya'akov) has decided that this entire group will found the nation. Since the theme of Sefer Bereishit is the selection of founders for the nation, and since this process of selection seems to have reached completion, the Sefer is complete.

### **INTERNAL DIVERSITY:**

This brings up an important observation: our discussions of Va-Yeishev, Mikkeitz, and Va-Yigash have shown that the sons of Ya'akov are highly diverse people. Re'uvein, Yehuda, and Yosef, for example, are all leaders, but their personalities and leadership styles are clearly divergent. The centerpiece of this week's parasha -- Ya'akov's blessings to his sons -- confirms and deepens this observation. Each of Ya'akov's sons faces different challenges and brings different strengths to bear on them. The fact that no one is rejected from participating in creating the Jewish nation indicates that all of these different strengths are necessary. Besides combining the legacies of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, the nation needs the internal diversity of different perspectives in order to adequately achieve its mission.

To illustrate with just one example, the different strengths of the various shevatim (tribes) have provided leaders whose characteristics enable them to successfully lead in the diverse places and times in which we have needed leadership. Bringing a nation out of enslavement and facilitating the nation's communication with Hashem at Sinai (Moshe, Shevet Leivi) demands a different set of leadership characteristics than does leading a nation into a new land, conquering it, and apportioning it (Yehoshua, Shevet Ephraim). Unifying a splintered, tribally organized nation and establishing a permanent dynasty (David, Shevet Yehuda) demands a different set of leadership capabilities than does leading the exiled nation through a time of critical emergency with wisdom and faith (Mordechai, Shevet Binyamin). There are dozens of such examples; despite Yehuda's basic hold on the monarchy, different circumstances have demanded leadership from other tribes as well. The leadership resources provided by this internal diversity have enabled us to successfully face challenges of all kinds. Hopefully, Hashem will continue to provide us with leaders to help us deal with the challenges we encounter in the present and future.

[Of course, as Jewish history demonstrates, the "down side" of this internal multiplicity is that separate entities can work not only with each other, but also against each other.]

### **NATIONAL THEMES:**

As mentioned above, Sefer Shemot develops themes of our national development. These themes first begin to resonate in a number of specific contexts in our parasha. Of course, the basic idea that the Avot will produce a nation has been clear since as early as Parashat Lekh Lekha, when Hashem promises to make Avraham into a "great nation." Yitzhak and Ya'akov also receive promises of nationhood. But national themes have slipped into the background in more recent parshiot: VaYeishev, Mikkeitz, and Va-Yigash focus largely on events within Ya'akov's family and make little or no mention of the national aspect. But Va-Yhi brings national themes back into focus in two different ways:

- 1) Specific mention of the future nation or national institutions such as laws and tribes.
- 2) Mention of the eventual return to Eretz Cana'an (after the Egyptian exile), or restatement of the family's / nation's significant connections to Eretz Cana'an.

### **NATION, INSTITUTIONS, AND LAND:**

Parashat Va-Yhi is not only where familiar national themes ("I will make you into a great nation") begin to reappear in the

text, it is also the place where some national themes appear for the first time. When Ya'akov repeats to Yosef the blessing he received from E-I Shad-dai, he is repeating a theme we know well:

BEREISHIT 48:3-4 --

Ya'akov said to Yosef, "E-I Shad-dai appeared to me at Luz in the Land of Cana'an and blessed me. He said to me, "I shall increase you, multiply you, and make you into a throng of nations; I shall give this land to your children after you as a permanent possession . . . ."

But when Ya'akov turns to Shimon and Leivi and curses their anger for their massacre of Shekhem, his words evoke the picture of a nation established on its own land:

BEREISHIT 49:5-7 --

"Shimon and Leivi are brothers; weapons of violence are their wares. In their council shall my soul not come; in their gathering shall my soul not rejoice, for in their fury they killed men, and by their will they uprooted oxen. Cursed is their anger for its strength, and their fury for its hardness; I shall split them up among Ya'akov and scatter them among Yisrael."

Shimon and Leivi must be scattered throughout the national homeland in order to guarantee that they do not once again come together and wreak violence out of measure. Sefer Yehoshua reports that indeed, Shimon receives a portion of Eretz Yisrael surrounded by the portion of Yehuda, whose job is apparently to control Shimon. And the Torah tells us many times that Leivi never receives a portion of Eretz Yisrael, and receives only individual cities scattered throughout the land. (As we will see, Leivi's "punishment" turns out much different than Shimon's!) In terms of our theme, what is clear for the first time is that each of Ya'akov's sons will be part of a nation, that this nation will conquer and occupy Cana'an, and that each son's descendants will receive a portion of the land (except Shimon and Leivi). This already suggests the tribal arrangement of Kelal Yisrael which we know from later on in the Torah, but its appearance here is unprecedented.

Ya'akov's mention of Ephrayim and Menashe's growth into nationhood is also not a "new" story -- they are merely being included in the destiny of Ya'akov's children -- but what Ya'akov says to Yosef just after blessing the two boys sounds a theme which will occupy the first half of Sefer Shemot: redemption from Egypt and return to Cana'an:

BEREISHIT 48:21 --

Yisrael said to Yosef, "I am going to die; Hashem shall be with you and return you to the land of your fathers . . . ."

Ya'akov's blessing to Yehuda also sounds a theme which telegraphs "national institution" as a basic assumption. Not only will Yehuda be the acknowledged leader of his brothers, as Ya'akov predicts as he begins the blessing to Yehuda, but Yehuda's authority will continue far into the future:

BEREISHIT 49:10 --

"The staff ["shevet"] will not be removed from Yehuda, nor law-making authority ["me-hokek"] from between his legs, until Shilo comes, and to him is the gathering of nations."

The mefarshim (commentators) debate whether "Shilo" refers to David, the Messiah, or some other personality or event; they also debate the meaning of "yik'hat amim." But it seems clear that Yehuda is being given broad authority to rule and to make or enforce laws -- a promise which can refer only to a polity governed by laws: a nation.

## TRIBES:

One other very important term which appears for the first time in our parasha is the term "shevet" -- literally, "staff." In fact, this term appears only three times in all of Sefer Bereishit -- all three in our parasha: 49:10 with regard to Yehuda's authority, 49:16 with regard to Dan, and 49:28 with regard to all of the sons of Ya'akov. Note that this word is used here in different ways, since "staff" can symbolize a number of things. With regard to Yehuda, "shevet" refers specifically to leadership (the leader carries a special staff, similar to a scepter, as we see later in the case of Moshe); with regard to

Dan, "shevet" seems to mean something very similar to "shofet," "judge"; and when used to refer to all of the sons, "shevet" means what we mean when we refer to the "Twelve tribes" -- each tribal leader carries a staff ("shevet") representing his authority and separate identity from the other tribes, and this term is borrowed to refer to the entire tribe itself.

Although many of us are used to thinking of the sons of Ya'akov as the "shevatim" ("tribes"), the fact is that until now, they have been only individuals, not founders of tribes which comprise a nation. As our parasha looks forward through Ya'akov's blessings into the distant future of the nation and anticipates the national themes of Sefer Shemot, the parasha begins to suggest the notion of tribes.

### A LOOK BACK AT THE LAND:

We have already noted that our parasha anticipates the themes of exodus and redemption in Ya'akov's assurance to Yosef that Hashem will eventually return the family to Cana'an. Yosef also assures his brothers before his own death that Hashem will "remember" them and eventually return them to Cana'an. But our parasha also directs our attention to the dual connections established by the Avot with Eretz Cana'an:

- 1) Hashem's promises to the Avot that they / their children shall inherit the land.
- 2) Avraham's purchase of a permanent personal "foothold" in the land -- the Field of Mahpela.

Ya'akov brings us back to a familiar theme (if you were with us for Parashat Hayyei Sara) when he commands his sons with his final words to bury him in the Cave of Mahpela:

BEREISHIT 49:29-32 --

He commanded them, saying, "I am to be gathered to my nation [=die]; bury me with my fathers in the \*CAVE\* in the \*FIELD\* of Efron the Hittite; in the \*CAVE\* in the \*FIELD\* of Mahpela which is before Mamre in the Land of Cana'an, the \*FIELD\* which Avraham bought from Efron the Hittite as a possession. There they buried Avraham and Sara his wife; there they buried Yitzhak and Rivka, his wife; and there I buried Le'ah -- [in] the purchase from the Hittites of the \*FIELD\* and the \*CAVE\* in it."

The Torah echoes Ya'akov's language in reporting the burial itself:

BEREISHIT 50:13 --

His sons carried him to the Land of Cana'an and buried him in the \*CAVE\* of the \*FIELD\* of Mahpela, the \*FIELD\* which Avraham had bought as a grave-possession from Efron the Hittite, [which is] before Mamre.

Ya'akov's request to his sons seems very repetitive and wordy -- he mentions the field and the cave three times, mentions twice that the field and cave were bought from Efron the Hittite, mentions unnecessarily that Avraham was the one who bought the field, and goes through the entire list of the people already buried there. What is so important about these details?

If Ya'akov's only intention is to give his sons directions to the field and cave, it should hardly be necessary to list the current occupants of the cave, or who originally owned it and who bought it, or to mention "field" and "cave" so many times. Why such formality, detail, and repetition in describing this piece of real estate? And why does the Torah repeat some of these details in narrating Ya'akov's burial?

If you recall our discussion of Parashat Hayyei Sara (or our brief review of it above), you will remember that we understood the complex and somewhat bizarre negotiations between Avraham and Efron the Hittite as an unspoken struggle on the part of Avraham to buy a piece of land as a personal foothold in Eretz Cana'an, and on the part of the Hittites to prevent him from gaining such a foothold. The "fierce politeness" of the Hittites and the "insistent obsequiousness" of Avraham betray this struggle, hidden beneath a veneer of genteel gentile generosity and gracious but firm Abrahamic refusal. Avraham avoids accepting a free grave-space among the grave plots of the Hittites and succeeds in purchasing not only a grave plot of his own, but a field to go with it; not simply a place to go once he is dead, but also a

place to live! And indeed, as the Torah tells us on several occasions subsequent to this sale, the Avot do live in Hevron, the city of the Field of Mahpela (and in which the Cave is located).

Why is Avraham so eager to buy a plot in Eretz Cana'an? Avraham has been promised by Hashem that he will receive Eretz Cana'an. But as he grows older and sees that no process seems to be unfolding which will grant him the land, he begins to wonder whether Hashem intends to fulfill His promise. Eventually, he asks Hashem directly: "How do I know that I will inherit it?" (15:8).

Hashem responds by correcting Avraham's misunderstanding of the promise: Avraham himself would not inherit the land; he would "join his fathers in peace," dying without participating in the struggle for the Land. After four generations of exile and enslavement in a foreign country, his descendants would return to conquer and inherit Eretz Cana'an. Avraham places complete faith in this promise, but he is somewhat disappointed that he himself will not inherit the land. Shortly afterward comes his opportunity to gain a personal stake in the Land: the death of his wife and the chance to use the search for a grave for her as a lever to manipulate the "people of the land" into selling him a plot of his own (since they cannot get away with outrightly refusing to give a burial place to the bereaved Avraham). [For the full development of this theme, our discussion of Hayyei Sara is available to those interested.]

### **YA'AKOV TAKES THE LONG VIEW:**

Ya'akov recognizes the danger facing his sons as they settle into Egyptian life and raise their families under Yosef's providence and protection: that they will forget about Eretz Cana'an and their connection to it, that they will not maintain the hope of returning to their land. In order to guard against this, he communicates to his sons the message of return: Hashem will eventually bring them back from Egypt to Cana'an. To reinforce their memories of the land and the importance it holds for the family, he paints a vivid snapshot of one important piece of it -- the family home and burial plot in Hevron:

- 1) He reminds them of the story they all know well of Avraham's cleverness in negotiating with the crafty Hittites, his insistence on buying his own burial plot, and his unblinking willingness to pay an exorbitant sum for it, a story which reminds them how important Eretz Cana'an was to their great-grandfather Avraham.
- 2) He reminds them that what Avraham bought was not just a burial place, but also a field, a place of life (the same emphasis on the field that appears in our parasha features prominently in the original account of Avraham's purchase; that account stressed that the field was full of trees, certainly a symbol of growth and vitality in Tanakh), where Avraham and Yitzhak lived and where they themselves were raised by their father.
- 3) He reminds them that this plot of land also connects them to the Land by virtue of its status as the family burial ground: Avraham and Sara, Yitzhak and Rivka, and Le'ah are all buried there. We all understand the deep emotional connection people maintain to the places their parents or earlier ancestors are buried; Ya'akov is trying to strengthen this connection.

These strategies highlight two aspects of our relationship to Eretz Yisrael (which we discussed at Hayyei Sara):

- 1) "The Field": Our connection to the Land as our living homeland, our place to live our lives, serve Hashem, raise our families.
- 2) "The Cave": Our connection to the Land as our ultimate homeland, the place where our dead are buried. Even if we are not able to live there, it is the place we acknowledge as our homeland, the place to which we return to bury our dead because we want them to rest at home.

Unfortunately, the "Cave" gets much more press nowadays than the "Field" -- it is much easier to make a casual touristy visit to the touchstones of Jewish history in Eretz Yisrael (Kotel, graves, archaeological sites, museums, etc.) than it is to make a personal commitment to the "Field" (living in the land, spending time learning in yeshiva there, etc.). But the fact remains that the "Cave" connection serves an important function today as it did then: to maintain our connection to the land even when we have no access to the "Field."

This may explain why Ya'akov is so insistent on being buried in Eretz Cana'an and why Yosef later displays the same

desire. Besides his own personal desire to be buried with his wife, parents, and grandparents, Ya'akov also knows that for his sons, bringing his body back to Cana'an for burial will also be a powerful experience which will renew their connection to the land and refresh their desire to return to it. The procession to Cana'an is not merely a funeral, it is also a pilgrimage to the family home.

Yosef understands this, and therefore, when he reminds his brothers that Hashem will eventually return them to Cana'an, he makes his brothers swear that they will bring his bones up with them. This promise not only expresses Yosef's desire to be buried in Cana'an, it also guarantees that Bnei Yisrael will not forget their connection to the land.

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## **PREPARATION FOR SEFER SHEMOT:**

This may sound extreme, but the best way to prepare for learning through any book of Tanakh is to lightning-read the entire Sefer. This is the first step in my own preparation, and I consider it valuable for the following reasons:

1) It quickly reminds us of all the things we think we remember but really don't. This is especially true of books of the Humash besides Sefer Bereishit, since Bereishit is nearly all stories, which are easier to remember than the legal portions of the Torah. Do you, for instance, recall much of the content of Parashat Mishpatim? How about Parashat Tzav? Parashat Shofetim? Got the picture?

2) It helps us overcome the "snapshot" effect: we tend to fall into the trap of looking at Humash in a disjointed way if we look at only one parasha at a time. It is crucial to merge the "snapshots" into a "movie" by taking a quick read through the Sefer (preferably in Hebrew),

- a) feeling the momentum of the story line,
- b) tracing the development of characters over long stretches of text (which we miss if we look only at "snapshots"), and
- c) recognizing the major themes of the Sefer.

As you cruise through the text at high speed:

- a) Note questions and patterns which seem significant.
- b) Write an outline of the major events/sections of the text and consult it as you prepare each week so that you maintain that sense of bird's-eye view which the lightning-read gives you.
- c) Ask yourself why the Torah includes particular events and leaves out others.

Shabbat shalom

## Parshas Vayechi: May God Make You as Ephraim and Menasheh

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

### I. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH

"They are the sons God has given me here," Yoseph said to his father. Then Yisra'el said, "Bring them to me so I may bless them." Now Yisra'el's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Yoseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. Yisra'el said to Yoseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." Then Yoseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. And Yoseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Yisra'el's left hand and Menasheh on his left toward Yisra'el's right hand, and brought them close to him. But Yisra'el reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Menasheh's head, since Menasheh was the firstborn. Then he blessed Yoseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." (B'resheet [Genesis] 48:9-16)

This famous deathbed scene is etched into our consciousness and is replayed in Jewish homes every Friday night when we bless our children:

"May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh."(ibid. v. 20)

Upon close inspection, there are a few anomalies regarding this narrative which are worthy of our attention:

- 1) Why did Ya'akov embrace and kiss his grandchildren before blessing them? - we don't find him doing this with his own children in the subsequent blessing scene (Ch. 49).
- 2) Why does it matter which hand is used to bless the "more deserving" child?
- 3) If Ya'akov wanted to raise the position of Ephraim over that of Menasheh, why didn't he insist that they switch positions - why cross his hands? (This question is exacerbated by the end of v. 14 - he crossed his arms since Menasheh was the firstborn - why is Menasheh being the firstborn a reason for crossing his arms?)
- 4) Why did Ya'akov prefer Ephraim to Menasheh, giving him the greater (right-handed) blessing? When challenged by Yoseph, his response was:

"I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations." (v. 19); however, this response is enigmatic and puzzling. If Ya'akov had indicated that Ephraim was more worthy, more saintly or otherwise more deserving, we could understand. His answer indicates anything but that; it seems that Ya'akov has elected to "go with the winner" and support the son who is destined for greatness - what can we make of his response and his thinking?

- 5) What was the blessing with which Ya'akov blessed his grandchildren while he had his hands on their heads? The text indicates that as he placed his hands on their heads, he blessed Yoseph (regarding their well-being) - but not them!

### II. FLASHBACK: YITZCHAK'S BLESSING

Even a cursory reading of our text quickly brings to mind another blessing scene in B'resheet: Yitzchak blessing Ya'akov in the guise of Esav, followed by the actual blessing received by Esav. (I suggest a quick review of Chapter 27 before continuing).

In both scenes, the bestower of the blessing (Yitzchak, Ya'akov) suffers from poor eyesight, he embraces the recipient(s) of the blessing - and the text of the blessing is not mentioned in the text (see 27:23 and v. 27 carefully). More accurately, each scene includes two blessings (v.23 and 27; 48:15 and 20), neither of which is explicitly presented in the text.

There are several questions to be asked about the narrative in Chapter 27 (in addition to the parallel questions we have already raised from Ch. 48) - the resolution of which will help us understand Ya'akov's behavior with his grandsons:

- 6) Why was Rivkah so concerned that Ya'akov get that particular blessing, even at the risk of his being cursed instead?
- 7) What is the relationship - if any - between Ya'akov's purchase of the b'khorah (right of the firstborn) at the end of Chapter 25 and his deceptive taking of the blessing in Chapter 27?

[parenthetical note: the first episode of Ya'akov's life, the purchase of the b'khorah, involves an oath. After Esav agrees to sell his rights to Ya'akov, Ya'akov makes him recommit to that sale through an oath. The final scene of Ya'akov's life, beginning at 47:29, involves his request of Yoseph to be buried in the Land. After Yoseph commits to personally fulfill the request, Ya'akov makes him take an oath. Interesting bookends...but beyond the scope of this shiur.]

- 8) To paraphrase Esav's question (27:38), did Yitzchak have only one blessing to bestow? Why couldn't their father have

repeated the same blessing - or given one of equal worth - to Esav?

### III. THE B'KHORAH - WHERE DID IT GO?

I'd like to ask one more question before beginning to decipher our text.

As we see from Ya'akov gift of a double portion (Ephraim & Menasheh) of land to Yoseph, he was given the financial benefits of the b'khorah (see D'varim 21:17). The verse in Divrei HaYamim states:

The sons of Re'uven the firstborn of Yisra'el. He was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Yoseph son of Yisra'el, so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright; though Yehudah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Yoseph. (Divrei HaYamim I 5:1)

Besides the financial benefits of the b'khorah (double inheritance), there seems to be a second component inherent in the b'khorah - political power. The verse indicates that although the financial rights of Re'uven's b'khorah were bestowed to Yoseph, the political component was given to Yehudah, who became prominent among his brothers. The Midrash (Aggadat B'resheet #83) adds a third dimension to the b'khorah - Kehunah (priesthood). (This is further demonstrated by the "switch" of these rights and responsibilities to the Levi'im [Bamidbar 3:41] - where it is clear that representation at worship was the duty of the b'khorot -see also Targum Onkelos on B'resheet 49:3).

In other words, until Sinai, the firstborn in a family would inherit three rights:

Double inheritance,

Political control over the family and

Representation of the family at sacrificial rites.

On his deathbed, Ya'akov gave the financial-b'khorah to Yoseph and the political-b'khorah to Yehudah - but who received the worship-b'khorah?

### IV. KEHUNAH - THE LEGACY OF EVERY FAMILY

We know that the families of Avraham and Yitzchak did not follow the ideal pattern for Jewish family life; in each case, only one son was chosen to carry on the tradition of the family and the rest were sent away. The conventional understanding is that the first proper family within our tradition was that of Ya'akov - 12 sons, all included and all maintainers of the tradition. We therefore expect the firstborn (Re'uven) to be accorded the usual rights appropriate for that position - and are surprised to see them taken away from him.

I'd like to propose another way of understanding Ya'akov's family. Just as Avraham and Yitzchak's job was to raise one son to follow in their respective footsteps, similarly Ya'akov had the responsibility to raise twelve sons to build upon the tradition he received. In other words, he was not raising one family - with the eldest occupying the conventional position of b'khor; he was raising twelve families, each of which would have their own b'khor. [Although Re'uven is called b'khor Ya'akov (e.g. B'resheet 35:23), this may be referring to simple birth order, not to position within the family.] This explains how Ya'akov "transferred" the b'khorah to Yoseph - something which is forbidden in Sefer D'varim - (see 21:17 again). He wasn't eliminating a b'khor - he was simply appointing the family headed by the financial wizard among the sons as "Chief Financial Officer" of his estate (Eretz Yisra'el). In the same way, he appointed Yehudah, who had earned the allegiance of his brothers, as the family that would rule over the other families - but only with regard to those issues which affect all twelve as a unit. Within each family, the b'khor would hold both financial and political rule. Regarding the Kehunah - the spiritual b'khorah - that remained within each of B'nai Yisra'el and became the responsibility of each of their b'khorot.

### V. S'MIKHAH - EMBRACE AND TRANSMISSION

The S'forno (B'resheet 48:18), in explaining the importance of the right hand in Ya'akov's blessing, states:

Since S'mikhah with the hand focuses the spirit toward the object upon which it is placed, like he placed his hands upon him [referring to Mosheh's s'mikhah of Yehoshua - Bamidbar (Numbers) 27:23] and the right hand is [generally] stronger than the left, therefore the s'mikhah of the right [hand] will focus more than the s'mikhah of the left.

S'mikhah is a Halakhah which first appears in the beginning of Vayyikra:

\*v'Samakh Yado\* (He shall lay his hand) on the head of the burnt offering.. (1:4)

The Halakhah of s'mikhah requires that in the case of any private offering, immediately prior to slaughtering the animal, the owner of the offering must lay his hands on the animal with all of his strength (MT Ma'aseh haKorbanot 3:13). In his explanation of the meaning behind animal offerings, Ramban (commentary to Vayyikra 1:9) suggests that the person bringing the offering should view himself as if he were on the altar. The catharsis of Korbanot is achieved when the owner experiences his own sacrifice vicariously through the offering. S'mikhah, performed immediately before the offering is slaughtered, is the process by which the owner transmits his energy into the animal in order that the offering truly represent

him on the altar.

[On the point of s'mikhah with all of one's strength - Think of how powerfully we hug a close friend or loved one at times of great sadness or joy - and think of how we hug a casual acquaintance when the occasion calls for it.]

There is another s'mikhah in Halakhah besides that preceding an offering. As S'foro points out, when Mosheh was preparing to transmit the mantle of leadership to Yehoshua, he performed s'mikhah on Yehoshua, laying his hands on Yehoshua's head. Following S'foro's reasoning, Mosheh was transmitting his energy/self, to Yehoshua, investing him with (at least) a connection to Mosheh's experience atop Sinai. Through the 1400 years when s'mikhah was operative (see BT Sanhedrin 14a), each recipient of s'mikhah was given a piece of the experience of Mosheh at Sinai, along with all of the others in the intervening chain. Each recipient had a direct link to the Revelation at Sinai and to the fount from which the Oral Law springs.

## VI. THREE TYPES OF B'RAKHOT

Before Sinai, there were three types of b'rakhot bestowed by people:

- a) The conventional well-wishing b'rakhah, (e.g. B'resheet 47:7,10).
- b) The designation-b'rakhah, (e.g. Ch. 49, where Ya'akov gave his children a b'rakhah - which was, essentially, his last will and testament.) This designation-b'rakhah was an assignment of duties, properties etc. within the family.
- c) The conferral-b'rakhah - which was the model for the post-Sinaitic s'mikhah.

Unlike a well-wishing blessing, in which the person who is most deserving gets the finest "wish", this b'rakhah is a real conferral of power and strength to the recipient. Since this conferral-b'rakhah was a highly charged emotional experience, reflecting a deep connection between the two parties involved, in order for it to be effective, the bestower had to first have a direct connection to the recipient. S'foro (B'resheet 48:10) explains that Ya'akov requested that Yoseph bring his sons close in order to embrace them. The embrace was intended to create the proper emotional and spiritual connection between them to make the conferral-b'rakhah effective.

We can now address those questions we asked about the Yitzchak-Ya'akov-Esav scenario:

Rivkah was aware that Ya'akov had purchased the b'khora from Esav - meaning that he would be "in charge" of the family affairs, both financial and political. [Yitzchak was evidently unaware of the sale - see 27:19] The person in charge is in the greatest need of support and strength; there are always those who would overthrow him and he has nowhere to go but down. The "underdog", contradistinctively, can only move up. Rivkah was so concerned that Ya'akov receive Yitzchak's strength and power - through the conferral-b'rakhah - that she was willing to risk the possibility of a curse.

When Ya'akov approached Yitzchak, his father embraced him (27:22), attended to his voice (ibid.) - and "blessed" him. (This is apparently a conferral-b'rakhah, as there are no blessing-words provided here). Yitzchak then ate and drank of the venison brought by Ya'akov, embraced him again, smelled his clothes - and "blessed" him again (vv. 25-27). Note that Yitzchak connected with Ya'akov using all four available senses. Subsequent to these b'rakhot, which I am theorizing are both occasions of s'mikhah, Yitzchak stated:

May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you! (27:28-29)

These words are not the b'rakhah - as he has already blessed Ya'akov. Rather, these words represent a verbal version of the strength he has given his son. Not only has he transmitted the ability to receive God's bounty - he has also given this son the strength to rule over his brother!

There is a textual hint to this idea - in 27:37, Yitzchak declares "I have made him lord over you and have given all of his brothers to him as slaves - and with grain and wine s'makhtiv (I have sustained him)..."; note that Yitzchak himself states that he has performed a type of s'mikhah on Ya'akov!

It is no wonder, then, that Yitzchak is "out of blessings" when the real Esav shows up! How can he give the same ruling strength to two people? The best that he can do is to give Esav the strength that "...when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck" (v. 40).

## VII. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH (REDUX)

We can now go back to our Parashah and understand it in a new light:

"They are the sons God has given me here," Yoseph said to his father. Then Yisra'el said, "Bring them to me so I may bless them." (48:9)

Ya'akov wanted to confer the strength of leadership on Yoseph's family.

Now Yisra'el's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Yoseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them.(v. 10)

In order confer this strength, he had to first connect with these two sons of Yoseph - which he did by embracing them.

Yisra'el said to Yoseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." Then Yoseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. (vv. 11-12)  
Here we see that the original embrace (v. 10) was merely a preparation for the b'rakhah, not the b'rakhah itself.

And Yoseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Yisra'el's left hand and Menasheh on his left toward Yisra'el's right hand, and brought them close to him. But Yisra'el reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Menasheh's head, since Menasheh was the firstborn. (vv. 13-14)

Since Menasheh was the b'khore, he would always maintain that status and would be the spiritual leader of that family. Menasheh's position in the family necessitated that he not be switched to the left side - so, in order for Ya'akov to give Ephraim the "stronger" b'rakhah, he had to cross his arms.

Then he blessed Yoseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." (vv. 15-16)

Note that here he is blessing Yoseph, not Yoseph's sons; this is a well-wishing-b'rakhah, not the gist of the conferral-b'rakhah given to Ephraim and Menasheh.

When Yoseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head to Menasheh's head. Yoseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." (vv. 17-19)

This (previously) enigmatic response is now clear:

Ya'akov is not "favoring the winner"; he is giving the greatest strength (his right hand, following S'foron's explanation) to the son who will need it most - whose progeny will be more numerous and widespread.

So he blessed them that day, saying, By you Yisra'el will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Menasheh.' " So he put Ephraim ahead of Menasheh. (v. 20)

Again, as in the Yitzchak-Ya'akov story, a second embrace leads to a second conferral-b'rakhah. Ya'akov then verbalizes a consequence of the b'rakhah - that these two boys will be the model of all blessings. This is, however, not the essence of the b'rakhah, which is the conferral of power.

### **VIII. POSTSCRIPT**

The Midrash Tanhuma indicates that his younger brother will be greater than he refers to Yehoshua', who will come from the tribe of Ephraim and will conquer the Land. Interesting, is it not, that this s'mikhah was a forerunner to the first "official" s'mikhah given - as Mosheh lay his hands on the head of 'Yehoshua' and conferred upon him the mantle of leadership.

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## **PARSHAT VAYECHI**

Blessings - we find so many of them in Sefer Breishit, particularly in Parshat Vayechi. What are they all about?

In our shiur, we will first distinguish between three different types of blessings that we have encountered thus far in Sefer Breishit ('bechira', 'bechora' and 'bracha'). Based on these distinctions, we will then attempt to better understand what transpires when Yaakov blesses Yosef in the first chapter of Parshat Vayechi.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recall (from our shiur on Parshat Toldot) that we identified two categories of blessings to explain the nature of Yitzchak's blessings to Yaakov and Esav. Those were: (1) 'bechira' and (2) 'bracha'.

We used the name 'bechira' to classify God's special blessing to Avraham Avinu that his offspring ('zera') would inherit the 'promised' land ('eretz'). God first bestowed this blessing upon Avraham Avinu at the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha (see 12:1-3) and subsequently repeated it numerous times not only to Avraham, but also to Yitzchak and Yaakov. By tracing these blessings, we were able to show how the 'bechira' process emerged as a primary theme in Sefer Breishit.

In contrast, we used the more general term 'bracha' to classify a blessing of personal destiny bestowed by a father onto his son [or sons]. As examples, we cited Noach's blessings to his three sons (see 9:26-27), and Yitzchak's blessing of prosperity and leadership that were intended for Esav, but 'stolen' by Yaakov [see chapter 27].

Now, in Parshat Vayechi, as the 'bechira' process nears its conclusion, we find how Yaakov bestows blessings of prosperity and success upon his children. Even though these would seem to fall under our category of 'bracha', when we take a closer look at these blessings, we will need to add an additional category to better appreciate their meaning.

### **YAAKOV'S BLESSING TO YOSEF - BECHIRA or BECHORA?**

Before Yaakov blesses all of his children in chapter 49, he first bestows a special blessing upon Yosef and his two children, as described in chapter 48.

To understand the purpose of this special blessing, we must consider not only its content, but also its context.

We begin our study by examining Yaakov's opening statement to Yosef, when he arrives with his two sons (see 48:1-2). We quote this pasuk in Hebrew in order to highlight its textual parallels to earlier blessings to the Avot:

[And Yaakov said to Yosef]: "KEL SHAKAI nir'ah eilai [appeared to me] be-Luz be-eretz Canaan va-yevarech oti, va-yomer eilai, [and blessed me saying:] 'Hineni MAFRECHA ve-HIRBITCHA u-netaticha li-khal amim, ve-natati et ha-ARETZ ha-zot le-ZAR'ACHA acharecha achuzat olam'" (see 48:3-4).

At first glance, this blessing appears to resemble the blessings that we have defined thus far as 'bechira'. To show how, let's quote the almost identically blessing of 'bechira' that Yitzchak had bestowed upon Yaakov prior to his departure from Eretz Canaan (when running away from Esav):

[Textual parallels are highlighted by CAPS.]

[And Yitzchak said to Yaakov]: "ve-KEL SHAKAI yevarech otcha ve-YAFRECHA ve-YARBECHA ve-hayita li-khal amim - va-yiten lecha et birkat Avraham lecha u-leZAR'ACHA itach, le-rishtechet ERETZ megurecha..." (see 28:3-4).

Similarly, we find an additional parallel blessing when God officially confirmed this 'bechira' (to Yaakov) upon his return to Eretz Canaan (again at Bet El):

[And God spoke to Yaakov saying] "ani KEL SHAKAI, PREH u-RVEH, goy u-khal amim yhiyah mi-meka... ve-et ha-ARETZ asher natati le-Avraham u-leYitzchak lecha etnena, u-leZAR'ACHA acharecha eten et ha-ARETZ" (35:11-12).

Considering these parallels, Yaakov's opening statement to Yosef in Parshat Vayechi would appear to convey this same message, i.e. that Yaakov is now bestowing the blessing of 'bechira' upon Yosef - and hence, possibly to the exclusion of his brothers! [If so, this would be quite problematic, for it implies that the 'bechira' process will now continue only through Yosef.]

However, when we consider the context of these psukim (i.e. 48:3-5), it becomes quite clear that Yaakov is not blessing Yosef with the 'bechira'. [Recall that only God can confirm 'bechira', and not the Avot themselves.] Rather, Yaakov first **informs** Yosef about his own 'bechira' as background for the new blessing that is about to bestow - a blessing which we will now categorize as 'bechora':

### **'BECHORA' - TO THE SON OF RACHEL**

To explain this point, let's take a careful look at what Yaakov now states concerning the status of Yosef's two children:

"Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt... shall be mine; Efraim and Menashe are to me like Reuven and Shimon" (48:5).

For some reason, Yaakov decides to grant Yosef a special status. Indeed, all twelve brothers are 'chosen'; nonetheless Yosef receives a DOUBLE portion ("pi-shnayim"). Efraim and Menashe are to be considered 'shvatim' (tribes) - a status equal to that of Reuven and Shimon. In 'Torah terms', we conclude that Yaakov has awarded Yosef the 'bechora' - for "pi-shnayim" [the double portion] is the special Biblical rights of the firstborn son. [See Devarim 21:17 re: 'mishpat ha-bechora'.]

This neatly explains why Yaakov prefaces this blessing of 'bechora' by first quoting God's blessing of 'bechira'. Before bestowing the 'bechora', Yaakov must first explain to Yosef that his special status of 'bechor' is being granted within the framework of the 'bechira' process (see 48:4). It is because the 'bechira' process has reached its completion (with God's choice of Yaakov and all of his children), that it is now incumbent upon Yaakov to grant the 'bechora' to one of his twelve children.

Yaakov thus neither chooses nor rejects any of his children. He simply awards Yosef with the 'bechora', even though Reuven was born first. In essence, Yaakov has chosen the first-born child of Rachel over the first-born child of Leah.

To prove that Yaakov's blessing is 'bechora' (and not 'bechira'), simply note Yaakov's next statement:

"But children born to you after them shall be yours; their inheritance shall be included under the name of their brothers" (48:6).

Should Yosef have any additional children, their portion must be included within the portions of Menashe and Efraim. Had Yosef been the only chosen son; then all of his children should have received special status. However, since he has now become the family 'bechor', he receives a double portion, but no more. Any other children that he may have must be included within this double portion.

[See Rashbam 48:5 & Ibn Ezra 48:4-6!]

### **A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH**

This interpretation also neatly explains the reason for Yaakov's next statement concerning Rachel's death (which otherwise would seem to be totally unrelated):

"When I was returning from Padan, Rachel died suddenly during that journey, while we were still some distance from Efrata [and thus even farther away from Chevron!], and therefore I buried her on the road..." (48:7).

This mention of Rachel's burial most probably relates directly to Yaakov's choice of Yosef as the 'bechor'. By choosing Yosef over Reuven, Yaakov has essentially chosen Rachel over Leah as his primary wife. However, this may come as a surprise to Yosef, for not only was Reuven born first, but Yosef's own mother (Rachel) was buried along the roadside, while Reuven's mother Leah was buried in Ma'arat Ha-Machpela - in the same burial spot where Yaakov himself wishes to be buried! [See 47:29-30.]

Therefore, Yaakov now explains to Yosef that Rachel's burial on the roadside (rather than in Ma'arat Ha-Machpela) was due to unforeseen circumstances, and thus should not be interpreted as an indication of a lower status. On the contrary, despite Rachel's somewhat disrespectful burial, Yaakov still considers her as having been his 'primary' wife.

[Note then when Yaakov had earlier expressed his concern about sending Binyamin to Egypt, he had made a similar statement: "And your servant, my father, said to us: As you know, MY WIFE bore me two sons, but one is gone..." (Yehuda quoting his father in 44:27).]

Therefore, even though Reuven is the firstborn of Leah, Yosef is awarded the **family** 'bechora', since he is the firstborn of Yaakov's primary wife, the "isha" whom he had originally intended to marry.

#### A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT TOLDOT

At this point in the narrative (i.e. after 48:7), we find an interesting transition. Now that Yaakov has completed bestowing the 'bechora' upon Yosef, the focus of his blessing now shifts to his grandchildren, Efraim and Menashe - who consequently have now attained the status of 'shvatim' (tribes). As such, they also deserve blessings of personal destiny from Yaakov (i.e. 'bracha'), just as he will later bless all of the tribes (in chapter 49).

However, when we read how Yaakov grants these blessings (in 48:8-20), we find several rather obvious 'flashbacks' to the blessings of Yitzchak in Parshat Toldot (see chapter 27).

For example, both narratives describe an aging father who can barely see (48:10 vs. 27:1), and the 'switching' of blessing between two sons to the consternation of their father (48:17-19 vs. 27:6-9). Furthermore, in both narratives, we find the use of many similar verbs.

One could suggest that the manner by which Yaakov grants these blessing to Menashe and Efraim reflects his own traumatic experience, when he was instructed by Rivka to 'steal' the blessing that Yitzchak had intended for Esav. Even though Yaakov understands that Efraim may reach higher levels than Menashe, he insists upon blessing both of them together. Yaakov does not want these slight differences between Efraim and Menashe to cause strife between them in the future (as was the case between Yaakov and Esav). At this initial stage, he places both children together, bestowing upon them a joint blessing, while providing a small indication (by switching his hands) regarding the potential prominence of Efraim. Despite their different destinies, Efraim and Menashe will need to work together, as they will be part of the same nation, and Yaakov would like this unity to begin already at this initial stage.

#### 'HA-MAL'ACH HA-GOEL'

Now that we have discussed the general framework of Yaakov's blessing to Efraim and Menashe, let's take a closer look at the blessing itself (familiar to us from "kriyat shema al ha-mita"). To appreciate this blessing, we must consider the fact that Efraim and Menashe had grown up with no contact with their uncles and cousins. To facilitate their integration with the rest of the family, Yaakov adds a special blessing:

"ha-mal'ach ha-goel oti mi-kol ra - yevarech et ha-nearim"  
[God's angel who protected me (Yaakov) from all those who wanted to harm me, He should bless these children (to help them 'blend in')],

"ve-yikare ba-hem shmi, ve-shem avotai - Avraham ve-Yitzchak..."

[And they should be known by my name, and by the names of Avraham and Yitzchak (for they are part of the

chosen family.]  
"ve-yidgu la-rov be-kerev ha-aretz"  
[and they should multiply within the land...] (see 48:15-16).

Yaakov very much wants Yosef's two sons to be identified with the rest of his family name; he therefore blesses them so that God should look over them with the same providence that helped Yaakov survive his confrontations with Esav and Lavan.

#### A TIME WILL COME...

Yaakov concludes his blessing to Yosef by reminding him that a time will come when the 'chosen family' will return home: "And Yisrael said to Yosef: I am about to die, but God will be with you and return you to the land of your fathers..." (48:21).

Now that Yosef has been appointed as 'bechor', it becomes his responsibility to inform the future generations of this Divine promise. Yaakov is not sure how long it will be until God will lead them back to Eretz Canaan. Nevertheless, his children must transmit this tradition to THEIR children, so that when the time comes, they will be prepared to meet their destiny.

It is precisely this message that Yosef repeats to his brothers and family on his deathbed, at the conclusion of Sefer Breishit: "And Yosef told his brothers, behold I am about to die, 've-Elokim pakod yifkod etchem' [God will surely remember you] and bring you from this land to the land which He promised by oath to give to Avraham, Yitzchak..." (50:24).

[Compare with 48:21, 46:3-4 & Shmot 13:13-22.]

Yaakov concludes this blessing with one last 'cryptic' statement to Yosef (that obviously requires some explanation): "And I am granting you one - SHCHEM - over your brothers, that I [will] have taken from the Amorites with my sword and bow" (see 48:22).

The commentators argue in regard the meaning of the word SHCHEM in this pasuk. Some understand that Yaakov is now giving the city Shchem to Yosef as an inheritance, but most explain that 'shchem' in this pasuk refers to an extra portion of inheritance that will be given to Yosef AFTER the conquest of the land.

According to the latter interpretation, this final blessing forms an appropriate conclusion. After mentioning that God will one day return his offspring to Eretz Canaan (fulfilling 'brit bein ha-btarim' - 48:21), Yaakov explains that when that time comes, Yosef will receive an extra portion in the inheritance of the land, for the simple reason that he is the 'bechor' - congruent with the opening section of this blessing to Yosef.

#### THE BLESSINGS OF PERSONAL DESTINY

As the family 'bechora' has been awarded to Yosef, Yaakov now summons his entire family (see 49:1) in order to give a personal blessing to each of his sons. Although each son receives what the Torah describes as a 'bracha' (see 49:28 / "ish asher ke-virchato beirach otam"), not all these 'brachot' appear to be what one would call a 'blessing'.

For example, Reuven is told: "You are unstable as water, you shall no longer excel..." (49:4).

Shimon and Levi are rebuked: "Let not my person be included in their council... For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger..." (see 49:6-7, note that Yaakov is cursing their anger, not his sons!).

On the other hand, Yehuda and Yosef are emphatically blessed with both prosperity and leadership. Other brothers also receive blessings, albeit less promising than those of Yosef and Yehuda, but blessings nonetheless, as opposed to the sharp criticism hurled upon Shimon and Levi.

What is the meaning of these 'brachot'? Will the personal traits of the brothers predetermine the fate of their offspring? Do Yaakov's blessings reflect the principle of determinism and negate the concept of 'bechira chofshit' (free will)?

One could suggest that Yaakov assumes the role of a 'father' (in his blessings to his children) more than the role of a 'prophet'. Let's explain:

As a parent, and the last forefather of God's special Nation, Yaakov must blend the goals of his family destiny with the realities of his life experience. His blessings, therefore, reflect the potential he sees within each of his children.

The fulfillment of life-long goals requires a person to recognize his potential by considering both his good qualities and shortcomings. As Yaakov recognizes his children's varying strengths and weaknesses, he blesses them according to their individual capabilities and talents. Although these blessings do not necessarily guarantee the final outcome, they form a guide that can provide each son with a proper direction that can help achieve his potential.

Yaakov does not intend his harsh castigation of Reuven, Shimon and Levi to result in ultimate condemnation. Rather, he hopes that they will recognize their weakness of character and work towards its improvement. [Note that Yaakov curses Reuven's **anger**, but not Reuven himself.]

Similarly, Yaakov's sharp rebuke of Levi turns later on into a blessing, as the Tribe of Levi later assumed an important leadership position (see Devarim 33:8-12!).

In contrast, Yehuda and Yosef possess a potential for leadership that should be recognized by their offspring. However, this blessing does not guarantee that every descendant of Yehuda or Yosef will become a great later. Even the kings of the House of David must be constantly conscious of their conduct, in order that they be worthy of exercising their leadership (see Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!).

[This idea can help us understand most blessings (even 'birkat kohanim'). A 'bracha' is not a simply mystic chant that determines a future set of events, rather it serves as a reminder to a person that he carries the potential to achieve a certain goal.]

Undoubtedly, the 'brachot' of Yaakov contain additional prophetic and metaphysical significance as well. Nonetheless, they do not negate the basic principle of 'bechira chofshit' [freedom of choice].

## UNITY OR HARMONY

In conclusion, our discussion can help us understand the underlying reason why God wanted Am Yisrael to consist of twelve distinct tribes. After all, if this nation's goal is to represent the ONE God, it would have been more logical that there be simply one tribe - thus forming one homogenous society! Furthermore, why must there continue to be friction between Yosef and Yehuda throughout the entire Tanach?

To explain why, recall our explanation of God's purpose in choosing a special nation (in wake of the events at Migdal Bavel). It was God's hope that this special Nation would lead all Seventy Nations towards a theocentric existence. For this purpose Avraham Avinu was chosen, and for this purpose the existence of 'shvatim' can serve as a model. Let's explain why:

People, by their very nature, tend to group into individual societies, each developing its own national character, personality, goals and aspirations. These societies eventually develop into nations who may occasionally fight over opposing goals, or cooperate in working towards the realization of common goals.

Through His agent, Am Yisrael, God hopes that all nations, while remaining distinct, will recognizing God's purpose in His creation of mankind - and hence cooperate with each other towards the achievement of that goal.

As we see in Yaakov's 'brachot' to his sons, each 'shevet' possesses its own unique character and singularity. The composite of all these qualities can be harnessed towards a common good. As God's model Nation, the cooperation between the 'Twelve Tribes of Israel' in the fulfillment of their Divine and national goals can serve as an archetype for the Seventy Nations to emulate. Through harmonious cooperation and the unifying force of a common goal (and with help of some good leadership), the Nation of Avraham becomes a 'blessing' to all nations (see

12:1-3). Mankind thus realizes its potential, and Am Yisrael fulfills its Divine destiny.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

## FOR FURTHER IYUN

**A.** In his blessing to Efraim and Menashe, "ha-mal'ach ha-gel..." Yaakov makes reference to a "mal'ach Elokim" who consistently saved him from all 'ra' (evil). Explain this reference in light of 31:7,24,29! (note the use of the word "ra").

Why do you think that this blessing is appropriate specifically for Efraim and Menashe (based on the above shiur)?

Modern commentators have suggested that the word 'ra' in this blessing may actually be alluding to the Egyptian god "raah" - If so, then Yaakov is stating that Hashem who has saved him during these final years of his life from the influence of this primary Egyptian god named 'ra' should bless these 'grandchildren' Efraim & Menashe in a similar manner, and save them from Egyptian influence, to the point that they should be known a Yaakov's offspring, and not as Egyptian princes [hence "v'yikareh bahem shmi, v'shem avotei..."]!

## B. HA-TCHAT ELOKIM ANI?

After Yaakov's death, the brothers beg Yosef to forgive them for their animosity towards him. Yosef assures them that they need not worry, for whereas he is not God, he has neither the responsibility nor the right to punish them. [This is the simple and standard explanation]. Yet, if we examine those psukim carefully, we may uncover an added dimension to Yosef's response, "ha-tachat Elokim ani"? Let's explain:

When the brothers ask Yosef's forgiveness, they explain that their father instructed them to say as follows (50:17):

"Forgive the offense and guilt of your brothers... Please forgive the offense of the SERVANTS OF THE GOD of your father..."

Immediately thereafter, the brothers suggest their own punishment, that they be SLAVES to Yosef. Yosef refuses this offer by explaining, "Do not fear, for am I IN THE PLACE OF GOD?" Yosef's answer responds directly to his brothers' comments. First, they ask to be forgiven on account of their being the SERVANTS OF GOD. Then, they offer themselves as SERVANTS to YOSEF. Yosef answers them accordingly: should they become his servants, they will no longer be servants of God. Therefore, Yosef tells his brothers - "ha-tachat Elokim ani?" - should he consider himself a replacement or 'substitute' for God? The brothers must remain God's servants, not Yosef's!

## C. "PAKOD YIFKOD" AND SEFER SHMOT

An obvious question that arises when studying Parshat Vayechi is, why didn't Yaakov's family return to Eretz Canaan once the famine ended? One could suggest that although they could and should have returned, they opted instead for the 'good life' in Eretz Mitzrayim (see the story of Avraham and Lot, 13:4-14). One could even suggest that their enslavement in Egypt was a punishment for this 'unzionistic' attitude.

Nevertheless, it seems as though Bnei Yisrael felt it their Divine destiny to stay in Egypt. This conception most likely evolved as a result of God's promise to Yaakov prior to his departure to Egypt: "Do not fear going down to Egypt, for you will become a great nation there. I will go down with you, and I will bring you back..." (46:3-4).

1. Compare these psukim, as well as 48:21, 50:24 and the psukim of Brit Bein Ha-btarim (15:13-19), with God's revelation to Moshe Rabeinu at the 'sneh' in Shmot perek 3.

2. Note God's Name in the various psukim in Sefer Breishit noted above, and relate it to Shmot 3:13-22.

3. At what point did it become unrealistic for Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt and return to Eretz Canaan? Had they returned, to what area would they have returned? Who owned the land, etc.?

## D. Between Reuven and Yosef

It is interesting to note that Yaakov himself later refers to Reuven as his 'bechor' - see 49:3), even though he had earlier granted the

'bechora' to Yosef (as we explained in our shiur above). To support our conclusion, there is a pasuk in Divrei Ha-yamim Aleph (see 5:1-2), that explains that Reuven was supposed to be the 'bechor' but because of his sin (when he took his father's 'pilegesh') - he lost his special status. Within the family of Leah, that status was given to Yehuda, but in regard to the entire family of Yaakov, the status of bechor was granted to Yosef. If you have time, I recommend that you see those psukim inside.

## Should I Make a Brakha When Receiving the COVID-19 Vaccine?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer \*

**Question: Do I make a brakha when receiving a COVID-19 vaccine shot or when it begins to be distributed in my city? If so, what brakha?**

**Answer:**

We should start by noting that the question you are asking is a halakhic one regarding the specific formulaic blessing of the Barukh atah nature. From a religious perspective, if one is feeling a sense of gratitude towards God, he should certainly say prayers and words of praise, either of his own or those that can be found in the Siddur or in Tehillim, or that come from any appropriate source.

To turn, then, to the halakhic question, my ruling would be as follows:

Assuming that you are experiencing joy, the blessing that you should recite is either the brakha of She'hehiyanu or HaTov vi'ha'Meitiv. In most cases, the blessing may only be recited at the time of receiving the shot, specifically the first shot, and not at other times, such as when the vaccine is being distributed.

Let's see why.

### Which brakha?

As these moments are moments of joy, the brakha that one should recite would be the standard one that is recited when a joyous event occurs – either She'hehiyanu, when it is just she who is experiencing the joy, or HaTov Vi'ha'meitiv (hereafter, HaTov), if her joy is shared with others.

In our case, HaTov would be preferred over She'hehiyanu. When a person receives a vaccine, it is good for other people as well – the fewer people who get sick, the better off we all are. However, the benefit that those others are receiving is of a different sort – they are not being directly protected – and some poskim are generally leery of saying HaTov when the shared nature of the benefit is not so black- and-white. There is also the general consensus among poskim that She'hehiyanu works even in cases which call for HaTov (see Beur Halakha, OH 223:5). So reciting She'hehiyanu is definitely an acceptable choice, and for some would be the preferred choice (not to mention that, experientially, people are much more emotionally connected to She'hehiyanu than to HaTov).

Nevertheless, I still would prefer HaTov. I believe that this case, unlike so many others in classic literature, is one in which the person receiving the benefit feels genuine joy not just for herself, but for all of society. This is reinforced by the fact that the receiving of the vaccine happens in settings where many people are receiving it together and where there is a system set up to administer the vaccine. One feels in such settings that the joy she is receiving is shared by others, and the joy that others are receiving is shared by her. HaTov would be – in my opinion – the preferred blessing to be recited.

So far, we have only been considering She'hehiyanu and HaTov. My esteemed colleague, Rabbi Ysoscher Katz, however, as well as others, have argued that the proper blessing to be recited at this time would be HaGomel, the blessing that we recite when a person recovers from an illness or returns from a dangerous sea journey. There is much to recommend this approach. The blessing of HaGomel is said when a person is saved from a state of danger or fear for one's safety. It is a blessing of redemption. She'hehiyanu and its counterpart, HaTov, in contrast, are blessings most often said in times of joy which go beyond our normal, acceptable – or generally good – state of being. It is not a blessing that we associate with being saved from a precarious situation. The one exception to this that I know of, is the recitation of She'hehiyanu (or HaTov) at a time when the rains come, which, according to Shulkhan Arukh (OH 221:1) refers to a case when it rains after a period of drought. Receiving rain during a period of drought is truly a case of being saved from desperate conditions. Others posit, however, that the case of reciting She'hehiyanu when the rains come refers to a case of plentiful rain, when there is great joy (Arukha HaShulkhan 221:2), making this recitation of She'hehiyanu just like all the others. According to this latter framing, She'hehiyanu is only said at moments of joy beyond the norm, and never when one is saved from a bad or dangerous situation. While this position is compelling, as a matter of halakha we embrace Shulkhan Arukh's position, and recite She'hehiyanu when the rains come after a drought. It for this reason that we focus here on the blessings of She'hehiyanu and HaTov as the ones to be recited, despite the fact that ours is not the standard

case regarding these blessings.

To rule that one should recite HaGomel in our case would require one to adopt the position that HaGomel may or should be recited at any time when one is saved from danger, even if the person was not one of the four types explicitly mentioned by the Rabbis (Berakhot 54a), namely, a person who returns from a dangerous sea journey; returns from crossing the desert; recovers from an illness; and who is released from prison. Shulkhan Arukh (OH 219:9) sides with this more expansive approach and does not limit the brakha to these cases specifically. Although in the end he recommends that when it is not one of the four cases specifically mentioned, one should recite the blessing without using God's name, Mishnah Brurah (OH 219:32) states that the consensus of the later poskim is that we should follow Shulkhan Arukh's first and primary opinion and recite HaGomel in any case analogous to those four.[1]

The reason that I do not explore here the possibility of reciting HaGomel, as compelling as that possibility may be, is that I generally adopt the more conservative approach that limits HaGomel to the four cases listed in the Talmud, although there is good reason, both halakhically and religiously, to not adopt such a limiting approach. More to the point, however, is that I also question whether the experiences of those who never had COVID and are now being vaccinated can be compared to a person who was seriously ill (even if not with a life-threatening illness) or who crossed a desert. In those cases, when ill or in the desert, there is an acute awareness at every moment of the dangerous and precarious situation that one is in, and the transition from being in the desert or at sea to having returned home is sudden and clearly demarcated (although admittedly less so in the case of recovering from an illness). In those cases, when one exits the state of danger or illness, he feels as if he has been saved. Our situation, by contrast, is one of an individual or community that has now been vaccinated and will now, over time, be relatively freer from the constraints that the virus has imposed. It does not seem to me that there will be a similar sense of salvation here when one receives a vaccine shot. Relief, yes. Joy, yes, possibly. But not salvation. I do think, however, that we should definitely consider the ha'Gomel blessing when enough people are vaccinated that society can move back to something close to normal. That, I believe, will feel like going from darkness to light. It will feel like salvation.

[NOTE: The above paragraph was written with the majority of the population – those who are not working on the front-lines – in mind. Since this teshuvah's posting, a number of front-line health care providers responded and noted that their role requires them to put themselves in danger of exposure to illness every day. For them, their reality was very much one of "acute awareness at every moment of the dangerous and precarious situation that one is in" and receiving the vaccine felt exactly like crossing an ocean and coming onto dry land. For these front-line workers, the proper blessing to recite would certainly be HaGomel.

Not everyone among health-care providers will have the same emotional and religious response. A chaplain, who likewise exposes herself to health risk on a daily basis, wrote a moving piece how for her, the blessing of Shehechiyanu gave exact expression to her powerful feeling of the presence of the hand of God, the partnership between God and humankind and the miracle of God having "sustained us and brought us to this time."

Perhaps one way to articulate the different religious responses here, is that one is a response of relief and the other one of joy, but that might be too facile of a distinction. As a practical matter, since both the HaGomel and the Shehechiyanu blessing would be indicated halakhically, a person should recite the blessing that gives greatest expression to what she is experiencing religiously and emotionally. If she feels that each blessing responds to a different part of her experience, she may choose to recite both of them, as each blessing is warranted by the circumstances.]

So while the blessing of HaGomel is one that might speak more to our experience of going from travail to relief than the blessings of Shehechiyanu and HaTov, which focus on joy, it is, in my opinion, a blessing whose time has not yet come. When we move from shots beginning to be given in certain geographic areas to a society that has been broadly immunized and has returned to some semblance of normalcy, the blessing of HaGomel should definitely be given serious consideration.

### **Each individual recites**

Each individual who receives the vaccine should recite the blessing, even if everyone else is also receiving these shots. The Gemara (Berakhot 59b) rules that when it rains, each individual who owns a field and benefits from the rain recites

the brakha – either She'hehiyanu or HaTov Vi'ha'Meitiv – alongside everyone else who is reciting it independently. Shulkhan Arukh rules accordingly (OH 221:1).

When is the right time to recite this blessing? We can identify a few potential times:

- (1) When the vaccine begins being distributed in your area;
- (2) When people have been using it for a few months, and its efficacy has been clearly demonstrated; or
- (3) When you, personally, receive it.

### **When is the moment of joy?**

To decide between these we need to consider, first, when the moment of joy occurs and, second, whether halakha would allow for the blessing to be recited at all, or only some, or only one of these times.

These blessings are only made when a person is, subjectively, experiencing joy. When is that time in our situation?

Many will feel that it is #3, when receiving the shot. At that time, something is happening to them concretely, and they are connecting to the joy of this vaccine directly.

For others, the moment of distribution, #1, will be a much more joyous event than that of actually receiving the vaccine itself, which might be anti-climactic. Alternatively, many people might not be prepared to celebrate until the vaccine has been proven to be effective, and would focus on that time, #2. It is, however, hard to know exactly when that time is. Nevertheless, if a person feels joy at a concrete moment when the vaccine's effectiveness is announced, then that would be the time to focus on for this person.

### **First Shot or Second Shot?**

If one is to recite the blessing at the moment of receiving the vaccine shot, should she do so when receiving the first shot, when the process begins, or the second shot, when the process completes? Here, again, the case of rain is instructive. The halakha is that the blessing of She'hehiyanu or HaTov over rains is said already when enough rain has fallen that bubbles are created when rain continues to fall, although the ground has not yet absorbed the amount of rain that is needed (SA OH 221:1, based on Berakhot 59b). This is directly applicable to our case: the blessing should be recited once the process begins in a significant and concrete way, that is, when receiving the first vaccine shot. It need not wait until the second shot is received. This makes a great deal of sense, since our feeling of joy begins at that first concrete moment, and in general, She'hehiyanu blessings that are said for joyous occasions focus on the first concrete experience of joy, even if the process has yet to consummate.

So much for the question of the subjective experience of joy. But what about halakhic considerations? Would halakha allow for a blessing to be made at any of these times?

My conclusion is that halakha would only allow for this blessing to be recited at #3, when one receives the vaccine. Here's why:

### **Direct and Indirect Experience of Joy**

When the vaccine is distributed in your city, you will likely be joyful as a resident of the city even before you have received your shot and benefited from the vaccine personally and directly. Can a blessing be recited then? The answer, is no. To return to the case of the rain – when it rains after a drought and you don't own a field, you do not make the brakha of She'hehiyanu or HaTov, although everyone else is experiencing great joy, and presumably you are joyous together with them (SA OH 221:2). Nevertheless, if you don't own a field, then you are not directly benefiting, and thus you do not recite a blessing.

What about the fact that you are benefiting personally when the vaccine is being distributed, because the entire society will now be more normal, and this is something that you will directly benefit from (e.g., your favorite stores will now be open, you can leave the house and go to work, etc.)? The case of the rain, however, seems to clearly prove that this does

not suffice for the blessing to be recited. In that case, when rain falls after a drought, the entire community benefits. People are happier, and food is cheaper and more available. And yet, if one does not own a field, she does not make the brakha of She'hehiyanu or HaTov (SA OH 221:2). Those brakhot are reserved for times when a person directly benefits from what has just occurred.[2]

It is, however, worth noting that in the case of rain, the Rabbis instituted a special blessing to be recited by all those not reciting She'hehiyanu or HaTov: "We thank you, God, our Lord, for every drop and drop that you have brought down to us...". The reason for this special blessing seems clear. As Arukh HaShulkhan explains (221:4): "One nevertheless has to give thanks to God, for this is something that affects everyone." I think we can reasonably surmise that were Hazal around now, they would have instituted a similar blessing for a time during a pandemic when a vaccine has been discovered and begins to be distributed to the entire world. But in the absence of their establishing such a blessing, we must choose between the blessings that they have instituted: She'hehiyanu and HaTov (and possibly HaGomei).

To repeat what was said above, if one is feeling religiously moved to bless and thank God at this time, then one should definitely do so in ways other than the formulaic Barukh atah style blessing. One could consider reciting the Nishmat prayer which appears right before Yistabach in the Shabbat Shaharit service. Much of the Nishmat prayer is taken from the blessing over rain, and one could even add to it the opening line from the rain blessing – "We thank you, O Lord, our God and God of our ancestors, for every drop and drop that you have brought down to us." We could even think of "every drop" as referring to every drop of the vaccine!

Our discussion, however, is in reference to the formulaic, halakhic blessings. For those, the time to say it is limited to cases of personal, direct experience.

### **Hearing Good News versus Hearing Good Tidings**

We have seen that one does not recite the blessing unless she benefits directly from the vaccine, that is, when she receives it herself (#3). But perhaps there is another reason to recite the blessing earlier – when it is being distributed (#1) or seen to be effective (#2). On hearing of the announcement of these events, a person is hearing joyous news. The Mishnah (Brakhot 54a) teaches that the blessings of She'hehiyanu and HaTov are made at moments of besorot tovot, joyous news. Would this not be such a time?

There is a halakhic question here as well as an experiential one. To start with the halakhic – does one recite a brakha upon hearing good news even if nothing has yet actually happened to the person directly? Would I, for example, make a brakha when my favorite team wins the World Series, since for me this is tremendously joyous news?

To me it seems clear that one does not. The examples in the Talmud (Brakhot 59b) of reciting a blessing when hearing good news is when a man hears that his wife has given birth or that he has received an inheritance. Those are not good news in general; they are reports that something good has happened to him.

In fact, the word used in the Talmud is not – as Shulkhan Arukh paraphrases it – shmuot tovot – good news, but rather besorot tovot. The word besorah occurs in multiple places in Tanakh, and it always has the meaning not of "good news" but of "good tidings," specifically in the sense of a report of something good or bad that is of direct consequence to the person receiving the news (see, for example, Sam. II, ch. 18, throughout the chapter, and Jer. 20:15, which was effectively lifted by the Mishna).

I can find no evidence that one may make a brakha of She'hehiyanu or HaTov upon hearing about good news which does not directly impact him. [3] The case of the blessing over the rain is again proof to this. Although it is clearly good news that a non-farmer hears when told that it has started raining, he still does not recite She'hehiyanu or HaTov.[4] Similarly, Mishnah Brurah in Beiur Halakha (223:1) rejects the position of Sefer Hasidim that one may recite a blessing when he hears that a righteous person who is very dear to him had a child. Since there is no direct benefit that this person has received in that case, it does not constitute besorot tovot and does not warrant a blessing.

We must, however, consider one final scenario. Consider a case where a person receives a shot before its effectiveness has been proven – as will be true for a large number of people – and does not experience any significant joy since he remains uncertain as to its efficacy. Then, it is announced that it has proven to be effective, which is joyous news to this person. This case is one which I would consider to be besorot tovot. Hearing about the vaccine's effectiveness after having received the shot is being told that something good has happened to you – and a brakha should be made at that

time.

## Summary

We have seen that the blessings of She'hehiyanu or HaTov were instituted in cases where a person is joyous over (a) a specific event that (b) affects her personally. In limiting the blessing to circumstances that meet these criteria, the Rabbis seem to have felt- perhaps basing themselves on the model of the blessings before and after eating – that we are most connected to benefit that we experience directly and personally. There might be cases – such as possibly this one – where a person experiences equal or even greater joy at a different moment. Nevertheless, the formulaic blessing – Barukh atah... – is limited to cases of direct, personal joy. Other prayers may of course be said at these times, just not these formulaic blessings.

One should thus reserve the recitation of the blessing to the moment when she is receiving the vaccine herself. That is, the time to recite the blessing is #3, when receiving the vaccine, and not #1, when it is distributed or #2, when it has proven its effectiveness.

For some, however, the moment of receiving the vaccine might not be the moment of greatest joy, and this moment might even be anti-climactic compared to hearing that it is being distributed, as discussed earlier. In such a case, the blessing should not be recited at the moment of receiving the shot. Whether one will recite a blessing at all in such a case may depend on the sequencing. If she hears of its effectiveness after having received the vaccine, and this is a joyous moment for her, she should recite the brakha at that time, as this news is good tidings about something good that has happened to her. If, on the other hand, she were to hear about the effectiveness before receiving the shot, no brakha is to be recited. Not before the shot, at the time of distribution or announcement of effectiveness, because it would not be in response to a personal, direct experience. And not at the moment of the shot, since, for this person, there is little joy at that time. Of course, in such, a case a person can say any words or verses of praise, or read from the Hallel. It is just the particular Barukh atah type blessing that would not apply in this case.

If someone did recite the blessing at the moment of distribution or when the vaccine's effectiveness was announced, before she received the shot, I would rule that she should make it again at the moment of receiving the shot, provided that that is also a joyous moment for her. The blessing would have to be recited again at that point, since the earlier blessings would, in my opinion, not have counted.

## In conclusion:

- A. The blessing to be made is HaTov or She'hehiyanu. Either of those are legitimate options in my opinion, for reasons discussed above. There is reason to also consider the blessing of HaGomel, especially when there has been change felt throughout society, although that is beyond the scope of this discussion.
- B. The time to make the blessing would be when receiving the first shot, assuming that it is a moment of joy for the person.
- C. If there is no particular joy for the person at the moment of receiving the shot, then a formal blessing should not be recited at that time.
- D. If, however, a person does not experience joy when receiving the shot but is joyful when she hears about its effectiveness afterwards, the blessing should be made at that later time, as that is a moment of good tidings.
- E. If a person made the blessing at an earlier time, whether at the time of distribution or at the time of the announcement of its effectiveness, she should make it again when receiving the shot, if this is also a joyous moment for her.
- F. Even when halakha does not dictate that the Barukh atah blessing should be said, a person may and should be encouraged to say words of praise to God if she is religiously motivated to do so.

May God, through the wisdom and knowledge that God has granted us as human beings, send refuah shleima to all those who are suffering as a result of the virus, and protect all of those who have not yet contracted the virus, and let us all see a time when society has returned to a semblance of normalcy.

## Notes:

[1] Alternatively, there are those who have argued that our case fits into the category of a sick person being healed. This is a hard position to take since ours is a case of being protected from illness, not of having been sick and being healed from the illness, which, on a subjective level, is a significantly different experience.

[2] Here we follow the explanation of Shulkhan Arukh (OH 221:1), as to why in this case the rain is a joyous event. He frames this as a case where there has been a drought, and now it is finally raining. Other framings are also possible. Mishnah Brurah (OH 221:1) rules that a blessing would be in order for the first rain of the season in the Land of Israel, since the country is often beset with drought and there is always great anxiety around when it will begin to rain. Both of these cases are analogous to ours, as they start with a bad situation for the entire society that has now been resolved and, nevertheless, the blessings are only recited by those benefiting directly. In contrast, Arukh HaShulkhan (OH 221:2) describes the case as one where there is plentiful rain and that it will be a particularly successful year for the farmers. If so, this would not be relevant to our current situation.

[3] The Talmud and Shulkhan Arukh (OH 223:2) do have a case where a man hears about his father's death and recites Dayan Ha'Emet over the death and She'hehiyanu if he is receiving an inheritance. While in that case he will actually collect his inheritance later, he is already, according to halakha, the legal owner of the property at the moment of death.

[4] I have found one source that might imply that the concept of besorot tovot goes beyond good tidings of events that happened to the person. Shut Hilkhot Ketanot (2:160) compares the blessing said over besorot tovot to the blessing that we make over smelling spices. The former is pleasure received by the ear, and the latter is pleasure received by the nose. While one could argue that the pleasure that a person experiences when hearing good tidings about events that relate to him directly will be greater than the pleasure he experiences when hearing good news in general, there are definitely exceptions to this rule (e.g., when I hear that my team won the World Series – that's music to my ears). It seems that for Hilkhot Ketanot this blessing is recited over hearing any joyful news, and not just good tidings.

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# **The Use of Traditional Scholarship to Build Bridges and Mend Rifts**

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel \*

**'The Disciples of the Wise Increase Peace in the World':**

## **The Use of Traditional Scholarship to Build Bridges and Mend Rifts \***

### **Introduction**

At the end of five different tractates of the Talmud, we find the following teaching:

Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: The disciples of the wise increase peace in the world, as it says, And all your children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children [banayikh] (Isa. 54:13). Read not banayikh ["your children"] but bonayikh ["your builders"] (Berakhot 64a, cf. Yevamot 122b, Nazir 66b, Keritot 28b, Tamid 32b).

Genuine Torah scholars are supposed to be builders of society, and increase peace in the world. When rabbis and scholars are seeking heaven and communal unity, their Torah scholarship is the ideal tool to unite diverse people.

The Talmud celebrates the diversity of the Jewish people by coining a blessing:

Rabbi Hamnuna further said: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he should say: Blessed is He who discerns secrets (Berakhot 58a).

Rather than considering conformity a blessing, the Talmud idealizes diversity as something for which God deserves praise. We seek Jewish unity, but not conformity.[1]

Command of a multiplicity of opinions, the hallmark of a Torah scholar, can be used to teach the many legitimate avenues into Torah. The sixteenth-century commentator Rabbi Samuel Eideles (Maharsha) explains that God revealed the Torah in the presence of 600,000 Israelites because the Torah can be interpreted in 600,000 different ways![2] Although the cliché "two Jews, three opinions" may be true, a more telling adage would be, "one learned Jew, dozens of opinions." When Torah scholars learn sources in their depth, they realize that every single point is debated by the greatest rabbinic minds. The dazzling range of possibilities teaches uncertainty, and also that people can hold significantly different opinions and still be unified under the roof of the Torah.

We live in an age of terrible fragmentation. Whereas debates are hardwired into Jewish tradition, rifts are detrimental to the Jewish community. Often, rifts arise when each side adopts a partial truth from within tradition to the near-exclusion of another partial truth held by the other side. Good Torah scholarship, in its attempt to navigate the two halves, offers an opportunity to build bridges and mend these rifts.

In this essay, we will briefly survey a few areas pertaining to (1) relations between Orthodox Jews; (2) relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews; and (3) relations between Jews and non-Jews. The guiding principle is that a faithful commitment to Torah and unity coupled with the range of opinions from within tradition offers models to build bridges and mend rifts without demanding conformity.

### **Within Orthodoxy**

#### **Religious Authority of Midrash**

Jewish tradition venerates earlier rabbinic scholarship, and places a premium on the Talmud and other midrashic collections. Simultaneously, the peshat school from the post-talmudic Geonim down to the present has established that the biblical text remains at the center of inquiry, and non-legal rabbinic teachings are not binding. The scholarly pursuit of truth in Torah is imperative.[3]

Many within the Orthodox world adopt only half of that truth at the expense of the other. One side dogmatically adopts talmudic and midrashic teachings as literal, and insists that this position is required as part of having faith in the

teachings of the Sages. Another group dismisses the talmudic traditions as being far removed from biblical text and reality. The first group accuses the second of denigration of the Sages, whereas the second group accuses the first of being fundamentalists who ignore science and scholarship.

The truth is, this rift has been around for a long time. Rambam lamented this very imbalance in the twelfth century in his introduction to Perek Helek in tractate Sanhedrin. He divided Jews into three categories:

The first group is the largest one...They understand the teachings of the sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated, let alone sophisticated scholars, their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying. The members of this group are poor in knowledge. One can only regret their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them. As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah of God and says the opposite of what it intended. For He said in His perfect Torah, "The nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deut. 4:6)...

Such individuals are pious, but foolish. They misunderstand the intent of the Sages, and draw false conclusions in the name of religion.

Misguided as this first group is, at least it is preferable to the second group, which also takes the words of the Sages literally but rejects their teachings as a result:

The second group is also a numerous one. It, too, consists of persons who, having read or heard the words of the sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the sages to be fools, hold them up to contempt, and slander what does not deserve to be slandered.... The members of this group are so pretentiously stupid that they can never attain genuine wisdom.... This is an accursed group, because they attempt to refute men of established greatness whose wisdom has been demonstrated to competent men of science....

The first group is reverent to the Sages, whereas the second group is open to science and scholarship and therefore rejects the Sages and their teachings. Both groups fail because of their fundamental misunderstanding of the Sages.

Rambam then celebrates that rare ideal scholar, who combines those two half-truths into the whole truth:

There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group.... This group consists of men to whom the greatness of our sages is clear.... They know that the sages did not speak nonsense, and it is clear to them that the words of the sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers....[4]

In addition to Rambam's insistence on the fact that the Sages did not always mean their words literally, we must add that the greatest peshat commentators, from Rabbi Saadiah Gaon to Rashi to Ibn Ezra to Ramban to Abarbanel and so many others, venerated the Sages without being bound by all of their non-legal comments. These rabbinic thinkers combine reverence for the Sages with a commitment to scholarship and integrity to the text of the Torah.[5]

### **Openness to Non-Orthodox and Non-Jewish Scholarship[6]**

Jewish tradition's commitment to truth should lead us to accept the truth from whoever says it. Rambam lived by this axiom,[7] and many great rabbinic figures before and after him similarly espoused this principle.[8] On the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish between knowledge and theory. Scholarship invariably is accompanied by conscious and unconscious biases of scholars, some of which may stray from traditional Jewish thought and belief.

This tension is expressed poignantly in an anecdote cited by Rabbi Joseph ibn Aknin (c. 1150-c. 1220). After noting the works of several rabbinic predecessors who utilized Christian and Muslim writings in their commentaries, he quotes a story related by Shemuel Ha-Nagid:

Rabbi Mazliah b. Albazek the rabbinic judge of Saklia told [Shemuel Ha-Nagid] when he came from Baghdad... that one day in [Rabbi Hai Gaon's] yeshiva they studied the verse, "let my head not refuse such choice oil" (Ps. 141:5), and those

present debated its meaning. Rabbi Hai of blessed memory told Rabbi Mazliah to go to the Catholic Patriarch and ask him what he knew about this verse, and this upset [Rabbi Mazliah]. When [Rabbi Hai] saw that Rabbi Mazliah was upset, he rebuked him, “Our saintly predecessors who are our guides solicited information on language and interpretation from many religious communities—and even of shepherds, as is well known!”[9]

All scholarship is valuable, but all scholars are necessarily biased. There is no easy solution to this dilemma, and rabbinic scholars continue to espouse different approaches for the proper balance in this issue.[10]

### **Sins of Biblical Heroes**

In recent years, particularly in Israel, there has been a raging debate regarding the sins of biblical heroes. One side insists that even ostensibly egregious sins, such as David and Bathsheba-Uriah (2 Samuel 11), Solomon and idolatry (1 Kings 11), and others should not be taken at face value. On the contrary, numerous rabbinic sources insist that these biblical figures did not violate cardinal sins as the plain sense of the text suggests.

Others maintain that the biblical texts speak for themselves. The Bible exposes the flaws of its greatest heroes, teaching that nobody is above the law, and nobody is perfect. There also are many rabbinic sources in support of this position.

In this instance, each side of the debate represents a half-truth. One group properly teaches a deep sense of awe and reverence for our heroes, whereas the other group correctly insists that nobody is above the Torah, and even the greatest figures are vulnerable to sin. Both of these messages emerge from the biblical texts and rabbinic tradition. However, people who adopt only one or the other half-truth cannot even engage with one another. The first group accuses the other of irreverence, whereas the second group protests that the first ignores the biblical text and its commentaries, and also justifies the immorality of religious leaders in the name of tradition.

Responsible rabbis and educators carefully weigh those two half-truths into a balanced picture more in tune with the biblical texts and rabbinic tradition, teaching that nobody is above the Torah, while maintaining proper awe and reverence for our heroes.[11]

### **Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Jews**

Judaism includes the basic tenets of belief in one God, divine revelation of the Torah, and a concept of divine providence and reward-punishment. Although there have been debates over the precise definitions and contours of Jewish belief, these core beliefs are universally accepted as part of our tradition.[12]

The question for believing Jews today is: How should we relate to the overwhelming majority of Jews, who likely do not fully believe in classical Jewish beliefs? Two medieval models shed light on this question.

Rambam insists that proper belief is essential. Whether one intentionally rejects Jewish beliefs, or whether one simply is mistaken or uninformed, non-belief leads to exclusion from the community of believers:

When a person affirms all these Principles, and clarifies his faith in them, he becomes part of the Jewish People. It is a mitzvah to love him, have mercy on him, and show him all the love and brotherhood that God has instructed us to show our fellow Jews. Even if he has transgressed out of desire and the overpowering influence of his base nature, he will be punished accordingly but he will have a share in the World to Come. But one who denies any of these Principles has excluded himself from the Jewish People and denied the essence [of Judaism]. He is called a heretic, an epikoros, and “one who has cut off the seedlings.” It is a mitzvah to hate and destroy such a person, as it says (Ps. 139:21), “Those who hate You, God, I shall hate” (Introduction to Perek Helek).

For Rambam, belief in the principles of Jewish belief are necessary, and sufficient, to gain afterlife. Scholars of Rambam generally explain that Rambam did not think afterlife was a reward. Rather, it is a natural consequence of one's religious-intellectual development. Although Rambam did not invent Jewish beliefs, he did innovate this dogmatic position of Judaism being a community of believers in a set of propositions.[13]

Professor Menachem Kellner explains that Rambam's position was not the only rabbinic response to Jews who do not espouse Jewish beliefs. Ra'avad, Rabbi Simon b. Tzemah Duran, and Rabbi Joseph Albo maintain that if one makes a well-intentioned error based on a misunderstanding of sources, that person is wrong but not a heretic. One is a heretic only when one willfully denies a principle of faith or willfully affirms a principle denied by the Torah.[14] Kellner argues that

the majority of medieval rabbinic thinkers support this latter view, rather than the exclusionary dogmatic position of Rambam.[15]

Halakhah, of course, defines Jewishness by birth and nationhood, and not by belief. Every Jew is part of the family even if he or she is mistaken in belief. We ideally want all Jews to learn, observe, and believe in the Torah and tradition. However, we should not exclude as heretics those who fall short unless they intentionally wish to exclude themselves from the community.[16]

The approach espoused by Ra'avad, Duran, and Albo reflects a productive means of addressing today's fragmented society from within tradition. We stand for an eternal set of beliefs and practices, and we embrace and teach all Jews as we build community together.[17]

### **Jews and Non-Jews**

The Torah embraces universalistic values that apply to all humanity. All people are descended from one couple, so there is no room for bigotry (Sanhedrin 37a). All people are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26).[18] There is a universal morality demanded by the Torah, codified in the Talmud as the Seven Noahide Laws. The messianic visions of the prophets foresee that all humanity will one day live in harmony by accepting God and the requisite moral life demanded by the Torah.[19]

Simultaneously, God made a singular covenant with the people of Israel through the Torah. Israel plays a unique role as a "kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Exod. 19:6), has a separate set of laws revealed by God, and occupies a central role in the covenantal history between God and humanity.

Many within the Jewish community focus almost exclusively on the particularistic elements of tradition, and consequently look down upon all non-Jews and non-observant Jews. Many other Jews focus almost exclusively on the universalistic vision of Judaism, ignoring Jewish belief, law, and values in favor of modern Western values. Needless to say, the respective espousing of half-truths again leads to rifts within the community.

Tradition teaches a sensitive balance of universalism and particularism.[20] The Torah has a special vision for Jews and simultaneously embraces all of humanity in an effort to perfect society.[21]

### **Conclusion**

We have seen several areas where traditional scholarship can build bridges between half-truths that divide people. Within the Orthodox world, reverence toward heroes and the Sages must be balanced with fidelity to the biblical text, commitment to prophetic integrity, and commitment to truth in scholarship. In relating to non-observant or non-believing Jews, we must espouse and teach traditional belief and observance, but not exclude those who are not yet fully connected. The Torah teaches both particularistic and universalistic values, and it is critical to adopt both in a faithful religious worldview. This position enables believing Jews to sincerely love all humanity and to long for universal morality and harmony.

It is easier to espouse a half-truth than to struggle for the whole truth. The perils of this approach are not theoretical, but an unfortunate and avoidable part of our current reality. It is up to the disciples of the wise to build the ideological basis for increasing peace in the world by upholding and promoting the eternal values of the Torah.

### **Notes**

[\*] This article appeared originally in *Conversations* 26 (Autumn 2016), pp. 20-32.

[1] See further in Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "Orthodoxy and Diversity," *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 70-81.

[2] Maharsha, *Hiddushei Aggadot* on *Berakhot* 58a.

[3] See, for example, Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," *Tradition* 25:2 (Winter 1990), pp. 18-27; Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav*, vol. 5, resp. 49 (pp. 304-307); Rabbi Michael

Rosensweig, "Elu va-Elu Divre Elokim Hayyim: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," *Tradition* 26:3 (Spring 1992), pp. 4-23; Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1-20; Rabbi Moshe Shamah, "On Interpreting Midrash," in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 27-39.

[4] Translation from the Maimonides Heritage Center, <https://www.mhcny.org/qt/1005.pdf>. Accessed March 15, 2016.

[5] See further in Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education," *Conversations* 24 (Winter 2016), pp. 18-32; Rabbi Nahum E. Rabinovitch, "Faith in the Sages: What Is It?" (Hebrew), in *Mesilot Bilvavam (Ma'alei Adumim: Ma'aliyot*, 2014), pp. 103-114.

[6] See Hayyim Angel, "The Use of Non-Orthodox Scholarship in Orthodox Bible Learning," *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 17-19; Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, "Reflections on the Use of Non-Orthodox Wisdom in the Orthodox Study of Tanakh," in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 53-61.

[7] In his introduction to *Pirkei Avot* (Shemonah Perakim), Rambam writes, "Know that the things about which we shall speak in these chapters and in what will come in the commentary are not matters invented on my own.... They are matters gathered from the discourse of the Sages in the Midrash, the Talmud, and other compositions of theirs, as well as from the discourse of both the ancient and modern philosophers and from the compositions of many men. Hear the truth from whoever says it." Translation in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, Raymond Weiss and Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover, 1983), p. 60.

[8] See, for example, Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Obligation" (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra va-Anahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in Our Time, 1979), pp. 13-27; Uriel Simon, "The Pursuit of Truth that Is Required for Fear of God and Love of Torah" (Hebrew), *ibid.*, pp. 28-41; Marvin Fox, "Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation," in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 3-26. See also Hayyim Angel, "The Yeshivah and the Academy: How We Can Learn from One Another in Biblical Scholarship," in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 19-29; reprinted in *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 28-35.

[9] *Hitgalut ha-Sodot ve-Hofa'at ha-Me'orot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1964), pp. 493-495. In *Hagigah* 15b, God Himself initially refused to quote Rabbi Meir in the heavenly court since Rabbi Meir continued to learn from his teacher Elisha b. Avuyah, though the latter had become a heretic. However, Rabbah instantly rejected God's policy, stressing that Rabbi Meir carefully sifted out the valuable teachings from the "peel." Consequently, God reversed His policy and began quoting "His son" Rabbi Meir in the heavenly court.

[10] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "From Black Fire to White Fire: Conversations about Religious Tanakh Learning Methodology," in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 1-18; *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 11-27; Hayyim Angel, "The Literary-Theological Study of Tanakh," afterword to Moshe Sokolow, *Tanakh: An Owner's Manual: Authorship, Canonization, Masoretic Text, Exegesis, Modern Scholarship and Pedagogy* (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2015), pp. 192-207; also in Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 118-136; Hayyim Angel, "Faith and Scholarship Can Walk Together: Rabbi Amnon Bazak on the Challenges of Academic Bible Study in Traditional Learning," *Tradition* 47:3 (Fall 2014), pp 78-88; reprinted in this volume; Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "Always Connect," in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel. *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 1-12; Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 1-38.

[11] See, for example, Rabbi Amnon Bazak, *Ad ha-Yom ha-Zeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013), pp. 432-470; Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for Yir'at Shamayim in Academic Jewish Studies," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), pp. 7-24; Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "A Living Torah" (Hebrew), in *Hi Sihat: Al Derekh Limmud ha-Tanakh*, ed. Yehoshua Reiss (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), pp. 17-30; Rabbi Yaakov Medan, *David u-Vat Sheva: Ha-Het, ha-Onesh, ve-ha-Tikkun*

(Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), pp. 7-24; Rabbi Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Kibbutz Av and Kibbutz Avot: Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques," *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 35-44.

[12] See Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004). Review Essay, Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, "Flexibility with a Firm Foundation: On Maintaining Jewish Dogma," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004), pp. 179-191.

[13] See Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986); Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999). Book Review by David Berger, *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 81-89.

[14] Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, pp. 99-107.

[15] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, p. 68.

[16] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, pp. 111-126. See also Marc B. Shapiro, "Is There a 'Pesak' for Jewish Thought?" in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief* (Mahshevut Yisrael ve-Emunat Yisrael), ed. Daniel J. Lasker (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2012), pp. 119\*-140\*.

[17] See also Rabbi Dov Linzer, "The Discourse of Halakhic Inclusiveness," *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 1-5; Menachem Kellner, "Must We Have Heretics?" *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 6-10.

[18] See Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, *In His Image: The Image of God in Man* (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2015).

[19] See especially Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002). See also Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Alan Brill, *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Alan Brill, "Many Nations Under God: Judaism and Other Religions," *Conversations* 2 (Autumn 2008), pp. 39-49.

[20] See Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "The Universalistic Vision of Judaism," *Conversations* 12 (Winter 2012), pp. 95-100; Rabbi Marc D. Angel, *Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991), pp. 197-207; Rabbi Marc D. Angel with Hayyim Angel, *Rabbi Haim David Halevi: Gentle Scholar, Courageous Thinker* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2006), pp. 189-198.

[21] See Hayyim Angel, "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," *Conversations* 8 (Fall 2010), pp. 52-60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 25-34.

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

## PARASHAT VAYECHI

In honor of their wonderful parents and siblings (in-law): Stuart, Joan, Yonatan, Marlena, P'nina, Nissim, Ahuva, and Rena Cantor, for all of their love and support.

Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet. Yehi Zikhra Barukh

### Yaakov's Blessings to Menashe and Efraim

Rav Yoel Bin-Nun

#### When did Yaakov meet Menashe and Efraim?

And it came to pass after these things, that [someone] told Yosef, "Behold, your father is sick." And he took with him his two sons, Menashe and Efraim." (*Bereishit* 48:1)

The unit begins with the words, "And it came to pass after these things." Which events are referred to here?

From the story as recounted over the course of the chapter, we see that the phrase cannot be talking about the end of Yaakov's life, after he has lived in Egypt for seventeen years and after he has made Yosef swear that he will not bury him in Egypt (as recorded in the beginning of the *parasha*). The chapter describes Yaakov's **first encounter** with his grandsons, Menashe and Efraim, and the atmosphere is still suffused with the excitement of the reunion between Yaakov and Yosef. This is expressed in Yaakov's words:

"I had not thought to see your face, and behold, God has also showed me your children." (48:11)

Further on, it also appears that in this chapter Yosef's sons are **young children**,<sup>1</sup> as Yosef brings them out "from between his knees."

According to the principle that "there is no chronological order in the Torah,"<sup>2</sup> we must conclude that "it came to pass after these things" takes us back to an earlier point in time – specifically, after Yaakov arrived in Egypt. The account in our *parasha*, then, is a continuation of the first encounter between Yaakov and Yosef as described in the previous *parasha*.

This begs the question of why the story of the blessing to Menashe and Efraim is not recounted immediately after Yaakov's arrival in Egypt. One possibility is that the Torah wanted to juxtapose the blessing to Yosef and his sons to the

blessings to the other tribes (chapter 49).

On the level of *peshat*, we might suggest that the previous *parasha* went on to describe the events that followed Yaakov's arrival from the point of view of Yosef, the ruler: his arrangements to ensure that his father and brothers would settle in Goshen; his planning and organization so that Egypt could deal with the famine; and his oath to his father (seventeen years later) not to bury him in Egypt, but rather in Cana'an (a matter for which Yosef would have to receive special approval from Pharaoh, as recorded in 50:4-6). Only after recounting all of Yosef's efforts in these areas does the Torah come back to the family context and the first encounter between Yaakov and Yosef.

Accordingly to this explanation, "after these things" – after Yaakov arrived in Egypt – Yosef was told that his father is ill. It seems that Yaakov was weakened by the journey and the excitement of seeing Yosef again. At this point, at the beginning of his stay in Egypt, he blessed Yosef with the blessing that had been given to him in Luz, in Cana'an.

Yaakov begins by saying, "God Almighty appeared to me in Luz, in the land of Cana'an." What is the meaning of this introduction? His words contain no hint of his dream of the ladder, nor the Divine revelation and promise to him as he left for Padan Aram. Clearly, then, Yaakov is referring to the revelation in Luz upon his *return* from Padan Aram. Indeed, the exact expressions that Yaakov recalls were said to him upon his return:

And God appeared to Yaakov again, when he came out of Padan Aram, and **blessed him**. And God said to him, "Your name Yaakov – your name shall not be called any more Yaakov, but Yisrael shall be your name;" and He called his name Yisrael. And God said to him, "I am **God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations** shall come of you, and kings shall emerge from your loins, and the land which I gave to Avraham and Yitzchak – to you I will give it, **and to your seed after you I will give the land.**" (35:9-12)

Following this passage (in *Parashat Vayishlach*) we read:

And they journeyed from Beit-El, and there was **but a little way to come to Efrat**, and Rachel travailed and she had hard labor... but his father called him Binyamin. (35:16-18)

Yaakov's words to Yosef in our *parasha* echo these excerpts exactly:

And Yaakov said to Yosef, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Cana'an, and **blessed me**, and said to me, 'Behold, I will **make you fruitful, and multiply you**, and I will make of you a **multitude of people**, and **will give this land to your seed after you** for an everlasting possession.' And now your two sons, Efraim and Menashe, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine – like Reuven and Shimon they shall be mine... And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Cana'an on the way, when yet **there was but a little way to come to Efrat**, and I buried her there in

<sup>1</sup> As Rembrandt indeed depicts them.

<sup>2</sup> *Pesachim* 6b, discussing the beginning on *Sefer Bamidbar*; see also Rashi on *Shemot* 24:1 and *Shemot* 31:18. Likewise, everyone agrees that Avram did not depart from Charan after the death of Terach; see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban on *Bereishit* 11:31-32.

the way of Efrat, that is Beit Lechem.” (48:3-7)

Why does Yaakov recall this revelation specifically?

The reason seems to be that this revelation not only includes the changing of Yaakov's name to Yisrael, but is also juxtaposed to the story of Binyamin's birth, bringing the number of the tribes of Israel to the total of twelve. All of them together are called “Yisrael,” as we see from the story of Eliyahu:

And Eliyahu took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Yaakov, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Yisrael shall be your name.” (*Melakhim I* 18:31)

This juxtaposition exposes the thorny problem that had troubled Yaakov in light of his reunion with Yosef: Could Yosef now rejoin the family? What would happen with his two sons, Menashe and Efraim, sons of Osnat, daughter of Poti-fera? What place was there for these boys – who had grown up in the ruler's palace, sons of an Egyptian princess – within Yaakov's household? Could they be considered among the “tribes of Yisrael”? If Yaakov would not manage to absorb Yosef back into the family, would he be left outside, together with his sons?

For this reason, Yaakov recalls the revelation in Luz in the land of Cana'an, where he received the name Yisrael and then witnessed the completion of the twelve tribes. And at this point, with that memory in mind, Yaakov takes courageous action with far-reaching consequences: **he adopts Efraim and Menashe as children of Yaakov and Rachel**, as full-fledged tribes, just like Reuven and Shimon. They would not be considered sons of the Egyptian Osnat, daughter of Poti-Fera, but rather sons of Yaakov and Rachel.

In order to anchor this perception back at the time when the tribes appeared, it is necessary to “resurrect” Rachel, as it were, and to retell the story of her burial in the context of her birthing not only of Binyamin, but also of Yosef's two sons, Efraim and Menashe. Yaakov thereby tells Yosef: You might be second to Pharaoh and obligated and defined by your diplomatic role, but your sons can return to the family by being considered children of Yaakov and Rachel.

When Yaakov asks, concerning Yosef's sons, “Who are these?,” on the simple level he is asking as to their identity. On a deeper level, the question is an important and troubling one: Will they be part of Bnei Yisrael? Yosef answers, “They are my sons, whom God has given me in this place” (*ibid.*). And then Yaakov blesses them by virtue of and in light of the revelation in Luz.

### Why does Yaakov change the order of Menashe and Efraim?

When Yaakov blesses Menashe and Efraim, he reverses their order. As we recall, Yaakov had once been in a similar situation, wherein Yitzchak, his father, had mistaken the younger son (himself) for the older one (Esav). Yaakov ended up paying a heavy price – he had to flee his home, and Rivka was forced to part from him forever. Why, then, does Yaakov now recreate a similar scenario?

The customs practiced by the forefathers (as well as the laws of the Ancient East) permitted a father, in special circumstances, to prefer one son over the others, but this fails to explain why in this situation it was worth doing so. Would this not sow seeds of jealousy and hatred between Efraim and Menashe? While the continuation of the *parasha* offers no evidence of any conflict in this regard, we must still ask how Yaakov could take the chance.

Clearly, Yaakov must have had a very good and very

important reason for acting as he did – and this reason pertains to Yaakov's interest in severing Efraim and Menashe from Osnat. Only this need could drive Yaakov to such an extreme act. According to the natural order, Menashe and Efraim are the sons of Osnat; they are Egyptian princes. But in the realm that transcends the physical, natural reality – by virtue of God's revelation to Yaakov with the name God Almighty (*El Sha-dai*) – Efraim and Menashe are the sons of Rachel.

Yosef is not happy with the exchanging of the order of his sons, but he accepts what Yaakov tells him. It seems that Efraim and Menashe also accepted the situation, being young children, and also perhaps because they stand and receive their blessings together, at the same time and in the same place, in contrast to Yaakov and Esav, who could not stand together before Yitzchak.

### Yaakov's blessing to Yosef's sons

And he blessed Yosef, and said, “May God, before Whom my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, walked; the God Who has been my Shepherd all my life long until this day; the angel who redeemed me from all evil – bless the lads, and let my name be placed upon them, and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” (48:15-20)

The language of the blessing recalls the revelation of the angel who delivers Yaakov from all evil while he is with Lavan the Aramean in Padan Aram (31:11-13).

However, there is a significant difference. Yaakov's blessing to Yosef, in which he mentions his fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, has a special dimension to it. Avraham had sent Hagar and her son away, as well as the children of his concubines. Yitzchak, too, had been forced to accept that his two sons could not inherit him together. But for Yaakov, the situation is different. Not only will all his sons – including the sons of Bilha and Zilpa – inherit together, but Efraim and Menashe will also be considered his sons, and together they will build the twelve tribes of Israel. From this point onwards, there is no more rejecting or excluding anyone from the family of the forefathers. Everyone is part of the family; all are children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and all together will “multiply exceedingly in the midst of the land.”

Only this can bring proper closure to *Sefer Bereishit* with all its families and genealogies, and all its stories of chosenness and rejection. By the end of *Sefer Bereishit*, there is no more exclusion; “they are all My children.”

### The Birthright of Menashe vs. the birthright of Efraim

Yaakov awards Yosef not only the blessing of the sons, but also leadership of the family. The blessing that God had given Yaakov in his vision in the night, when he was on his way to Egypt, used the word “*anokhi*”:

“I (*anokhi*) shall go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again, and Yosef shall put his hand upon your eyes.” (46:4)

Similarly, when Yaakov transfers leadership of the family and the promise to Yosef in Egypt, he says:

“Behold, I (*anokhi*) die, but God shall be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers.” (48:21)

And again, when Yosef hands the promise on to his brothers:

“... I (*anokhi*) die, and **God will surely visit you, and bring you up out of this land** to the land of which He swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov.” (50:24)

But in Yaakov’s blessing to Yosef, we find an additional element of critical importance:

“And I have given you **one portion more than your brothers, which I took** out of the hand of the Emori with my sword and with my bow.” (48:22)

On the surface, we might have understood this extra portion as a part of Yosef’s inheritance to the firstborn leader. However, from the latter half of the verse, it is clear that Yaakov is speaking of a particular, specific inheritance. It seems that that Yosef, as the head of the family and as Rachel’s firstborn, **received from his father, while still in Egypt (!), a special inheritance** in the land – the region of Shekhem.

### Shekhem, Inheritance of Yosef

The city of Shekhem, hinted to in Yaakov’s blessing to Yosef, will ultimately become the connection between the inheritances of Menashe and Efraim. There Yosef will be buried, and his resting place will be a place of encounter for his descendants for all generations (see *Yehoshua* 24:32).

The huge inheritances of Yosef’s sons on the western side of the Jordan (*Yehoshua* 16, 17), to which are added the inheritance of Menashe on the eastern side, are testimony to the success of Yaakov’s strategy, against all odds.

There can be no question that the double inheritance of Menashe is an expression of his birthright. Menashe is the only tribe that receives an inheritance on each side of the Jordan, from Gilad to Shekhem – an inheritance that connects the two sides. Efraim, on the other hand, does not receive a birthright (double) inheritance. His portion is smaller than Menashe’s portion on the western side of the Jordan alone. However, he receives the blessing of leadership and dominion of “a multitude of nations” (48:19) – a reference to the leadership of *Yehoshua bin-Nun* in the conquest and inheritance of the land.

But what is the meaning of “by my sword and by my bow”? Was it not Shimon and Levi who conquered Shekhem by their sword?

Here Yaakov states explicitly that any inheritance conquered by the family belongs to the patriarch (see *Ramban*). It is not Shimon and Levi who, by means of the sword, will decide on the inheritances, but rather Yaakov, “by his sword and by his bow,” who will decide. And he gives Shekhem to Yosef – the same place to which he dispatched Yosef as a boy to go and check on the “welfare of his brothers.”

Thus, the circle is closed: Yosef will inherit the portion where his brothers (seemingly Shimon and Levi) had sought to kill him, and from whence he was sold as a slave. Shimon and Levi had surely meant to inherit Shekhem for themselves by their sword, but it was taken from them – as we shall see below.

Thus, the end of chapter 48 connects to chapter 49 – the chapter of the blessings for inheritances.

### The “Latter” Days

And Yaakov called to his sons, and said: “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last (latter) days.” (49:1)

*Chazal* teach that Yaakov wanted to reveal to his sons

what would happen at the end of days, but his Divine inspiration suddenly left him (see *Rashi*). According to the *peshat*, however, what Yaakov seeks (and indeed goes on) to tell them is not a matter of prophecy or wonders, but rather simply the matter of inheritances. The “last days” (*acharit ha-yamim*), in Biblical Hebrew, means the “latter days”<sup>3</sup> that will come after the present time in Egyptian exile. Yaakov refers to the time when *Bnei Yisrael* will return to the land of their forefathers’ inheritance.

When the family dwelled in Cana'an, the brothers were mired in evil reports, hatred, and the sale, leading the entire family to exile in Egypt. However, it is specifically in Egypt that all the blessings of *Eretz Yisrael* and its portions of inheritance are revealed, with the promise that Yaakov will be buried in the ancestral burial ground, the inheritance of Yosef with Efraim and Menashe, and the blessings of the tribes, replete with allusions to their inheritance. All this is a vision of the “last days” – the time to come after the exile.

### The Inheritance of Reuven

Reuven is rejected as firstborn by his father. This is reflected, first and foremost, in his inheritance. The son who is the “first of his father’s might” is supposed to receive the main and most important portion, symbolizing the leadership of *Am Yisrael* as a whole. As such, Reuven should have received Mount Chevron, where Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov lived. However, owing to his “going up to his father’s bed,” Reuven loses his birthright. And “unstable as water,” he asks for his inheritance first, before the other tribes – on the eastern side of the Jordan.

Reuven’s behavior – in the episode of Yosef and the pit, in his rash promise concerning surety for Binyamin, and in his request for his inheritance – shows him to be too hasty and not sufficiently thought-out. Yaakov therefore tells him, “You shall not excel.” However, these are merely matters of character. Reuven’s grievous sin against his father concerns his interference in Yaakov’s intimacy, the episode involving Bilha.

### Withholding Inheritance from Shimon and Levi

“Shimon and Levi are brothers... I will divide them in Yaakov and scatter them in Yisrael.” (49:5-6)

In accordance with Yaakov’s words, the inheritance of Shimon is indeed situated within the inheritance of Yehuda (*Yehoshua* 19:9). Later on we find descendants of Shimon living in the Dotan area in the northern Shomron, during the period of Yoshiyahu’s monarchy (*Divrei Ha-Yamim II* 34:6) and during the Second Temple Period (*Sefer Yehudit*). The tribe of Shimon remained nomads even in the land (see also *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 4:42-43).

The tribe of Levi receives no inheritance at all, but rather is dedicated to Divine service and lives in the Levite cities. Moshe and Aharon elevate the tribe of Levi higher and higher, while Shimon descends lower and lower (Pe’or and the plague, *Bamidbar* 25). Yaakov’s words are borne out by history, and these two tribes lack any independent inheritance.

### a. Yehuda – Victory and Inheritance

“Yehuda – it is you whom your brothers will praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s

<sup>3</sup> In Biblical Hebrew, whatever is not “first” (*rishon*) is by necessity “later” or “afterwards” (*acharon*), occurring after whatever came first. For example, “And he placed the handmaids and their children first, and Leah and her children afterwards (*acharonim*), and Rachel and Yosef last (*acharonim*)” (*Bereishit* 33:2).

children shall bow down before you. Yehuda is a lion's whelp... The staff (*shevet*) shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the ruler (*mechokek*) from between his feet, until the coming of Shilo, and the people shall obey him. Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes; his eyes are red with wine, and his teeth white with milk." (49:8-12)

Yehuda will reign like a lion's whelp rising from the prey, crouching like a lion after its prey. The "shevet" that will always remain with him is the staff or scepter of the leader, and the "mechokek" refers to the royal official overseeing provisions for the citizenry, the "sons of your father." The figure who answers to this description, of course, is David, son of Yishai. Most of the commentators explain the name "Shilo" here as being derived from "*shilia me-rechem*" – that which emerges from the womb, i.e., a descendant. The reference, then, is to the King Mashiach, and "the people shall obey him."

My father and teacher, Dr. Yechiel bin-Nun z"l,<sup>4</sup> explained the words "until the coming of Shilo" as an allusion: "The spoils [of war] will be brought in tribute [or "as a gift"] to him (*shai lo*)." In the expression "*ad ki yavo shilo*" (conventionally translated as, "until Shilo comes") the word "*ad*" means "prey," as in the blessing given to Binyamin:

"... in the morning he shall devour the prey (*ad*), and at night he shall divide the spoil." (49:27)

Examples of this image of the parading of the spoils in honor of the victorious king are to be found in the books of the Prophets, for example:

At that time, a gift (*shai*) shall be brought to the Lord of hosts... to the place of the Name of the Lord of hosts, Mount Tzion. (*Yeshayahu* 18:7)

And in *Sefer Tehillim*:

Vow and pay to the Lord your God; let all that are round about Him bring gifts (*shai*) to Him Who is to be feared. He shall cut off the spirit of princes; He is terrible to the kings of the earth. (*Tehillim* 76:12-13)

Yehuda's inheritance is also depicted in his blessing. The final verses of the blessing are understood as referring to Mount Chevron, which is so well suited to vineyards that each single vine can produce enough grapes to load a donkey, and the wine is so plentiful that it can be used even for washing laundry. The Judean Desert (*Midbar Yehuda*) is such an expansive area for abundant herds that the eyes grow red from wine, and the teeth white from milk.

### Inheritances of the Smaller Tribes

"Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Tzidon.

Yissakhar is a sturdy donkey crouching down between the sheepfolds; and he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant, and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant to tribute.

Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> In his book *Eretz Ha-Moriah – Pirkei Mikra Ve-Lashon* (Alon Shvut, 5766), pp. 177-182. The reason why the name cannot refer to the city of Shilo, in the portion of Efraim (as Rashbam proposes) is because the name of that city is generally written in *Tanakh* without the letter "yud."

Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that bites the horse's heels, so that his rider shall fall backward. I await Your salvation, O God.

Gad, raiders [or "troops"] shall maraud him, but he shall prevail over the last.

Out of Asher his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties.

Naftali is a hind let loose; he gives good words." (49:13-21)

Although the inheritance of Zevulun is the most explicitly defined of all the tribes in Yaakov's blessings, this particular blessing was not realized. Zevulun was meant to inherit the great valleys from the Carmel to Rosh Ha-Nikra, and the coastline up to Tzur (Tyre) and Tzidon (Sidon). However, the Phoenicians maintained complete control over these areas, and the tribes were never able to dominate the northern coastal areas.

This fact emphasizes the gap between the plan for the inheritances in the "last days" and the reality of the period of settlement and monarchy.

Yissakhar unquestionably dwelled in the Jezreal Valley, which lies "between the sheepfolds [*mishpatayim* – mountains]." A steep price for this dwelling was paid in suffering ("he bowed his shoulder to bear"): many different rulers would subjugate his descendants, starting from the Canaanite cities (Sisera), followed by the Midianites. The tribes of Zevulun, (Asher) and Naftali would come to his aid in the time of Devora, and also in the time of Gid'on (*Shoftim* 4:6-10; 5:18; 6:35).

Both Dan and Gad are depicted in the blessings as tribes that play a leadership role. Dan will lead in the manner of the serpent – an historical allusion to the battles they waged in conquering Leshem (which is Tel Dan) in the north, and to Shimshon.

Gad, on the other hand has "companies" or "troops," and "he shall prevail over the last (*akev* – literally, "heel") – meaning, he will protect the "heel" – the tribes on the other side of the Jordan. Gad was the powerful tribe that protected Reuven.

Asher and Naftali inherited the most fertile regions of the Galilee. "His bread shall be fat" – bread is dipped in olive oil (one of the prime natural products of *Eretz Yisrael*) and oil olives grow plentifully in the valleys of the Galilee.

The blessing to Naftali describes the mountains of the upper Galilee, where gazelles and hinds roam and graze amidst the natural forest. Onkelos's translation understands Naftali's blessing as a reference to the fertile valleys at the feet of the mountains of the Galilee. And indeed, the Kinneret and the surrounding valleys are included in Naftali's inheritance. According to this explanation, "a hind let loose (*ayala shelucha*)" depicts a valley that is well-watered ("shelachin").

Rashi (49:21) combines these two interpretations:

"*Ayala shelucha*" – this refers to the valley of Ginnosar, where fruits readily ripen, just like a hind, which is quick to run..., "let loose" to run."

He views the image of the "hind let loose," springing its way through the mountains of the Galilee, as a metaphor, while adopting Onkelos's words about the valley of Ginnosar and its like as the reality represented by the metaphor.

b. **Inheritances of Yosef and Binyamin**

Yosef is a fruitful bough (*ben porat*), a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches (*banot*) run over the wall... but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made supple (or “golden” – *va-yafozu*, ‘*paz*’ meaning ‘fine gold’) by the hands of the mighty God of Yaakov, from thence, from the shepherd, the Rock of Israel: By the God of your father, Who shall help you, and by the Almighty Who shall bless you, with blessings of heaven above... The blessings of your father are potent above the blessings of my ancestors, to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills, they shall be on the head of Yosef and upon the crown of the head of him who was separated from (or “the distinguished of” – “*nezir*” in the sense of “he who wears a crown” - *nezer*) his brothers. (49:22-26)

“*Porat*” describes a fertile vine planted by a spring. Its two main branches (“*banot*”) are Efraim and Menashe, as reflected in Onkelos’s translation (v. 22):

“... Two tribes shall emerge from his sons, receiving a portion and an inheritance.”

Yosef’s fertile inheritance is blessed both with rain and with abundant underground springs – the expanses of the Shomron and the Sharon (“the utmost bound of the everlasting hills”).

The two most prominent blessings are given to Yehuda and to Yosef, both of whom are described as leaders: the “staff shall not depart” from Yehuda, while Yosef is “the distinguished of his brothers.” “The arms of his hands were gilded” (as in pictures of Pharaohs holding bows), and he inherits the principle blessings given to the forefathers. Yosef is endowed with blessed royalty, while Yehuda has the staff and official status.

Is there any way of maintaining two forms of leadership simultaneously within a single nation, without creating a split? In Yaakov’s blessing, such a reality seems possible. In historical terms, this was a very difficult challenge, and it remains so.

Another allusion to inheritance is to be found in the blessing to Binyamin, who is also endowed with power to fight (“a ravenous wolf...”):

“...In the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.” (v. 27)

The Tosefta (*Shevi’it* 7:12) explains:

“In the morning he shall devour the prey” – this refers to Yericho, which [“ripens”] early, “and at night he shall divide the spoil” – this refers to Beit-El, which [“ripens”] later.

The inheritance of Binyamin includes both Yericho, which is at a very low altitude and where the fruit ripens early, and Beit-El, atop a mountain 1200 meters higher, where the fruit ripens much later – even in relation to the rest of the country.

Yaakov’s blessings, to a far greater degree than his burial in Ma’arat ha-Makhpela, represent a vision of the land promised to the tribes, spread out and depicted in all its glory.

Translated by Kaeren Fish