

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 more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Vayechi is a transition in many ways. In this parsha, Yaakov dies. Vayechi also concludes Sefer Bereishis, and Shemot opens when all of Yaakov's sons have also died. Sefer Bereishis explores relationships among individual generations and families. After Vayechi, the focus is on B'Nai Yisrael – the nation that arises when massive population growth transforms barely seventy family members into millions of Jews from a dozen different tribes.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes:

[O]ne of the central questions of the book of Genesis [is] – sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Can brothers live peaceably with one another? This question is fundamental to the biblical drama of redemption, for if brothers cannot live together, how can nations? And if nations cannot live together, how can the human world survive?

Kayin responds to a question from Hashem with: “Am I my brother's keeper?” (4:9). Most of the drama in Bereishis consists of relations among family members. Sarah sends Yishmael away to prevent him from influencing Yitzhak, although the brothers reconcile after the deaths of their parents. Rivalry between Esav and Yaakov leads Rivka to send Yaakov away for a “brief period” that becomes more than twenty years. Although Esav threatens to kill Yaakov, the brothers eventually reconcile and live in “peace” – but they only meet a couple of times after Yaakov returns. (We know that they live in what is essentially peace, because Esav never attacks Yaakov or his family after Yaakov returns to Canaan.) After his brothers move to Goshen (Egypt), Yosef continues to take care of them (he considers himself their keeper), although the brothers remain uneasy, always concerned that he will change his mind (despite Yosef's attempts to reassure them).

Once B'Nai Yisrael transforms from a family to a nation, much of the national drama in the Torah continues to involve disputes among the tribes, as Rabbi Ovadia discusses in numerous examples (below). Yaakov's final blessings to his sons raise some surprises, as Rabbi Ovadia observes, including the revelation that Yosef's descendants will no longer be leaders of the nation, and that eventually the leaders will be Yehuda (political) and Levi (religious). Since Levi and Yehuda start by disappointing their father as young adults, their eventual rise is a surprise – but also an indication that B'Nai Yisrael will find a way to accommodate mobility in relative status of the various tribes without the nation falling apart.

Rabbi David Fohrman and his scholars at alephbeta.org observe that the clash of the Rachel and Leah sides of B'Nai Yisrael continues throughout much of Jewish history, at least until the end of the Temple period. The clash of Yosef versus the other brothers is largely Rachel vs. Leah, with Benyamin largely a passive observer. After the death of King Solomon, the nation splits into northern and southern kingdoms. The north is primarily Ephraim (Rachel) while the south is largely Yehuda (Leah). The tribes from northern kingdom largely disappear after the Assyrian conquest. (We do not know what happened to the other tribes, although some members could have been slaughtered, sent far away, absorbed into the other tribes still in the south, or absorbed into other nations.) The southern kingdom is largely Yehuda (Leah), with a minority from Benyamin. After the destruction of the second Temple, over time it becomes much more difficult to trace tribal heritages except for Levi (including Kohanim). The significant groups of Jews in the past 200 years have

largely divided into Sephardic and Ashkenaz. In more recent times, conflicts among Jews seem to be primarily Sephardic vs. Ashkenaz, or sometimes across more narrow groups, such as German vs. Russian Jews (post U.S. Civil War). The dispersion of Jews throughout the world has made it much more difficult for any enemies of our people to wipe out all the Jews. Our task is to maintain our link to previous generations and to pass along to our children and grandchildren the importance of being our brothers' keepers. "Brothers" clearly includes all Jews, not only our immediate family or tribe.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, always stressed our obligation to help our Jewish fellows everywhere. For Rabbi Cahan, we are always our brothers' keepers, and all Jews are our brothers. Hannah and I try to teach this lesson to our children and grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom.

Hannah and Alan

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. 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.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Dvar Torah: Vayechi: Shhhhhh ... The Secret of Immortality

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2017

A lion cub is Judah... He crouches, lies down like a lion, and like an awesome lion, who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah till Shiloh (Moshiach) arrives... (Breishis 49:9-10)

Judah, from amongst all the tribes, was forecasted to make it till the end of times. What quality did he and does he yet possess, that has granted him that kind of longevity? Perhaps in the very blessing of Jacob we have a clue. Why is Judah both a mature lion and a whelp, a baby cub?

Mark Twain wrote an article in 1899 for Harper Magazine entitled, "Concerning the Jews". Here is an excerpt I'm sure many are already familiar with:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of; has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people...He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it...The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to the dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but burned it out, and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, be at them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his

energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

An archeologist in Israel came upon something rather surprising while digging one day. He was certain that he had just unearthed the next Dead Sea Scrolls. No doubt fame and fortune awaited him. There were a number of tiny scrolls tucked ever so carefully into small compartments and he couldn't wait to return to the lab to analyze and publicize what he had found. He carefully placed the delicate parts into a plastic bag to preserve them and then into a paper bag to disguise their value. He sat on a bus now cradling his find with a parent's devotion. Sitting next to him was a man with a black hat and a beard who was also clutching a bag.

The archeologist could not contain his excitement. He asked his neighbor if he wished to peak at his discovery. The fellow looked into the bag and shook his head affirmatively. The archeologist was a little disturbed by the lack of shared enthusiasm and so he told him that that these items might be thousands of years old. Still unimpressed, the man opened for the archeologist the bag he had been holding and showed him the same thing, Tefillin, black boxes with parchments. "We wear them every day." He told him exactly what was written on those scrolls and so it was and has been for 3319 years. They may have been very old but it was nothing new.

A psychologist friend who became observant was being chided by colleagues and friends in a public forum as to how he could have become involved with such medieval practices. He cleverly retorted, *"It's not medieval! It's ancient!"*

Judah, the source of the title "Jew," is like a valuable coin in that he is both extremely old and still in mint condition. He is ancient but not a relic ready for the British Museum. He's also current- on the cutting edge and yet connected to his ancient roots. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter ztl. compared the young generation to an energetic train and the elders to tracks. It's only together that either has any practical function.

Like a lion- cub that is simultaneously old and vibrant, the Jewish People who find in the ancient the very new and the new in the most ancient hold the key to what could be shhhhhh ... the secret of immortality.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5777-vayigash/>

You Call This a Blessing?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2012, 2014

As Yaakov's life draws to a close, he calls his children to his bedside and blesses them. In twenty-six verses of beautiful poetry he addresses each son in turn, tailoring his words to what is most appropriate for that particular son. These poetic utterances are not initially described as blessings but as a form of prophecy: *"Gather and I will tell you what will occur to you in the End of Days"* (Breishit, 49:1). Nevertheless, their content makes it clear that they are indeed blessings, and the Torah describes them as such at the conclusion of this section: *"and this is what their father spoke to them, and he blessed them, each person according to his blessing did he bless them"* (Breishit, 49:28).

So each son was blessed. But is this really true? It seems that at least two sons – Shimon and Levi – were not blessed but cursed:

"Cursed be their wrath, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel" (Breishit, 49:7).

What type of blessing is this? Can it be, somehow, that this curse is actually a blessing?

Yes, it can. When someone points out our faults or even calls us to task for our sins and misdeeds, this can indeed feel like a curse. But if this is done by someone who loves us, if that someone is doing it for us and not for them, then it can truly be a blessing. This is indeed what true parenting is about. Loving our children means caring about their moral development, about what type of people they will grow up to be. If we yell at them because they have made a mess before a big dinner party, we are venting our own anger; we are not – in this yelling – parenting them. But if our response

is tailored to their concerns and not ours, and if we call them to task so that they can learn moral and social responsibility, then we have done true parenting, and they will be all the better for it.

The first step is to make sure that this is coming from a place of love and out of concern for the one who has to hear this criticism. Let us remember that Yaakov's initial response to Shimon and Levi's destruction of Shechem was an angry outburst, an outburst which focused not on their moral education or on even the immorality of their acts but on how their actions would endanger him: *"And Yaakov said to Shimon and Levi, 'You have accursed me, to make me odious among those who dwell in the land... and they will gather against me and smite me, and I and my household will be annihilated'"* (34:30). Notice the recurrence of the personal pronoun: me, me, I, my. It is all about him, so his yelling falls on deaf ears: *"And they said, will our sister be treated like a prostitute?!"* (34:31). Now, however, it is the end of his life. It is no longer about him; his life is over. It is about them, what they need to hear so that they can improve, so that they can be better.

But coming from a place of love and caring is not enough. Criticism can be devastating regardless. So what needs to be paired with caring is faith: faith in the other person, in his or her innate goodness, in their ability to divorce themselves from these actions: *"Even at the moment of rebuke, he did not curse them, but only their wrath"* (Rashi, 49:7, quoting Breishit Rabbah). *"You are better than that," is the message. "This isn't you. You can rise above this."* When our children misbehave, we know not to say, *"Bad boy!"* or *"Bad girl!"* We know, rather, to say, *"That was a bad thing that you did."* (Whether we always remember this at a moment of anger is a different question.)

A true friend can tell you things you need to hear, things that no one else will tell you, and he can tell you in a way that you can hear it. When the person on the receiving end knows that the words are coming from a place of love, and when she feels that others believe in her, she will be able to believe in herself and hear what is being said.

But it is not just how the message is delivered; it is also how it is heard. And we are not in control of how someone will hear what we have said. Some people have the ability to hear the one negative, slightly critical comment in an effusion of praise and to zero in on that, to find the one thing they can feel bad about and to beat themselves up over it. Indeed, some studies have shown that it takes ten positive comments to counter the effect of one negative one. But a person does himself no service by just focusing on the negative. The result will be feeling bad, feeling guilty, with no productive outcome. And it can lead to reinforcing the negative, to defining oneself by past behavior: *"I'm no good. I'm always doing the wrong thing. I'm a bad person."* This type of thinking can even serve as an excuse for future misconduct: *"What else could be expected of me? This is who I am."*

A person who instead believes that he or she was created in God's image, in our ultimate freedom as human beings, a person who believes in bechira chafshit, will know that his or her past behavior need not define who he or she is and can be.

Now, this is not to deny that people are made differently. People have different character traits and different personalities. But biology is not destiny, and character, even if it cannot easily be changed, can surely be redirected. As the Gemara in Niddah (16b) states, it may be determined at the moment of conception – genetically, we would say – whether a person will be smart or stupid, strong or weak, but what is not determined is whether the person will be good or bad. Even destructive character traits can be directed towards a constructive purpose. A person with bloodlust, says Rav Ashi in Shabbat (157a), may turn out to be a murderer, but he may also turn out to be a shochet or a surgeon.

How we hear loving critique, and what we do with it, is in our hands. The same character trait that was the source of a curse can now become the source of a blessing. It is all about what message we choose to hear. So it was with Shimon and Levi. One of them heard only the curse and defined himself by it. And one extrapolated the blessing and lived up to it and its promise.

Shimon heard the curse. His destructive anger never changed, was never redirected, and so the words of Yaakov became a curse. The tribe of Shimon was scattered in Israel, and they had no inheritance of their own when Joshua divided the land.

And Levi heard the blessing. Levi – his descendants, the tribe of Levi – took their anger, their passion, and directed it to the service of God, to defending God's honor, to zealously protecting the Sanctuary. They brought their zeal to the service of God. They were scattered in Israel, but this was so that they could serve the people, teach Torah, and give religious guidance to one and all. And the cities in which they dwelt were cities of refuge, one of which was Shechem itself. These cities provided safety and protection to those who had unintentionally killed someone so that they would not be murdered

in the violent bloodlust of others seeking to avenge the death of a brother or sister, protecting them so that the sin of Shechem would not be repeated. Truly, their curse became their blessing, a blessing that they shared with the entire Jewish people.

Did Yaakov bless Shimon and Levi, or did he curse them? His words, delivered with love, with concern for their betterment, with belief in their potential to change and rise above, had the potential to truly be words of blessing. Yaakov did his part; the rest was up to his sons. If his words were heard as a curse, then they would be a curse. But if they were heard as they were delivered, if they were heard as a blessing, then they became a blessing indeed. Let us always have the ability to deliver our words as blessings and to hear the words of others – even the critical words – as blessings as well.

Shabbat Shalom!

<https://library.yct Torah.org/2014/12/you-call-this-a-blessing/>

Generational Continuity: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Among Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's lectures was one that dealt with the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. *"A grandfather stands before his newly born grandchild filled with paradoxical thoughts. Feelings of renewal merge with fading memories of the past."*

A grandparent gazes at grandchildren with a sense of wonder. Fifty, sixty and more years may separate them. The grandparent is part of the "old generation," while the grandchildren are part of a new world with new challenges and opportunities. Yes, the grandparent feels a sense of family continuity — but also a sense of anxiety. Will we — of different generations — feel a sense of harmony, a common history and destiny? Will we be able to talk to each other heart to heart? Or will alienation set in? Will the grandchildren have different life agendas than we have?

The larger question is: how can we hold our community and culture together from generation to generation? How do we avoid the ubiquitous problem of "the generation gap"?

The Mishnah (Eduyot 2:9) cites the opinion of Rabbi Akiba, who stated that parents transmit 6 characteristics to their children: physical appearance, strength, wealth, wisdom, longevity. The sixth quality is "mispar ha-dorot lefanav," the number of generations before them. But what exactly does this mean?

Children are not born into a historical vacuum. They are heirs to the generations of their family going back through the centuries and millennia. In the case of Jewish children (and grandchildren), they are not only heirs to their particular family's traditions, but "inherit" all the previous generations of the Jewish people going back to the time of Abraham and Sarah.

The challenge to the older generations is to transmit to the new generations a feeling of connectedness with the past. We introduce our children and grandchildren to "the number of generations before them," so that they come to see the biblical characters of thousands of years ago as part of their own group of close friends. We teach them that "we" were slaves in Egypt; that "we" were redeemed; that "we" built the Temples in Jerusalem; that "we" went into exile. Rashi and Rambam "are" our teachers. Our earlier generations continue to live in our memories, and are a presence in our lives. We want our children and grandchildren to understand that they are engaged in a life-long dialogue among all the generations of their family and of their people. What a wonderful gift to give children! And what a tragedy when this gift is not conveyed!

In a traditional religious setting, there need not be a generation gap where alienation sets in between the generations. In some unique, mysterious way, the different generations see themselves as contemporaries. We share a spiritual outlook, a set of ideals, a style of living according to the mitzvot. We have the gift of "the number of generations before us."

In this week's Parasha, Jacob gives his blessing to his grandchildren, Joseph's sons, praying that *"the angel who redeemed me from all evil will bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth."* Jacob wanted continuity from generation to

generation; he wanted the grandchildren to cherish the names and ideals of their grandparents and forebears; he wanted the family to grow and prosper, spreading the word of God throughout the land.

These are the blessings we pray for our own children, grandchildren and generations yet to come. Od Avinu Hai, Am Yisrael Hai.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/generational-continuity-thoughts-parashat-vayhi>

Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought: Book Review

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought, by Rabbi Hillel Goldberg

Archilochus, an ancient Greek poet, observed: *"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."* Sir Isaiah Berlin used this line as a metaphor for different kinds of thinkers. Some, like the fox, know many topics, have wide-ranging intellectual concerns. Others, like the hedgehog, have one central idea that dominates their thinking.

Rabbi Dr. Hillel Goldberg draws on the fox and hedgehog imagery in his new book, *Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought* (Ktav, 2022). He notes that he, like the hedgehog, has one central focus — Torah Judaism. But, like the fox, he also has a wide range of intellectual interests including science, history, philosophy, literature and more.

Rabbi Goldberg's book is a classic example of the combined focus of a hedgehog and the expansiveness of the fox. He has a fine eye for detail. His studies in biblical texts and prayers hone in on words, patterns, and nuances. But they reflect the larger vision of works that put us in relationship with the Almighty. So it is with the structure of the book as a whole. He addresses particular themes in a penetrating manner...but also explores the larger meanings and implications of each topic.

The subtitle of this book is *From the Holocaust to Halakhah and Beyond*. This gives the reader an idea of the scope of material covered in this book. Rabbi Goldberg writes about holocaust theology and what we can learn from the survivors themselves. He explores themes in prayer, biblical commentary, musar, Jewish law, philosophy; and he offers biographical studies of Rav Kuk and Professor (Rebbe Dr.) Isadore Twersky.

Rabbi Goldberg is an engaging writer with a distinctive style. His prose is modulated. It gives the reader time to think, to digest the words. In discussing Abraham and the Akeida, Rabbi Goldberg writes:

"This is the paradox: Abraham finds his own way to God's way. Actually, however, Abraham transcends paradox. He does not have two separate sides. Now he is submissive, now he is creative: it is not this way. Abraham melds the will of God and the will of man. As much as possible for any human being, Abraham unifies Infinity and finitude." (p. 171)

As a hedgehog, Rabbi Goldberg focuses on the detailed mandates of the halakha. As a fox, he seeks the meanings that undergird the details and that soar heavenward. He writes:

"By His love and grace, God issued halakhah as the sovereign over all ritual, ethical and social necessities; equally, by His love and grace, God endowed the human being with the capability and curiosity to unveil secrets of the universe." (p. 210) Rabbi Goldberg notes that *halakha*

“creatively juxtaposes divine knowledge and human knowledge of the natural world. It shapes social reality and embraces other disciplines of divine knowledge.” (p. 212)

On a personal note, Rabbi Goldberg and I were fellow students at Yeshiva College during the 1960s. Even then, I learned to appreciate his soft-spoken, thoughtful manner of communication. Over these many years, I have learned much from his writings, and have enjoyed his masterful articles and editorials in the *Intermountain Jewish News*. When I read his works, I somehow feel that I am hearing his voice...calm, thoughtful, precise, challenging. More than a hedgehog, more than a fox: Rabbi Goldberg is a thinking rabbi who incorporates and transcends both.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/across-expanse-jewish-thought-book-review>

Book Review: Understanding Hazal

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo, *Understanding Hazal: A Translation and Annotation of Rabbenu Avraham ben HaRambam's Ma'amar Al HaDerashot Ve-al HaAggadot*. (Da'at Press, 2022), 169 pages.

Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo recently has published an annotated translation and commentary on Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam's seminal essay on rabbinic aggadot (non-legal texts).

The primary purpose of this volume is to make Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam's important essay on midrashic methodology accessible to the English-speaking world. Rabbi Avraham (1186-1237, Egypt) was Rambam's only child, and was a towering rabbinic figure who succeeded his father as the leader of the Jewish community of Egypt. He mastered his illustrious father's teachings, and was a prolific author in his own right.

Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo has written a fine translation of the excellent 2019 Hebrew edition of the essay by Rabbi Moshe Maimon. Rabbi Berdugo also provides learned footnotes with further references and clarifications.

Beyond that purpose, however, Rabbi Berdugo also demonstrates that Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam's work is perfectly consistent with the teachings of leading Geonim such as Rabbi Hai, Sherira, Saadyah, Shemuel ben Hofni, and others. The great rabbinic interpreters from the Spanish Andalusian school who became the heirs to the Geonic tradition, such as Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra and Rambam, adopted the interpretive position of the Geonim.

Briefly stated, aggadot (non-legal texts in the Talmud and other midrashic collections) are not generally to be viewed as binding received traditions, nor are they all intended as literal. We must examine each aggadah carefully to learn the lessons of our Sages, but aggadot must not replace a careful study of the biblical text.

Because Tanakh and aggadah are studied for their truth, we hear the truth from the one who says it, rather than being bound by an authority-based system. In the words of Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam in chapter 2 of his article:

Know, for it is your duty to know, that anyone who wishes to uphold a known theory and admire its author by [blindly] accepting it without proper analysis or verification of its truth, is [considered to possess] a deficient character trait. This [mode of conduct] is forbidden according to the way of the Torah, and is not an intelligent approach. It is intellectually dishonest because it entails deficiency and inadequacy in the contemplation of essential convictions, and it is forbidden according to the ways of the Torah because it deviates from the way of truth... (Berdugo translation, p. 68).

On one level, Rabbi Berdugo's thesis is so obvious that there should not be any need to demonstrate its cogency. However, there are always learned detractors within the Orthodox rabbinic world who falsely claim that Judaism universally embraces aggadot as more literal and as binding tradition.

In his footnotes, Rabbi Berdugo cites a recent book by Rabbi Moshe Meiselman (Torah, Chazal, and Science, 2013), who claims that this essay of Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam is a forgery. Among other things, Rabbi Meiselman bases this determination on the (incorrect) assertion that if it were authentic, it would be at odds with the worldview of all the other classical commentators. As Rabbi Berdugo amply demonstrates, many classical commentators — including Rabbi Avraham's father Rambam — are fully in sync with Rabbi Avraham's methodology.

Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579-1654), the author of the celebrated Tosafot Yom Tov commentary on the Mishnah, understood the self-evident freedom of interpretation in non-legal matters in Jewish tradition:

Regarding Scripture, permission is granted to interpret [differently from how the Gemara interprets] as our own eyes see in the commentaries written since the time of the Gemara. However, we must not make any halakhic ruling that contradicts the Gemara (commentary on Mishnah Nazir 5:5).

Despite the preponderance of evidence from our classical commentators, many religious educators continue to misrepresent their methodology. Rabbi Marc D. Angel needed to pen an article, "Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education" (Tradition 41:2, 2008, pp. 10-23), in which he criticized trends of rabbinic fundamentalism within the Yeshiva Day School system. When teachers explain Midrashim as literal and as binding traditions, they misinterpret the biblical text, the intent of the rabbis' statements, and the breathtaking diversity of rabbinic interpretations.

The voices of the Geonim, the classical commentators, and Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam, among many others, need to be heard and taught. Rabbi Berdugo's translation and explanation of Rabbi Avraham's work contributes further to an understanding of the Geonic and Andalusian methodology of how to approach the eternal treasures of our rabbinic aggadot.

* National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and Professor at Yeshiva University,

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-understanding-hazal>

The End of Days

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Yakov had passed away. Yosef took the place as a leader and provided for the Jewish family. As his time to pass away neared, he called his brothers together and shared vital information. He shared the spark of hope, the prophecy, that would keep the family going through fear and oppression. He told his brothers, *"Hashem will remember and redeem you. He will take you up to the promised land."*

On the basis of this prophecy the Jewish family lived through some of its bleakest times, the exile in Mitzrayim and the years of slavery. Eventually, Moshe arrived and declared in G-d's name that the time for redemption had arrived. The year of redemption was one of emotional ups and downs as the slavery first got worse, and then stopped entirely as the plagues came upon the Mitzriyim. The concept of redemption did not come as a surprise to the Jews. They had been promised redemption and return to the promised land. Even in the bleakest of times they remained on the lookout for the fulfillment of the redemption prophecy.

Interestingly, the words that Yosef used, *"Pakod Yifkod,"* to say that Hashem will remember and redeem, are words that require effective use of the lips to say the P and F sounds. Thus, it must have been an extraordinary experience when Moshe — who had burned his lips in infancy and described himself as one who is of heavy lips — arrived to redeem the people. Miraculously, Moshe was able to pronounce these two words articulately even as he could not normally make those lip sounds smoothly. Indeed, as much as redemption is promised and assured, it is with miracles that redemption actually occurs.

Generations later the Jews would again be exiled, once when the first Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, and a second time when the second Beis Hamikdash was destroyed. Each time, the Jews left with the awareness of a prophecy of redemption; they would return. Regarding the exile from the first Beis Hamikdash, the prophet Yirmiya (29:10) shared an actual length for the exile, 70 years. Regarding the exile from the second Beis Hamikdash the length of the exile is hidden information. (Daniel 12:9, 12)

The prophets speak of the redemption with glorious descriptions. Moshe said that after we experienced *“the blessing and the curse”* Hashem will return us from wherever we have been dispersed and grant blessing greater than ever before. (Devorim 30:1,3,5) Later prophets speak more specifically about Moshiach, a king from the house of Dovid, who will reign with universal recognition, rebuild the Beis Hamikdash and usher in what we commonly refer to as Messianic times, an age of peace and universal knowledge of Hashem. (For example, Yeshaya 2)

What is interesting is that this topic is not just something that we believe in, it is something that we are obligated to yearn for. In the words of the prophet Chavakuk (2:3), *“If it tarries, await expectantly.”* In fact, in the Ani Maamin affirmations of Jewish faith, the twelfth (which talks about Moshiach) is the only one that describes a requirement to yearn.

The Ramchal (Mesilas Yesharim 19) explains that although Moshiach might not come in a particular generation, the very yearning of each generation is an enormous mitzva. The mitzva of yearning for the times of Moshiach defines us. Every time we sit down for a meal, we conclude the meal with a blessing regarding Yerushalayim. Three times a day we include in our prayers, requests for the return of the Davidic dynasty, Yerushalayim and the holy service of the Beis Hamikdash. At a Chasuna we break a glass; in our homes we leave a spot unpainted. We yearn, we wait, we live with the promise of redemption.

Yearning for redemption is not just a state of mind or heart. Yearning for redemption requires that we be proactive. It requires that we each do our part to bring about redemption. When a Chazzan or mourner leads Kaddish, for example, he leads the congregation in a most sacred ritual in which we each accept to do our part to bring about redemption. The leader intones, *“May the great name of Hashem be made great and sanctified in the world!”* To this statement we respond with a resounding affirmation: *“Amen.”* The leader continues, *“Regarding this world that Hashem chose to create, may His kingdom reign speedily in our days.”* This time a resounding *“Amen”* is not sufficient. We reply not only with *“Amen,”* but also with our own affirmation, *“May Hashem’s great name be blessed forever and ever.”* Implied in our response is that we are not just replying with a perfunctory *“Amen,”* yearning for peaceful and blessed times because that would be a good thing. Rather we are personally accepting to do our part to bring that about. (See Talmud Shabbos 119)

There are two great traditions regarding the generation to which Moshiach will come. One tradition is that that the generation will be so desperate that there will be no choice but to redeem them. The other tradition is that the generation will be so righteous that they will be worthy of redemption. I have heard that these two traditions might actually be fulfilled as one, in a generation that has both qualities. It is possible that one generation will have both the quality of many righteous people and also have a sense of desperation. In our generation, for example, we continue to strive to be righteous and committed, even as there are many reasons to argue that we desperately need Moshiach now!

The task of those who recite and respond to Kaddish with fervor is to try to influence the world towards the times of peace and universal knowledge of Hashem. It is not enough to yearn and believe. We strive to bring about those promised times through personal integrity, learning Torah, observing its teachings, promoting chesed (kindness) and Shalom Bayis. There is so much work to do. But the Jew lives with hope.

Imagine a very wealthy businessman who is trying to do a merger with another company. He instructs his professional team to hammer out the best terms for the deal to be done. Day and night tens of professionals can be seen busy with assessments and negotiations. His team works round the clock to perfect the proposed contract so that all should be well. Then, suddenly, in the middle of the night, the businessman walks in. A buzz spreads among the team. Surely the boss will check on their work and advise them how to do better. Perhaps he will even rebuke them for not working quickly or diligently enough. Instead, they look closely and see an urgent joy on the boss’s face. *“Quickly,”* he says, *“Let’s do the deal!”*

The team wonders aloud, *“But we aren’t finished our preparations. We still have so much to do.”*

The boss motions urgently. He says, *“It is time. The time has come. It is good. I have decided to do the deal, now.”*

I imagine that this is what will happen when Hashem decides it is time for redemption. We will wonder, *"But there is still so much more to do to prepare."* But Hashem will respond, *"It is time. I have so decided."*

When that decision is made, miracles happen. Even someone who can't pronounce a P or F sound will suddenly be able to because Hashem has decided to do the deal. Even those nations (and Jews) who were so opposed to the Vision will be awestruck and humbled. (See Yeshaya 52:15)

As for us, we will certainly be excited. But we will not be surprised. Because we were promised redemption, and we were waiting, yearning, and striving for it for so long.

May it come speedily in our days.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Vayechi -- Overly Sensitive For Someone Else

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer*

When Yosef is told that his aging father is not well, he immediately goes to visit him. Yaakov, recognizing he is nearing the end of his life, uses this opportunity to elevate Yosef's sons, Menashe and Efraim, to the status of full tribes, awarding each with their own portion in the future land of Israel. He blesses Yosef and his sons, saying the famous words of Hamalach Hagoel, *"May the angel who redeemed me from all evil bless the lads."* In the middle of this discussion, the Torah tells us that Yaakov reminds Yosef of how Rochel, Yosef's mother, died while Yaakov was still traveling back from Lavan's house and was buried on the roadside. (Bereishis 48:1-16)

Rash"i (Bereishis 48:7) explains that Yaakov had a great need to discuss Rochel's burial with Yosef. As is customary, Yaakov sought to be buried in a proper burial spot with other great people and in the land of Israel. Yaakov, therefore, wanted to be buried in Me'aras Hamachpeilah, together with his parents and grandparents, Avrohom and Sarah, Yitzchok and Rivkah. Yaakov shared this desire with his sons. Since they were currently under Egyptian rule and Yosef was the viceroy of Egypt, he put Yosef in charge of his burial. Recognizing that there may be significant hurdles in removing his remains from Egypt and arranging for Yosef to leave the country for the duration of the burial procession, Yaakov even made Yosef swear that he would carry out Yaakov's will.

Despite Yosef's oath, Yaakov still had a concern. He was aware that Yosef was pained by the fact that his mother, Rochel, had been buried on the roadside, outside of the city limits. Although, Yosef certainly trusted his illustrious father, that pain for his mother's honor still left an imprint on Yosef's heart. When Yaakov asked Yosef to go the extra mile and ensure that he himself would be buried in a proper burial ground, Yosef couldn't help but be reminded that Yaakov had not done this for Rochel, his mother. This could prevent Yosef from fully committing himself to fulfilling Yaakov's wishes for his own burial. Without Yosef's full emotional commitment, it was possible that Yosef would fail to overcome the challenges in burying Yaakov in a different country.

Yaakov, therefore, took this opportunity to discuss Rochel's burial with Yosef. He explained that he too was pained at having Rochel buried on the roadside, but he had been instructed by G-d to do so because Rochel was needed there on that road. Many years later, during the destruction of the Temple, the general Nevuzaradan led the Jewish captives into exile along that same road. As they passed Rochel's grave, she sat there on the roadside and cried out, pleading with G-d to have mercy on her descendants. The prophet Yirmiyahu tells us that in response to her cries Hashem promised that we would ultimately be redeemed. (Jeremiah 31:15-16)

The Gur Aryeh (Bereishis 48:7) asks why Yaakov only explained this to Yosef now? The Torah tells us that Yosef had left Yaakov and returned to the palace after he swore to see to Yaakov's burial. It was only now at a later time that Yaakov brought this up. Why didn't Yaakov explain when he originally asked Yosef to swear?

The Gur Aryeh answers that Yaakov delayed in sharing this with Yosef out of sensitivity for Yosef. In order to explain, Yaakov would have to share some details of pain of the future exile with Yosef. Despite Yaakov's great concern to ensure he'd be buried in Israel going so far as to make Yosef swear, and even though he would have to tell Yosef eventually, Yaakov waited as long as he felt was reasonable before causing Yosef this pain. This slight additional pain in Yosef's life, that he should know earlier of the anguish of an exile in the distant future, was enough reason for Yaakov to delay in ensuring that he would have a proper burial.

When we consider the context, this is even more astounding. Yosef was already in pain over his mother's burial. Though he trusted that Yaakov had good reason for burying her there, he certainly must have felt some measure of comfort in finally knowing why. His comfort was presumably even greater in knowing that her burial on the roadside would ensure the eternality of the Jewish people. Yet, nonetheless, Yaakov estimated that Yosef's pain over the future exile would be greater. In order to delay this subtle increase in Yosef's overall pain, Yaakov waited. Although, Yaakov already knew he was near the end of his life when he made Yosef swear, he waited a little bit longer before taking this final precaution and explaining Rochel's burial place to Yosef.

When it comes to our own emotional pain, we are taught appropriately to be strong and not delay unnecessarily when something needs to be done. Yaakov is reminding us here that we must be careful to maintain our sensitivity when it comes to the pain of another. Even waiting a few days may be worthwhile.

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Favorite Son vs. Man of the People

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Choosing a college major is a tricky business. You start studying for the profession most in demand at the moment, just to find out four years later that the world has drastically changed. Programming, or coding, has been one exception and a safe bet for the last couple of decades, but this too is about to change. Deep neural networks are the new frontier, for now being the closest thing to self-learning machines which are going to beat our comparatively stupid computers. That's right, we are looking into a future where machines will not depend on a set of commands programmed by humans, but rather on analyzing millions of cases and mountains of data, and finding a way to make their own conclusions. For people in the field, the exciting event heralding that era was Google's DeepMind beating the world's best Go player, Lee Sedol. To reach that moment, DeepMind was fed 30 million moves of human players, but the moment of awe and exhilaration came when DeepMind made an original move, never played before. For the first time, humans were watching a machine thinking independently.

Machines are not ready yet to think like humans, though, since there is still the issue of cracking the code of human unpredictability and the endless possibilities of human reactions, emotions, and subliminal messages. One man who knew that the ability to flow with and adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of the human condition was our patriarch Jacob. Think for a moment. Where did Joseph disappear to, after dominating the last thirteen chapters of the book of Genesis? Joseph and his brothers. Joseph and Jacob. Jacob and his sons. The saga of the House of Jacob, so far has Joseph at its center. We would have expected Joseph and his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to continue playing a central role in the history of the Israelites. The rest of the bible, however, displays a portrait of leadership and hierarchy among the tribes which is radically different than that of the House of Jacob as seen in Genesis.

In the other four books of the Torah, the leader and main protagonist is Moshe, of the tribe of Levi, while Levi's longtime ally, Simeon, becomes his sworn opponent in the form of the infamous Zimri ben Salu (See Num. 25:1-15). Moshe's disciple and successor, Joshua, is the only one from among Joseph's descendants to become a national leader. Looking for other significant appearances of the children of Joseph, we find the daughters of Zelophehad, a descendant of Menashe, who requested their inheritance in Canaan. Moshe then splits Menashe into two factions, each living on a different side of the Jordan river.

Menashe maintains a divisive and cantankerous image and clashes four times with the tribe of Ephraim. The descendants of Menashe clash with Joshua twice, once over demands for a greater portion in the land (Jos. 17:14-18) and once over

apparent paganism)Jos. 21:9-34(, and later accuse the Judge Gideon for not calling on them for help. Although Gideon manages to appease them, things go terribly wrong when the people of Ephraim make a similar accusation towards Jephthah, who was from Menashe. When he is accused by Ephraim for not inviting them to fight alongside his army, he declares war on them and slaughters forty-two thousand of his opponents. Jephthah is also condemned for taking his daughter's life after vowing to sacrifice her)Jud. 11:29-12:7(.

After the reign of Joshua, the tribe of Ephraim appears only in a negative context, first being involved in murder and idolatry at the end of the book of Judges, then probably the main force in the division of Israel into kingdoms and in taking the northern one on a disastrous path. Ephraim is the one singled out by the prophets active in the Northern Kingdoms, most significantly Hosea.

Yehudah, on the other hand, emerges as the ultimate leader of Israel, the once and future king. After the failed reign of Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, the history of the Israelites revolves around David and his dynasty, both in history and in the literature of the Davidic dynasty, which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

Given Joseph's stellar performance and achievements as an administrator, it is surprising that in the long term it was Judah, and not Joseph, who became the leader of the more stable of Israel's two kingdoms, and the one to whom we refer as the progenitor of the future king and redeemer, a scion of the House of David. What is more surprising, though, is that this development has already been predicted by Jacob in his blessing to his children on his death bed.

Consider this: if we would have tried to guess what would be Jacob's last will, we would probably choose one of two options. Either Jacob stops playing favorites with his children and respects the chronological order of birth, or he favors Joseph as he always did. Well, Jacob defies our predictions. He demotes Reuben from the title of firstborn and rebukes Simeon and Levi, who are next in line, for being rash and violent. He then praises Judah in a somewhat enigmatic language, which could suggest that he was aware of his part in both the selling of Joseph and the negotiation to save Benjamin)"you have risen from devouring my son"(. Jacob then continues to appoint Judah as king, legislator, and future leader of the Israelites.

In contrast, when speaking to Joseph, Jacob describes his travails and sufferings, praises him as one who is set apart from his brothers, and promises him abundance, but not leadership. What was it that Jacob saw that made him prefer Judah over Joseph as the future leader, despite Joseph's unprecedented commitment to his father and success as the viceroy of Egypt? I believe that the answer is that Joseph was too calculated, too much in control of his emotions, to serve as a leader to his nation. Let us review Joseph's carefully calculated moves:

Meeting Pharaoh – Job Interview

Upon being called from his prison cell to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph makes the guards wait so he can shave and change clothes. He cleverly offers himself for the position of administrator and lands the job.

Gathering the Wheat – Capitalist Communism

Joseph knows that pure communism is bound to fail, because equal distribution to all would provide no incentive for farmers to produce greater crops. He builds local granaries, giving the impression that the distribution will be local. When the famine seizes Egypt, however, Joseph turns the granaries into collective warehouses and equally distributes food.

The Distribution – First Talk to the King

When the famine finally settled on Egypt, Joseph did not hurry to open the granaries, but rather indicated that he awaits an order from Pharaoh. By doing this he showed loyalty to Pharaoh, but also forced the king to acknowledge that Joseph is essential to him.

The Brothers' First Visit – Accusing to Prove Innocence

Joseph harshly and publicly accuses his brothers of spying. He does so in anticipation of their future immigration to Egypt because the tension between Egypt and Canaan could have been used by his opponents to frame Jacob and his family as a hostile element. Joseph took care of that by accusing them, imprisoning Simeon, and forcing them to return with Benjamin to prove their innocence, thus clearing their name before the revelation that they are related to him.

"Quiet" Reunion to Ensure Exposure

When Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, he ordered his courtiers to leave the room. He did so for the sake of privacy, but he knew they would be eavesdropping, and they did. Joseph wanted Pharaoh to get the news by hearsay, to indicate that he would like his family to return to Canaan and not to burden the kingdom, even though he already promised his brother to settle them in Egypt. When Pharaoh tells Joseph to bring his family to Egypt, Joseph politely refuses, and this “reverse psychology” prompts Pharaoh to issue a royal command, making the settlement of the Israelites in Egypt irrefutable. Joseph later manages to secure the land of Goshen for his brothers.

Jacob's Pyramid

When Joseph sets out to fulfil his father's last wish, to be buried in Canaan, he delivers the request through Pharaoh's courtiers. He did that to guarantee Pharaoh's agreement. Pharaoh, who relied on his courtiers' loyalty for handling his body in accordance with the intricate Egyptian codex, had no choice but to acquiesce to Joseph's request.

To summarize, Joseph was the ultimate administrator. He calculated his moves, measured his words, and succeeded in every goal he set for himself. He failed only in one field: human interaction. He caused unnecessary pain to his father and brothers, among whom was the innocent Benjamin. His behavior at his father's funeral made the brothers think that he would cause them harm, and in general he was so busy with running the kingdom, that he had no time left for family. That is, I believe, one of the reasons Jacob asks him, when he comes with Menashe and Ephraim. “who are these?” as if saying “I don't see you anymore!”

Shabbat Shalom.

* Torah VeAhava. Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Rise Like a Lion

By Rabbi Dan Margulies *

I am a high school teacher. One challenge I face in my working with teenagers is the difficulty that many of them have waking up in the morning and getting started with their day: tefilla, their studies, and so forth. It is something that is not unique to teenagers. Many people struggle to wake up in the morning, to start their days with feelings of energy and excitement. Our halahkic sources guide us in this regard: we should strive as an ideal to wake up in the morning with great energy, with great passion, with great excitement to serve God. This is the first line of the Shulchan Aruch, which says:

“A person should wake up in the morning like a lion in order to serve their Creator.”

And it is a beautiful ideal. It is something that we should strive for and a goal that we should set our sights on. However, here is the problem: If you have observed a lion at the zoo, you have seen that lions behave like big cats. They wake up. They yawn. They are lazy. They roll over. They go back to sleep in the sun. What can the Shulchan Aruch possibly be telling me? What does it mean to wake up like a lion? Lions do not wake up early in the morning. Lions do not wake up ready to go.

If we look at the comments of the Seforno in this week's parsha, we get a deeper insight into what it means to wake up like a lion to serve God. In Bresishit 49:9, Yaacov gives his son Yehuda a berakha:

“He bows down and couches like a lion, and like a lion's whelp who can raise him up?”

The Seforno there points out: what does it mean that like a lion, no one can get him up? That is because no one has the power or the authority to wake up the lion, the king of the beasts. The lion chooses when to wake up. If anything, it is the lion's slow morning, its lazy cat-like yawn, that actually is an indication of the lion's greatness. The lion is the king of the beasts. The lion is the master of his or her own future. Maybe the Shulchan Aruch is not suggesting that you have to wake up super early in the morning in order to serve God. Rather, that every choice you make to serve God, every action you

take throughout your day, for tefillah, for tzedaka, for Talmud Torah: they should be based and grounded in your own freedom to choose, your own will, command of your own time, and your own destiny.

You are the lion, the king or the queen of the beasts for your own life. That is what the Seforno points out in the berakha Yaacov gives to Yehuda. Yehuda, who has the future to be the king of Israel, represents that sense of monarchy, of independence, of self control and will, that we should all dedicate in each of our own lives to the service of God, to serving others, and to spreading the values of Torah to the whole world.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Assistant Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and Co-Director of Community Learning at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Semikha from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah)2017(.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2023/01/rise-like-a-lion/>

Shavuon: Summer Edition

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

[Rabbi Rube is on summer vacation, and the Auckland Hebrew Congregation is moving. Rabbi Rube will resume his column soon.]

* Rabbi Rube recently moved from Alabama to Auckland, NZ, where he is Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation

[Note: It is summer now in the Southern Hemisphere.] Auckland Hebrew Congregation is moving to a new building and will be closed for the move. I anticipate that Rabbi Rube will resume his Devrei Torah on January 23, 2023.

Rav Kook Torah Vayechi: Fishy Blessings

Realizing that his death was not far off, Jacob gave his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, the following blessing:

"May [God] bless the lads, and let them carry my name, along with the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac. May they increase like fish in the land.")Gen. 48:16(

Yes, fish have astonishingly large families. But so do frogs and many other animals. Why were Joseph's children blessed to be like fish?

Furthermore, the phrase "*increase like fish in the land*" sounds like a very mixed-up metaphor. Fish do not thrive on land; they certainly do not increase there! What kind of blessing is this?

Immunity from the Evil Eye

The Talmud)Berachot 55b(explains that Joseph shared a special quality with fish:

"The fish in the waters are concealed by the water, and thus not susceptible to the Evil Eye. So too, the descendants of Joseph are not susceptible to the Evil Eye."

What does it mean that Joseph was immune to the Evil Eye like the fish?

We explained previously that the Evil Eye is an example of hidden influences that exist between souls. An environment of jealousy and hatred can poison not only the atmosphere but also the soul against whom they are directed. This, however, is only true for weaker souls that are easily influenced. The Evil Eye can only harm those whose sense of self-worth is not

fully developed, people who need to live their lives in a way that meets the approval of foreign 'eyes.' But if we are secure within ourselves, and our life is focused on our inner truths, then we will not be susceptible to the Evil Eye of those around us. The Evil Eye has no power over those whose robust sense of self-esteem does not let others dictate what is important and worthwhile.

Why are fish immune to the Evil Eye?

Fish are not concerned with envious eyes above the water. They live in their own world below the surface, a secluded realm that determines the direction of their lives. Like the fish, Joseph remained faithful to his inner convictions, despite the external pressures and influences of his roller-coaster life. Family estrangement, a foreign land, a foreign culture, temptations, slavery and imprisonment — none of these succeeded in leading Joseph astray. Even when he needed to contend with the hardest test of all — the incredible success, wealth, and power as Egyptian viceroy — Joseph was steadfast in his beliefs and inner convictions. Joseph remained true to his own inner world, despite his active participation in a vastly different outer world.

Just like a "fish in the land."

)Gold from the Land of Israel pp. 93-94. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, pp. 275-276.(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAYEHI59.htm>

Transforming the Story)Vayechi 5768, 5779(By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

The scene that brings the book of Genesis to a close is intensely significant. Joseph's brothers were terrified that, after the death of their father Jacob, Joseph would take revenge against them for selling him into slavery. Years before, he had told them that he forgave them: *"Now, do not worry or feel guilty because you sold me. Look: God has sent me ahead of you to save lives"*) Gen. 45:5(. Evidently, though, they only half-believed him.

Their fear was based on the fact that, as is clear from the earlier story of Esau, sons were not allowed to take revenge against their brothers in the lifetime of their father. Esau had said:

"The days of mourning for my father will be here soon. I will then be able to kill my brother Jacob."
Gen. 27:41

That is what the brothers now feared: that Joseph had not really forgiven them but was simply waiting until Jacob died.

That is why, after Jacob's death, the brothers sent word to Joseph saying:

"Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." Gen. 50:16

So Joseph had to tell them again that he forgave them:

"Don't be afraid," said Joseph. "Am I in 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." Gen. 50:19–20

The episode is moving in itself, but it also resolves one of the central questions of the book of Genesis – sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Can brothers live peaceably with one another? This question is fundamental to the biblical drama of redemption, for if brothers cannot live together, how can nations? And if nations cannot live together, how can the human world survive?]emphasis added[

Only now, with the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers, can the story move on to the birth of Israel as a nation, passing from slavery to freedom.

These words of Joseph, though, tell us something more. I have previously argued that the entire drama Joseph put the brothers through when they came to buy food in Egypt – accusing them of being spies, and so on – was to test whether they had done teshuvah. Did they realise the wrong they had done in selling Joseph and had they really changed as a result? At the height of the drama, as soon as Judah said he would stay as a slave so that his brother Benjamin could go free, Joseph revealed his true identity to them and forgave them. Judah, who had proposed selling Joseph as a slave, had completely changed. He had done teshuvah. He was now a different person.

Yet something more is revealed in this last conversation between Joseph and his brothers. It concerns the most paradoxical of all rabbinic statements about teshuvah. It was said by one of the great baalei teshuvah, penitents, of the Talmud: the third-century Sage known as Reish Lakish. Originally a highway robber, he was persuaded by Rabbi Yochanan to give up his lawless ways and join him in the house of study. Reish Lakish repented and became Rabbi Yochanan's disciple and colleague)and also his brother-in-law: he married Yochanan's sister(.

Perhaps speaking from his own experience, he said: *Great is repentance, because through it deliberate sins are accounted as though they were merits, as it is said, "When the wicked man turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live thereby"*)Ezekiel 33:19(.]1[This statement is almost unintelligible. How can we change the past? How can deliberate sins be transformed into their opposite – into merits, good deeds?

The quotation from Ezekiel does not prove the point. If anything, it does the opposite. The prophet is speaking about a person who, having undergone teshuvah, now does good instead of evil – and it is because of his good deeds, not his earlier evil ones, that *"he shall live."* The verse says that good deeds can overcome a previous history of wrongdoing. It does not say that they can turn bad into good, deliberate sins into merits.

Reish Lakish's statement is intelligible only in the light of Joseph's words to his brothers after the death of their father: *"You intended to harm me but God intended it for good."* The brothers had committed a deliberate sin by selling Joseph into slavery. They had then done teshuvah. The result, says Joseph, is that – through divine providence)"God intended it"(– their action is now reckoned "for good."

Not only is this the source of Reish Lakish's principle; it also enables us to understand what it means. Any act we perform has multiple consequences, some good, some bad. When we intend evil, the bad consequences are attributed to us because they are what we sought to achieve. The good consequences are not: they are mere unintended outcomes.

Thus, in the case of Joseph, many positive things happened once he had been brought to Egypt. Eventually he became second-in-command of Egypt, overseer of its economy, and the man who saved the country from ruin during the years of famine. None of these consequences could be attributed to his brothers, even though they would not have happened had the brothers not done as they did. The reason is that the brothers neither foresaw nor intended this set of outcomes. They meant to sell Joseph as a slave, and that is what they did.

However, once the brothers had undergone complete repentance, their original intent was cancelled out. It was now possible to see the good, as well as the bad, consequences of their act – and to attribute the former to them. Paraphrasing Shakespeare's Mark Antony, the good they did would live after them; the bad was interred with the past)Julius Caesar, Act III, scene 2.(. That is how, through repentance, deliberate sins can be accounted as merits, or as Joseph put it: *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good."* This is a hugely significant idea, for it means that by a change of heart we can redeem the past.

This still sounds paradoxical. Surely time is asymmetrical. We can change the future but not the past. We can choose what is yet to be, but, in the words of the Sages, *"What has been, has been,"*]2[and we cannot alter it.

We now see, through Joseph's and Reish Lakish's words, a revolutionary idea. **There are two concepts of the past. The first is what happened. That is something we cannot change. The second is the significance, the meaning, of what happened. That is something we can change.**]emphasis added[

The great truth about the role of time in our lives is that we live life forwards, but we understand it only looking back. Consider an autobiography. Reading the story of a life, we see how a deprived childhood led to the woman of iron ambition, or how the early loss of a parent drove the man who spent his later years pursuing fame in search of the love he had lost.

It might have been otherwise. The deprived childhood or the loss of a parent might have led to a life dominated by a sense of defeat and inadequacy. What we become depends on our choices, and we are often free to choose this way or that. But what we become shapes the story of our life, and only in hindsight, looking back, do we see the past in context, as part of a tale whose end we now know. If life is like a narrative, then later events change the significance of earlier ones. That is what the story of Joseph and his brothers is telling us, according to Reish Lakish.

Joseph was saying to his brothers: by your repentance, you have written a new chapter in the story of which you are a part. The harm you intended to do me ultimately led to good. So long as you stayed the people prepared to sell a brother into slavery, none of that good could be attributed to you, but now you have transformed yourself through teshuvah, you have transformed the story of your life as well. By your change of heart you have earned the right to be included in a narrative whose ultimate outcome was benign. We cannot change the past, but we can change the story people tell about the past. But that only happens when we ourselves change.

We can only change the world if we can change ourselves. That is why the book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph and his brothers. It tells on an individual level the story that the book of Exodus tells on a national level. Israel is charged with the task of transforming the moral vision of humankind, but it can only do so if individual Jews, of whom the forerunners were Jacob's children, are capable of changing themselves.]emphasis added[

Teshuvah is the ultimate assertion of freedom. Time then becomes an arena of change in which the future redeems the past and a new concept is born – the idea we call hope.

FOOTNOTES:

]1[Yoma 86b.

]2[Pesachim 108a

Around the Shabbat Table:

1. What similarities are there between the stories of Joseph and Reish Lakish?
2. What does Rabbi Sacks mean by “We live life forwards, but we understand it backwards”?
3. When you look back at periods and events in your life that seemed to be negative at the time, can you now see positive significance to them?
4. Can you think of examples of how the world has been impacted by the Jewish concept of time?
5. Why do you think the book of Genesis ends with this story)clue: the connection between teshuvah and freedom(?

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/transforming-the-story/> 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.

Don't Write the Obituary Just Yet!

By Yossi Goldman* © Chabad 2023

There was a fellow whose morning ritual involved reading the daily paper while drinking a glass of cold, freshly squeezed orange juice. One day, as he flipped through the obituary section, he was shocked to see his own name on the list of those who had passed.

He assumed that it was someone else who shared his name, but upon closer inspection, all the information was a perfect match.

Furiously, he called the newspaper office and demanded to be put through to the editor. He insisted on an apology and a retraction.

The editor was rather unsympathetic and categorically refused to issue an apology.

"Sir, the Paper does not make mistakes."

"But I'm alive! I'm talking to you on the telephone!"

"Sir, the Paper does not make mistakes. We, therefore, cannot issue a correction or an apology. However, if you insist, we can put your name in tomorrow's Birth Column."

Just 80 years ago, the Jewish People's obituary had already been written. We were down and out with a full third of our population decimated and Hitler's Museum of the Extinct Jewish Race was already being planned.

Thank G d, we did indeed resurface in the "birth column," as the survivors emerged from Europe and resettled in Israel and the world over, doing their best to raise the next generation of our nation.

In Parshat Vayechi, we read about the passing of our patriarch Jacob.¹ Remarkably, Rabbi Yochanan of the Talmud claimed that "our father Jacob never died."² When his colleagues challenged the veracity of his astounding statement, he explained: "Just as his descendants are alive, he is alive."

Jacob's life work continued in perpetuity. He was described as the "select of the forefathers." Why? Because whereas Abraham fathered Isaac, he also bore Ishmael. And Isaac fathered Jacob, but also Esau. Jacob, however, fathered twelve sons who became the 12 Tribes of Israel, who all remained faithful to his way of life, and through whom Am Yisrael, the Jewish nation, was firmly established.

Whether it is the individual Jew or the Jewish People, the same rule applies. We have a role to play, a mission to accomplish — each of us in our own personal lives and all of us collectively. We cannot opt out. We are only as good as the sum of all our parts.

And the very trajectory of history depends on us too. Our actions can change not only our own situation, but the rest of the world too, and can even achieve global redemption. Our "chosenness" is as much a responsibility as it is privilege.

A congregant of mine returned from a visit to Israel with a charming story. He was in a taxi and spent time chatting with the Israeli driver. Now, anyone who has ever interacted with taxi drivers in Israel knows that they are a unique species. Somehow, every taxi driver there is a world expert on everything from the Bible to philosophy, politics, the economy, and world peace. When my friend asked his driver if he was not worried about the current danger levels in the Middle East, the driver was completely dismissive of his concerns.

"But you are living in a dangerous part of the world, surrounded by enemies who are trying to drive you into the sea. How can you not be anxious?" my friend persisted.

The driver smiled.

"Tell me, have you heard of Clint Eastwood?"

"Of course," replied my friend.

"Well, if you've ever watched a Clint Eastwood movie, you know that he will not be killed, no matter how many people are trying to murder him. In the end, he always survives."

"Why? Because he is the star of the film. He cannot die. They need him for the next movie!"

"Well, we are the same. G d needs us around to fulfill our destiny and His destiny. That's why I'm not worried."

The Jewish People never die. We almost die on a regular basis. In every generation, there is someone trying to wipe us out. But do we die? Will we? Can we? Never!

Jacob never died because we continue to carry on what he and our other patriarchs and matriarchs began.

Let us live proud Jewish lives and continue to be living examples of eternal Jewish continuity.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 49:33.

2. Taanit 5b.

* President of the South African Rabbinical Association.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5752234/jewish/Dont-Write-the-Obituary-Just-Yet.htm

Vayichi: Our Inspiring Pasts

by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky *

Our Inspiring Pasts

Joseph took them both – Ephraim with his right hand, to Israel's left, and Manasseh with his left hand, to Israel's right – and brought them close to him.)Gen. 48:13(

According to Rabbi DovBer)the Maggid(of Mezeritch, Ephraim represents consistently saintly individuals while Manasseh represents penitents. Each group is inspired by their pasts, but in different ways:

Consistently saintly individuals are inspired by the fact that G-d has made them successful in the past. Their past experience spurs them on to continue to do good.

In contrast, penitents recall the fact that they have in the past betrayed or forgotten about G-d, and are thereby fired with a greater yearning to become close to Him. This serves as their inspiration to do good.

We all embody both perspectives – that of Ephraim and that of Manasseh – and can therefore focus on both aspects of our past in order to glean the inspiration necessary to live up to our spiritual potential..

– From Kehot's Daily Wisdom #3

Gut Shabbos,
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

* A Chasidic insight that Rabbi Wisniefsky selected for the parsha.

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Shabbat Parashat Vayechi

5783 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Family, Faith and Freedom

If you want to understand what a book is about, look carefully at how it ends. Genesis ends with three deeply significant scenes.

First, Jacob blesses his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasheh. This is the blessing that Jewish parents use on Friday night to bless their sons. My predecessor Lord Jakobovits used to ask, why this blessing of all the blessings in the Torah? He gave a beautiful reply. He said, all the others are from fathers to sons – and between fathers and sons there can be tension. Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasheh is the only instance in the Torah of a grandparent blessing a grandchild. And between grandparents and grandchildren there is no tension, only pure love.

Second, Jacob blesses his twelve sons. There is discernible tension here. His blessings to his eldest three sons, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, read more like curses than blessings. Yet the fact is that he is blessing all twelve together in the same room at the same time. We have not seen this before. There is no record of Abraham blessing either Ishmael or Isaac. Isaac blesses Esau and Jacob separately. The mere fact that Jacob is able to gather his sons together is unprecedented, and important. In the next chapter – the first of Exodus – the Israelites are, for the first time, described as a people. It is hard to see how they could live together as a people if they could not live together as a family.

Third, after the death of Jacob, the brothers asked Joseph to forgive them, which he does. He had also done so earlier. Evidently, the brothers harbour the suspicion that he was merely biding his time until their father died, as Esau at one point resolved to do. Sons do not take revenge within the family while the father is alive – that seems to have been the principle in those days. Joseph speaks directly to their fears and puts them at rest. "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good," he says.

The Torah is telling us an unexpected message here: the family is prior to all else, to the land, the nation, politics, economics, the pursuit of

power and the accumulation of wealth. From an external point of view, the impressive story is that Joseph reached the heights of power in Egypt, the Egyptians themselves mourned the death of his father Jacob and accompanied the family on their way to bury him, so that the Canaanites, seeing the entourage said, "The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning" (Gen. 50:11). But that is externality. When we turn the page and begin the book of Exodus, we discover that the position of the Israelites in Egypt was very vulnerable indeed, and all the power Joseph had centralised in the hands of Pharaoh would eventually be used against them.

Genesis is not about power. It is about families. Because that is where life together begins.

The Torah does not imply that there is anything easy about making and sustaining a family. The patriarchs and matriarchs – Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel especially – know the agony of infertility. They know what it is to wait in hope and wait again.

Sibling rivalry is a repeated theme of the book. The Psalm tells us "how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together." It might have added, "and how rare." Almost at the beginning of the human story, Cain kills Abel. There are tensions between Sarah and Hagar that lead to Hagar and Ishmael being sent away. There is rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers, in both cases coming close to murder.

Yet there is no diminution of the significance of the family. To the contrary, it is the main vehicle of blessing. Children figure as central to God's blessing no less than the gift of the land. It is as if the Torah were telling us, with great honesty, that yes, families are challenging. The relationship between husband and wife, and between parent and child, is rarely straightforward. But we have to work at it. There is no guarantee that we will always get it right. It is by no means clear that the parents in Genesis always got it right. But this is our most human institution.

The family is where love brings new life into the world. That in itself makes it the most spiritual of all institutions. It is also where we have our most important and lasting moral education. To quote Harvard political scientist, the late James Q. Wilson, the family is "an arena in which conflicts occur and must be managed." People within the family "love and quarrel, share and sulk, please and disappoint."

Families, he says, "are the world in which we shape and manage our emotions." [1]

The Torah guides us through areas that have been identified in the 20th century as the most important arenas of conflict. Freud saw the Oedipus complex – the desire to create space for yourself by removing your father – as one of the primary drivers of human emotion. Rene Girard saw sibling rivalry as a, perhaps the, source of human violence. [2]

I have argued that the story of the Binding of Isaac is directed precisely at the Oedipus complex. God does not want Abraham to kill Isaac. He wants him to relinquish ownership of Isaac. He wants to abolish one of the most widespread beliefs of the ancient world, known in Roman law as the principle of *Patria potestas*, that parents own their children. Once this has gone, and children become legal personalities in their own right, then much of the force of the Oedipus complex is removed. Children have space to be themselves.

I have argued also that the story of Jacob's wrestling match with the angel is directed against the source of sibling rivalry, namely mimetic desire, the desire to have what your brother has because he has it. Jacob becomes Israel when he ceases wanting to be Esau and instead stands tall as himself.

So Genesis is not a hymn to the virtue of families. It is a candid, honest, fully worked-through account of what it is to confront some of the main problems within families, even the best.

Genesis ends on these three important resolutions: first, that grandparents are part of the family and their blessing is important. Second, Jacob shows it is possible to bless all your children, even if you have a fractured relationship with some of them. Third, Joseph shows it is possible to forgive your siblings even if they have done you great harm.

One of my most vivid memories from my early days as a student was listening to the BBC Reith Lectures in 1967. The Reith lectures are the BBC's most prestigious broadcast series: the first to deliver them was Bertrand Russell in 1948. In 1967 the lecturer was the Cambridge Professor of Anthropology, Edmund Leach. I had the privilege of delivering these lectures in 1990.

By Rene and Rami Isser in loving memory of
Rene's grandfather,
Yehudah Ben Gedaliah David, a"h,
(12th of Tevet)
and Rene's father, Chaim Ben Yehudah, a"h
(17th of Tevet)

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Leach called his lectures *A Runaway World?*, and in his third lecture he delivered a sentence that made me sit up and take notice. “Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents.”[3] It was an important sign that the family was about to be dethroned, in favour of sexual liberation and self-expression. Rarely has so important an institution been abandoned so thoroughly and so lightly.

In the decades that followed, in many parts of society, cohabitation replaced marriage. Fewer people were getting married, they were getting married later, and more were getting divorced. At one point, 50% of marriages in America and Britain were ending in divorce. And 50% of children were being born outside marriage. The current figure for Britain is 42%.

The consequences have been widespread and devastating. To take one example, the birth rate in Europe today is far below replacement rate. A fertility rate of 2.1 (the average number of children born per woman of the population) is necessary for a stable population. No country in Europe has that rate. In Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece, it is down to 1.3. The overall average is 1.6. Europe is maintaining its population only by immigration on an unprecedented scale. This is the death of Europe as we knew it.

Meanwhile in the United States, a significant part of the population is living in neighbourhoods with few intact families, disadvantaged children, damaged neighbourhoods, poor schools, few social facilities, and a desperate shortage of hope. This, for sections of America, is the end of the American dream.[4]

People who look to the state, politics and power, to deliver the good, the beautiful and the true – the Hellenistic tradition – tend to regard the family and all it presupposes in terms of fidelity and responsibility as a distraction. But for people who understand not just the importance of politics but also its limitations and dangers, relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, grandparent and grandchildren, and siblings, are the most important basis of freedom. That is an insight that runs all the way through Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, summed up in his statement that “as long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone.”[5]

James Q. Wilson put it beautifully: “We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former’s affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter’s tests, judgements, and demands.”[6]

That, surprisingly, is what Genesis is about. Not about the creation of the world, which occupies only one chapter, but about how to handle family conflict. As soon as Abraham’s descendants can create strong families, they can move from Genesis to Exodus and their birth as a nation.

I believe that family is the birthplace of freedom. Caring for one another, we learn to care for the common good.

[1] James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, Free Press, 1993, 162.

[2] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

[3] Edmund Leach, *A Runaway World?*, Oxford University Press, 1967.

[4] This is the thesis of two important books: Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*, Crown Forum, 2012, and Robert Putnam, *Our Kids*, Simon & Schuster, 2015. See also Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, Basic Books, 2016.

[5] *Democracy in America*, 340.

[6] *The Moral Sense*, 163.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

In a most uplifting and inspiring deathbed scene, grandfather Jacob/Israel peacefully takes leave of this world by blessing, evaluating and prophesying about every one of his sons, delineating the tribe that will emanate from each and establishing the National Republic of tribes that will emerge from all of them together.

The petty rivalries have been laid aside, the sturm und drang of exiles, wars, famines and inter-sibling savagery unto death have seemingly been forgotten; a divided family torn asunder by jealousies and ambitions is turning into a nascent nation, united—if only during this brief period—by their aged Patriarch, whose last words are presenting the blueprint for the Divine destiny set aside for the purveyors of the Abrahamic blessing, that all the families on earth will be blessed with peace because of this unique nation.

For those of us who have been carefully following the adventures of this remarkable family, fraught with intrigue but always propelled onward by a Divine Spirit of “compassionate righteousness and moral justice,” there is one jarring note in Grandfather Israel’s will and testament of prophetic blessing: In each previous generation, the elder and the more aggressive son was rejected in favor of his younger and gentler brother (Isaac trumps Ishmael, Jacob trumps Esau) and in this latter instance, Rebekah demonstrates to Isaac, albeit by deception, that Jacob, if necessity warrants it, has the wherewithal to utilize the hands of Esau to get what is rightfully his. Hence Isaac eventually rejects Esau and gives both the physical double portion of the blessings and the more spiritual Messianic birthright legacy to Jacob.

As I have written in a previous commentary, the Malbim explains that Isaac had originally

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intended to split the inheritance, giving the more material blessings to the more aggressive and materialistically oriented son, Esau, who would know how to train and equip an army, how to navigate the stock market and how to initiate start-up hi-tech projects, as it were, and to give the more spiritual, Messianic birthright legacy to the wholehearted, tent-dwelling Jacob, who could more naturally deal with that mission of Israel, to teach morality and peacefulness to all the nations of the earth.

Rebekah argued that in order for Torah ethics and spirituality to be enabled to “conquer” the world, if God was indeed to be enthroned on earth, then Torah would require a protective army and a strong financial base to make this a real possibility. And when Rebekah proved her point by “coating” Jacob with the external garb and might of Esau, Rebekah won the day and both blessings and birthright went to Jacob.

Now that it’s Jacob’s turn to bestow material blessings and Messianic birthright, I would have thought that he, of all people, based on his own experience, would have given both gifts to the same favored and beloved wise son of his old age, to the son of his most beloved Rachel, to Joseph. But no, Jacob does what his father Isaac had thought to do initially: He creates a division between the physical blessings and the spiritual birthright. He bequeaths the blessings of heavenly rain and earthly produce, innumerable seed and a double tribal portion of land, and even the mighty bow of vanquishing warfare upon the financially adept Grand Vizier, Joseph (Gen. 48:22- 49:26) and he awards dominion over the family, the majestic and spiritual birthright of King Messiah, the recipient of fraternal fealty as well as peaceful homage from the ingathering of all of the nations, to the ba’al teshuva (penitent) Judah. Why does Jacob revert to the concept of Isaac rather than to that of Rebekah, the mother who so adored him? You will remember that the victory of Rebekah over Isaac may have been short-lived. Jacob was plagued by his deception of his father until his dying day. Almost from the moment he left his father’s house for Laban-land, his mother’s brother substituted his elder daughter for her younger sister under the marriage canopy with the prescient words, “It is not the practice in our place to give the younger before the elder,” and not only his ten sons but even his beloved Joseph deceived him—the ten brothers with the bloody coat and Joseph with his garb of Grand Vizier.

Jacob understands only too well that the bearer of the righteous legacy of Abraham dare not descend into deception; and so only when he succeeds in disgorging the Esau from within himself, the unfortunate result of twenty-two years with Laban, will he be empowered with the name Yisra-El, purveyor of the God of righteousness (Yashar-El).

Moreover, when the head of a family must decide upon who is to be the real continuator

of his legacy, he must choose the individual child who most represents the major ideals and goals to which the family is dedicated.

However, when one is about to form a nation, a consortium of twelve (or thirteen) tribes which will comprise the peoplehood of Israel, the goal becomes “e pluribus unum,” a united vision which emerges from joining together multiple strengths and different ideas; not a conformity but rather a cultural pluralism which combines together and unites behind a commitment to the ideal of morality and peace.

In such a situation, no brother is to be rejected unless he will do damage to the ultimate vision; there is room for many leaders, each with his particular gift and emphasis, as long as they all stand behind a God who demands compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Since acceptance of the eventual goal depends upon the ability of Israel and the nations of the world to repent, to return to God in Heaven, on both counts, Grandfather Jacob/Israel chose Judah, the consummate ba'al teshuva and the unifier of the family, to receive the prized legacy of Messianic leadership.

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersch Weinreb** **No Two Snowflakes Are Alike**

Having lived on the eastern seaboard of the United States for most of my life, I know the havoc wrought by a severe snowstorm. Nevertheless, I am also very aware of the beauty of such snowstorms and especially by the beauty of each single snowflake.

The snowflake, held under a magnifying glass, is an exquisitely intricate and beautiful creation. Furthermore, every snowflake is unique. No two snowflakes are alike.

The uniqueness of each snowflake is but one example of an amazing fact, which is true of the entire natural world. No two blades of grass are identical, no two leaves are exactly the same, and every individual member of every animal species is unique in some way.

This is true of human beings as well. None of us has the same fingerprint, and no matter how closely one of us might resemble another, we are different from the other in some respect.

The Talmud recognizes this when it comments that “just as no two faces are alike, so too, no two personalities are alike.” We are different from each other physically, psychologically, intellectually, spiritually, and in every other way.

Any person who has parented several children knows that each child is different from the get-go. Mothers tell me that even while still pregnant with their children, they were aware of the potential differences that unfolded later in life.

Woe to the teacher who treats all of his students alike. The so-called cookie cutter method of education is doomed to failure. Each of us has different learning styles and differing intellectual strengths and weaknesses. The secret of successful pedagogy lies in the recognition of individual differences, and in the ability of the teacher to be flexible enough to adapt his or her lessons to each individual and his or her learning needs.

In this week's Torah portion, Vayechi, we find that our patriarch Jacob was well aware of this secret.

Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph, and later proceeds to bless each one of his sons, the twelve tribes. Reading these blessings, we cannot help but notice how each one is fundamentally different and seems tailor-made to the character traits and emotional makeup of each tribe.

Jacob blesses one son with power and dominion; another with agricultural wealth. One is compared to a lion, one to a wolf, and yet another to a serpent.

Jacob knows his children and knows how diverse and heterogeneous his family is. He knows how to bless them with the particular resources that they will need as they march forward, with varying talents and dispositions, into their historical roles.

The Bible underscores this when it summarizes the entire episode of the blessings with the following words: “All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a blessing appropriate to him.” (Genesis 49:28) To each a different blessing, to each his own parting word.

The fact that each of us is uniquely gifted is a basic component of the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, who passed away more than 70 years ago, but whose written legacy keeps him very much alive.

Rav Kook insists that the very purpose of education is to help each person discover his or her own individuality, to learn what he or she can do best. Self-discovery, for Rav Kook, is the essence of the educational endeavor.

Rav Kook, besides being an educator, was also a mystic. From his mystical perspective, he views the world as being a unified whole, to which every individual is necessary, because each individual contributes something utterly unique to the cosmos.

Each snowflake is different from the other because the beauty of each snowflake is equally essential to nature's beauty.

Each human being is unique because the contribution of every one of us is absolutely

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necessary for the accomplishment of humanity's ultimate mission.

Like Jacob's children, we all are uniquely blessed. Appreciating our uniqueness as that of every one of our fellow men is an essential component of Jewish spirituality.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The True Chessed Shel Emes

At the beginning of the parsha, Yaakov asks Yosef to swear that he will bring him back to the Land of Canaan and not allow him to be buried in the Land of Egypt. Rashi famously comments that a kindness done with the deceased is a “true kindness” (Chessed shel Emes) because the person extending the favor expects no repayment from the person receiving the favor. The quintessential Chessed shel Emes is the chessed someone does with a dead person. There are no ulterior motives involved in such kindness. Many Chevra Kadisha organizations are known as Chessed Shel Emes societies. The source is this Rashi at the beginning of Parshas Vayechi.

However, a number of commentaries ask on this Rashi, because the pasuk explicitly says that Yaakov was giving Yosef an ulterior motive for rendering this kindness. Yaakov promised Yosef the city of Shechem because he was troubling himself not to bury Yaakov in Egypt! How can Rashi call this the classic paradigm of Chessed shel Emes where no gain or benefit is expected in return?

Moreover, the Gemara says in Kesuvos and other places that the way this world works is that if someone eulogizes others, others will eulogize him, and one who goes to funerals and participates in the burial of the departed will have others do the same for him as well. In other words, there is repayment for people who occupy themselves with burying the dead! Basically, this is a death insurance policy. The premiums are to eulogize and bury others; the payment is that others will eulogize and bury you. So, again we have a question on Rashi's characterization of the matter.

The sefer Avir Yaakov offers the following interpretation: Certainly, when there is a funeral and someone buries a departed friend or neighbor, there can be and there will be a payback. However, the reason why kindness done with the dead is considered a Chessed shel Emes is because the dead person will not feel indebted to his benefactor. Every time someone does someone else a favor—for the purest of reasons—it creates an obligation on the recipient. He feels indebted to the one who did him the favor. It is just human nature. When you give something to someone, he feels indebted.

The favor may have been performed totally altruistically, but inevitably, later on, when you see the person who did you a favor in the street, you are thinking “I owe him something”. And this other fellow may very

well also be thinking that you owe him something. The only person who will certainly NOT feel indebted after receiving a favor is a dead person. That is why Rashi calls this a true Chessed shel Emes.

Rav Yeruchem Levovitz, the Mir Mashgiach, always portrayed a situation where Reuven does a favor for Shimon and Shimon is very appreciative and tells Reuven, “Thank you so much, how can I repay you?” Reuven answers “Oh, it was nothing. Forget about it!” Shimon persists “No, no. I really want to repay you somehow. What can I do for you?” Again, Reuven says “Please, just forget about it!”

People think, Rav Yeruchem said, that Reuven is being very nice and magnanimous. He is not asking for anything in return from Shimon for the kindness he did for him. Rav Yeruchem said that the contrary is true. Reuven is not being nice by not giving Shimon the opportunity to do something for him as repayment. When a person says “What can I do for you in return,” it gives him the opportunity to remove the feeling of indebtedness that he must now carry around. When the benefactor disallows the possibility of payment, he is really holding onto the debt for possible collection at a later date.

Therefore, the real true Chessed is only the kindness someone does with the dead, who have no feelings of indebtedness.

Yosef Had to Be Told His Father Was Sick?

There is a Daas Zekeinim m’Baalei haTosfos in our parsha that comments on the pasuk “And it was after these matters, it was told to Yosef ‘Behold your father is sick.’ He took his two sons with him, Menashe and Ephraim.” [Bereshis 48:1] Yosef hears that his elderly father is on his death bed and goes to see him, taking along his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim.

Let us ask a question: If someone is on his death bed, isn’t it likely that the son will know about it without needing to be told? What kind of son would not know what kind of condition his father is in and need to be told by others “Behold, your father is sick”?

The Daas Zekeinim infers from this narration that Yosef did not visit his father frequently. Yosef was not there on a regular basis and therefore he did not know Yaakov’s condition and consequently, he needed to be informed by others that the end was near. The Daas Zekeinim suggests a reason why this may have been the case: Yosef did not want to spend time with his father alone because he was afraid his father would ask him how it was that he wound up in Egypt.

This is an incredible idea. Yaakov was in Mitzrayim for seventeen years. He had not seen Yosef for twenty-two years prior to that. There was a dramatic meeting between the two of them in last week’s parsha. They had been

so close during Yosef’s youth in Canaan. Can it be thought that now, after their initial dramatic reunion, that Yosef, the “heir apparent” to the patriarchal legacy, does not go back to visit with his father on a frequent basis?

According to the Daas Zekeinim, as hard as it is to imagine, and as difficult personally as it must have been for Yosef, he kept his distance. Yosef feared that moment of privacy with Yaakov when his elderly father would say to him “Yossele my dear son – tell me: what really happened? How did you ever wind up here in Egypt?” The truth would have caused Yaakov great aggravation and anger at his other sons. Yosef did not want to be the cause of that aggravation and family strife.

The sefer Avir Yaakov asks the following question: Yosef did not see his father all these seventeen years when they were both in Mitzrayim. It was painful to Yaakov and it was painful to Yosef. Why? Yosef wanted to avoid the question “What happened to you?” However, there is a simple resolution to this problem. It is called “Lie through your teeth.” There are plenty of stories Yosef could have told Yaakov to explain his disappearance without incriminating his brothers. “I was kidnapped by these Yishmaelim” is a very plausible story. It is not true, but perhaps Yaakov would have believed it. If there ever was an example of “one is allowed to extend the truth to preserve peace” (M’shaneh b’ad ha’Shalom) [Yevamos 65b] – this was it!

The Avir Yaakov offers an answer to this question. (If you have a better answer, perhaps discuss it around the family Shabbos table.) He suggests that even though Yosef may have been allowed to lie, he just could not bring himself to deceive his father. Maybe that is because Yaakov personified the attribute of truth more than anything else. If you know your father values truth over every other human characteristic – you just cannot lie to him. Despite both Yosef and Yaakov suffering for all of these years, Yosef could not lie to his father and violate the paramount value in his life.

The Fundamental Qualification for Malchus in Klal Yisrael: Lack of Arrogance

This final thought is from the sefer Chidekel, by Rav Chaim Dov Keller, the late Rosh Yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Chicago. It is based on a Targum Onkelos, a Targum Yonosan ben Uziel and a Medrash.

Yehudah is actually the first of Yaakov’s sons to receive an unadulterated blessing. Reuven, Shimon, and Levi received a “Bracha” that was actually more mussar than bracha. Yehudah’s “Bracha” was pure blessing.

Among the five pesukim of Yehuda’s bracha, Yaakov said: “The scepter shall not depart from his descendants nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh arrives...”

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[Bereshis 49:10]. This is a seminal pasuk in all of the Torah. It grants monarchy to the Tribe of Yehudah. All kings must be from his descendants. In fact, at the time of the Chashmonaim, when the Tribe of Levi usurped the monarchy (the Maccabees were Kohanim), they were punished severely despite their righteousness.

What did Yaakov see in Yehudah that made him fit for royalty? The pasuk “Yehudah ata yodoocha achecha...” is commonly translated “Yehuda—you, your brothers will acknowledge” [Bereshis 49:8].

Targum Onkelos translates the pasuk to mean: “Yehudah you confessed (Yoducha from the word Modeh) [when it came to the story of Tamar] and were not embarrassed”. When Tamar was taken out to be burnt at the stake and she said, “Whoever is the person who gave me these items is the person who impregnated me,” Yehudah said “She is more righteous than I.” Imagine the Yehudah’s humiliation in making this embarrassing admission.

Targum Yonoson ben Uziel adds a further element in his translation of this pasuk: “Yehudah, you admitted in the story of Tamar. Therefore, all Jews will be called YEHUDim after your name.” We are called Jews because of the name Judah in all different languages. The name of our nationality is derived from the name of Yaakov’s fourth son! We received our national identity because of the strength of this incident. Being able to admit you are wrong is so fundamental to being a Yid that it is why we are all called Yehudim.

In fact, the Medrash Rabbah says that it was the Ribono shel Olam who made Yehudah the Melech of Klal Yisrael for this one act of humility and his ability to say “I am wrong.”

This is an amazing quality that is extremely rare among contemporary politicians—the willingness and ability to announce “I made a mistake” or “I am wrong!” In Klal Yisrael, the fundamental qualification for Malchus is lack of arrogance—the ability to be Modeh al haEmes.

In general, this is a Jewish trait. Rashi illustrates this point several times in Chumash. In Toldos, Rashi says regarding a certain pasuk [Bereshis 28:5] “I don’t know what this is coming to teach us.” Now obviously, Rashi does not comment on every pasuk in Chumash. Rashi could have easily glossed over this pasuk and not said anything. He could have just skipped it. However, Rashi felt compelled to admit that he was bothered by this pasuk and did not know why it was there.

Likewise, the same phenomenon [e.g. – Bava Metziah 108b] occurs in his monumental Talmud commentary. In the middle of a sugya, Rashi writes “I did not closely follow the words of my teachers (lo dikdakti b’Divrei Rabbosai).” He gives the impression – “Do

you know why I don't know complete pshat in this piece of Gemara? It is because I was sleeping during shiur!" Why does Rashi need to say that? It is because he is a Yid! Also see Brachos 25b. There is a Gilyon HaShas there which quotes every single place in Shas that Rashi explicitly writes that he does not understand the Gemara's interpretation. The print is too small and the list is too long for me to count all the places mentioned.

In each of those places, Rashi had the option of not saying anything but he chose not to take that easier option. That would be the less-than-fully-truthful approach. That is not the characteristic of Jews.

Rabbi Keller cites an incident he saw in a sefer that Rabbi Shlomo Loriczn wrote (B'Mechitzasam), describing the various Gedolim he had connections with in Eretz Yisrael.

The Chazon Ish wrote on the entire Torah. He wrote a chapter (Siman 12) in one of his Sefarim about Masechta Kelim. He later regretted having published that Siman. He didn't think what he wrote was correct. He expunged it from his Sefer. In the Chazon Ish's volume on Taharos regarding Masechta Kelim, the chapters skip from eleven to thirteen. Siman 12 was removed in all later editions.

Someone asked the Chazon Ish why he did not renumber the subsequent chapters and make Siman 13 into Siman 12 and so on? "Let there be one less Siman at the end of the Sefer. Why do you need to announce that there is something missing here?" The Chazon Ish said "I want people to know that I had something to say over here. It was originally included but I decided it was wrong so I removed it. That's the way it is."

This is another example of Yehudah – Ata yodoocha achecha. He admitted and was not embarrassed to do so. The ability to confess and say "I'm human, I was wrong, I made a mistake" is highly admirable. In Klal Yisrael, it is a qualification for true leadership. There has never been a dogma in the history of Klal Yisrael that anyone is infallible, as is the case in other religions. This is because people are not infallible. People are people and people are humans, and even the greatest can from time to time err.

The attribute that qualifies the Melech Yisrael for Malchus is the ability to say "I was wrong. She is more righteous than I." That is why Yehudah merited monarchy. It is because a king cannot be arrogant. He has much too much power. Arrogance, on top of having all that power, can be disastrous. The higher up you are, the humbler you must be. Unfortunately, we see the opposite in the world around us.

Dvar Torah **Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

What's the greatest blessing one can have? Parshat Vayechi is the parsha of blessings. At the conclusion of Sefer Bereishit, Jacob gives blessings to his sons in Egypt. Before he does this, Jacob summons his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe, children of his son Joseph, for them to receive a bracha, but how does he commence that blessing?

The Torah (Bereishit 48:15) says, "Vayevarech et Yosef vayomar," – "And he blessed Joseph and he said," meaning that he blessed Joseph by giving this blessing to Joseph's children.

It doesn't make sense. Surely the Torah should have said, "Vayevarech otam vayomer," – "He blessed them and he said," meaning Ephraim and Menashe. He didn't bless Joseph – he blessed Joseph's children.

The Shlah haKadosh explains that the greatest blessing for a person is when they know that their children are blessed. So therefore when Jacob was blessing his grandchildren, it was a bracha, a blessing for his son, Yosef.

So often parents tell me that all they want in life is to know that their children are happy; their children are content; their children are healthy and fulfilled in life. But there is a blessing which is even greater than this.

In Parshat Vayeira (Bereishit 22:18) Hashem says to Avraham, "Vehitbarchu vezarecha kol goyei ha'aretz." – "Through your descendants may all nations on earth be blessed." That's the greatest bracha – that we know, not just that our children are well and healthy, but that through their actions, other people are being blessed. When our descendants are a blessing for others, that's the greatest blessing for us.

May Hashem bless each and every one of us so that our children and grandchildren, together with all those upon whom we have an impact, will be fulfilled and content and healthy in life, but more than that: may all those over whom we have an influence be a true blessing to all others.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel **Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*** **Grandparents and Grandchildren**

The very first words in the Torah spoken by a grandfather to his grandchildren are in our Torah portion Vayechi. Jacob informs two of his grandchildren, Ephraim, and Menashe, that in the future, all Jewish parents will bless their sons by asking God to make them like you, Ephraim, and Menashe (Genesis 48:20). While Tagum Yonatan states that this should be the words of the blessing of every new father to his son at the Brit Milah-circumcision (Targum Yonatan commentary on Genesis 48:20), the custom of Jewish parents, until today, is to use these words to bless their sons on Friday night before the Kiddush. Thus, the blessing of Jewish children is the blessing of Jacob to his

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grandchildren. In addition, Jacob elevated these two grandchildren to the status of actual children, by saying they are now viewed by his as equal to Reuven and Shimon, his sons (Genesis 48:5). And, like the twelve sons of Jacob, only these two grandchildren were given a portion in the land of Israel, each as a "separate" tribe. What should be the ideal relationship between grandchildren and their grandparents? We will see that it is not what most Jews believe.

King Solomon states Jewish grandchildren are the crown (pride) of their grandparents, and Jewish grandparents are the glory of their grandchildren (Proverbs 17:6). Rashi (Rashi commentary on Proverbs 17:6) explains that both grandparents and grandchildren take pride in each other when they see each other living an upstanding life. The Midrash (Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 63:2) cites this verse to teach us that Abraham's life was saved after being thrown into the inferno by Nimrod, not in his own merit, but, rather, in the merit of his grandson, Jacob, who continued Abraham's path and values. King David writes (Psalms 128:6) that when parents see their own children have children, there will be peace in the nation of Israel. The Talmud (Ketuvot 50a) explains that the grandparents see a continuity of Jewish generations, it brings a sense of contentment to them and all the Jewish people.

The Special Torah Connection of Jewish Grandparents & Their Grandchildren - The Rabbis (Bava Metzia 85a) interpret a verse in Isaiah (Isaiah 59:21) to prove that if a Jewish man as well as his child, and then his grandchild are all Torah scholars, then the chain of Torah scholarship and observance in that family will be unbroken until the end of days. One of the daily morning prayers recited by Jews is that Torah knowledge should be sweet in our mouths and the mouth of all Jews. But then the prayer continues with the hope Jewish children and grandchildren continue to learn Torah (Isaiah 59:21).

There is a different Torah verse which specifically speaks about teaching Torah to grandchildren. The verse (Deuteronomy 4:9) warns that as Jews begin to forget their experiences in Egypt (their salvation, Revelation, and God's miracles in the desert), it is the obligation of adult Jews to instruct their children and grandchildren, so that they will know their heritage. It is clear from the verse that this obligation rests on grandparents as well as parents. One commentary (Yehuda ben Bilaam commentary on Deuteronomy 4:9) states that the fourth of eight grand parental obligations is the teaching of Torah to their grandchildren. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Haamek Davar commentary on Deuteronomy 4:9) emphasizes that this is a special Mitzvah-commandment for grandparents, and it is not a general statement, like in the Shema "Teach your children," where that can be interpreted to teach many students who are not relatives.

This commandment is specifically about grandparents and their grandchildren only.

Another Torah verse obligates grandparents to engage in passing down the heritage to their grandchildren. On the one night when this transmission to Jewish children takes place more than any other, Seder night on the first night of Passover, the Torah specifically commands both parents and grandparents to transmit the Exodus story to their children and grandchildren (Exodus 10:2). The Talmud (Kiddushin 30a) states that if a grandparent teaches Torah to a grandchild, it is as if the grandchild has received that Torah from Sinai, from God Himself. Why? Because grandparents are one generation closer to the Sinai experience and are, thus, better “connected.” The Jerusalem Talmud (Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 19b) agrees, and says that a grandchild who recites Torah learned from a grandparent, it is as if he or she heard it directly from God at Mount Sinai. Rabbi Abraham Englard (Imrai Avraham on Parshat Toldot) emphasizes the importance of three generations of Torah scholars (grandparent, parent, and grandchild), which ensures Torah will never be forgotten by that family (as mentioned above), but stresses that all three must be alive at the same time learning Torah for this unbroken eternal chain to be created.

The Talmud (Kiddushin 30a with Rashi commentary) rules that a grandfather is actually obligated from the Torah to teach his or her grandchildren Torah. Just as every Jew must teach his child Torah, so, too, every grandparent must teach his grandchild Torah. Maimonides formulates this obligation into Jewish law (Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:2), and even before ruling that a Jew must learn Torah for himself, he states the obligation to teach one’s child and grandchild Torah. And, if a Jew is capable, Maimonides continues and rules, that he or she is obligated to teach any and all Jews Torah, even if they are not relatives. Shulchan Aruch brings down the ruling of Maimonides (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 245:3), but modifies it somewhat. Although every Jew is obligated to teach Torah to every other Jew (if possible), priority must be given to one’s child, and then to one’s grandchild.

There is yet a third Torah verse requiring the grandparents to teach Judaism to one’s grandchildren. In the verse that commands Jews to know and understand Jewish history (Deuteronomy 32:7), the Torah says the child will ask the parent, and he or she will tell him or her the answer to the question, and the grandchildren will also convey this to them. On this verse, Tzila Hemnuta of Sanz commentary differentiates between the obligation of the father and the grandfather. The father must wait for the child to ask, but the grandfather is obligated to teach and tell the grandson, whether he asks or not (Tzila

Hamnuta from Sanz commentary, Toldot, 5765, 12).

An Unexpected Turn In The Relationship of Jewish Grandparents & Grandchildren - The Midrash (Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 94:5) makes a bold statement: even though Jewish grandchildren need to show some respect to grandparents, it is not the profound respect that a Jewish child needs to show his or her parents. What is the basis of this Midrashic statement? The Torah says that when Jacob brought sacrifices to God in Beer Sheva, they were for him (Jacob-Israel), his God, and also in the name of his father, Isaac’s, God (Genesis 46:1, with Rashi commentary). Rashi asks the question: why did not Isaac bring sacrifices also in the name of his grandfather Abraham? He answers, based on this Midrash, that while a Jew must show great respect for one’s parent, he only must demonstrate minimal respect for a grandparent, and, thus, Isaac did not mention Abraham. Rabbi Yosef Colon Tarbuto (4120-1480), known as Maharik, one of the great Rabbinic leaders of the Italian Jewish community, makes an astounding, almost bizarre statement (Responsa Maharik 30). He says that since there are no sources obligating a grandchild, there is absolutely no special obligation for a Jewish grandchild to give any respect to a grandparent, more than anyone else. Therefore, just as any Jew is permitted to say Kaddish for any other Jew, if there is no one else, a Jewish grandchild is allowed to say Kaddish after a grandparent has died, but is not obligated to do so. First, Tur asks (Turei Zahav commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 240) how could Rabbi Tarbuto says, “there is no source”? We just learned Rashi and a Midrash that states that a child should give some respect to a grandparents, but more respect to a parent (the sacrifice of Jacob). The answer to the question on Maharik about “no sources” comes from Ikarai Dinim (Rabbi Daniel Tirani, 1800’s) (Ikarai Dinim, Hilchot Aveilut 26), who asserts that Maharik certainly was aware of these two sources about respecting grandparents (somewhat) quoted above. However, he says that Maharik, like many other Rabbis, do not decide Jewish law based on Midrashic sources or Rashi on the Torah.

In fact, there are several Talmudic examples that seem to support the idea that grandchildren need not respect their grandparents at all, and their relationship is not very different to the relationship of a child to any older person. Below are some stunning and “harsh” examples. Although the Torah states that a child who curses his or her parents is guilty of the death penalty, Maimonides rules that this law does not apply at all to grandchildren. A grandchild who curses his grandparents is the same as cursing a stranger (Exodus 21:17, Maimonides, Hilchot Mamrim 5:3)! The Talmud (Sotah 49a with commentary of Rashi and Maharsha) tells the story of Rabbi Jacob who was brought up in the house of his grandfather, Rabbi Acha. When Jacob was

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asked to bring him a cup of water by his grandfather as an obligation of respect, Rabbi Jacob, who knew Jewish law, simply refused. He said I am not your son, but your grandson, and a grandson, unlike a son, need not give respect to his grandfather! And, in a discussion of another Jewish law, the Talmud (Makkot 12a with Rashi commentary) examines the unusual situation where a father accidentally killed one of his sons. Normally, in accidental death, the relative of the victim may attempt to kill the murderer (before he runs to the City of Refuge). But since, in this case, that relative of the victim is the other son of the father, the son cannot be permitted to kill his father, since a son owes a father all the respect in the world, and cannot intentionally harm him. But the Talmud then says that the grandson of the father can indeed avenge the life of victim (his uncle or father) and try to kill his grandfather, since he has legal connection to the grandfather is not close and he owes him no respect!

After all these very seemingly unkind Talmudic stories and decisions, how does Jewish law rule? Does a Jewish grandchild indeed owe respect to his or her grandparents? Rema (Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 240:24) in the Code of Jewish Law brings down the opinion of Maharik, cited above, that a grandchild need not show special respect for his grandparents, but then Rema disagrees, and rules (like Rashi) that a grandchild should demonstrate some respect for his or her grandparents, but not as much respect as he or she shows his or her parents. The reader might think that after all the sources brought above, showing the closeness of Jewish grandparents and Jewish grandchildren, that Jewish law might reflect this closeness. And yet, even after this ruling by the Code of Jewish law, it is still not clear to the Rabbis that grandparents are shown any favorite status when it comes to their grandchildren.

Some Rabbis take a different approach. The famed Ben Ish Chai (Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Bagdad, 1835-1909) clearly states (Ben Ish Chai, Shana Shniya, , Parshat Shoftim 30) that there is a specific obligation to give great respect to each of one’s four grandparents, without implying any of the restrictions stated above. A contemporary decisor of Jewish law, Rabbi Yisrael Rapaport, in his book on the Jewish attitude to parents (Sefer Yosher Horai 19:24, nos. 5-6), writes that although it is not that clear in Jewish law the degree of respect that is due Jewish grandparents, he lists many specific and logical areas where and how a grandchild should respect a grandparent. Like parents, a grandchild should stand up when a grandparent enters the room. A grandchild should never embarrass a grandparent or make him or her feel bad, especially if they are suffering from dementia. If a parent does not have the means to ensure that an elderly parent has appropriate food and shelter, then if the grandchild has the means, then he or she is obligated to see that the grandparents are well taken care of in these areas, and their dignity is

preserved. This reflects the ruling of Chayei Adam (Rabbi Avraham Danzig, 1810) (Chayei Adam, 67:25), who unequivocally writes that a grandchild must honor his grandparent, and a grandchild who is able, must supply food and shelter to the grandparent. However, he reiterates that respect for a parent indeed takes precedence over the respect for one's grandparents.

Although Jewish law seems to be a bit "harsh" and without proper empathy in some areas regarding grandchildren and grandparents, nevertheless, many non-law sources continue to convey the deep connection between Jewish grandparent and Jewish grandchildren. One Midrashic story seems to set the tone (Midrash, Tana Debei Eliyahu 16). A student entered the study hall in Jerusalem after studying the text of the Torah. He asked the simple but obvious question: why is it that the original human beings in the Torah and history lived for so many hundreds of years (800 and 900), and today, even with all medical breakthroughs, a person's lifespan does not even average a hundred years old? The Rabbi answered that long life was preserved at that time because the many generations of descendants of these people were old, were happy to serve and help their great grandparents and even everyone in the several generations above them, who were still alive, even as they were 400, 500 years old and even older. The younger generations provided them with food and shelter for the elderly, who were hundreds of years old. But in the generation of Enosh, that generation suddenly said "why should I help these old people? That is not my problem," and decided to stop helping all their living ancestors who were very old. We see this new attitude continues in the Torah until Noah, who indeed served all of his older generations and his living ancestors during the 120 years while he was building the Ark. That is why Noah was called righteous. But he was the only one, and since the descendants of the elderly decided to stop helping the previous generations of relatives, God then decided the next generations would diminish in their life expectancy, punishing them measure for measure. After Noah, people began to live a lifespan that we are familiar with today. This story implies that when there existed a close relationship between grandchildren and grandparents, great grandparents and beyond, everyone benefitted. And we, like previous generations who are relatively selfish, often do not treat our living ancestors properly. This Midrash also suggests that there is great reward for those who do treat their elderly relatives properly – even possible extended life – but great punishment to those who do not. It is hoped that with this Midrash in mind, all people, Jewish and non-Jewish (there were no Jews in this Midrash) will learn from this better sensitivity to their grandparents, great grandparents and beyond, and may they be rewarded with the very long years of long ago.

* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr.

Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Shimon, Levi and the Zealous Brotherly Bond - Rabbi Benjy Myers

At the end of Yaakov's life, shortly before he passes from this world, he gathers his sons around him to bless them. While for most of the sons it's clear that these are indeed blessing; for the first three – Reuven, Shimon and Levi – it's not so clear-cut.

I would like to address the words spoken to Shimon and Levi, and to understand them in light of future history, the emergence of Moshe and the blessings that Moshe bestowed on the tribes at the end of his life.

Yaakov, with his sons around him, turns to his second and third born:

"Shimon 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 desirous they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel." (Bereishit 49:5-7)

שמעון וְלֵוִי אֲחֵיהֶם כְּלִי הַמָּס מִכְרֵתֵיהֶם: בְּסֹדֶם אֶל תָּבֹא נַפְשִׁי בְּקִהְלָם אֶל תַּחַד כְּבֹדִי כִּי בְּאַפִּם הִרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבִרְצֹנָם עָקְרוּ שׁוֹר: אָרוּר אָפֶם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשְׁתָה אֶחָלָקָם בִּיעָקֹב וּבְאִפְצִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: (בראשית פרק מט, ה-ז)

Rashi notes that their description as "brothers" is not merely a biological statement, but rather that they were in sync when it came to their treatment of the people of Shechem following the rape of Dina, and also in their approach to their younger brother, Yosef. It is their actions and united front that led their father to send them away, eternally, with these words ringing in their ears. It seemed at the time, following their assault on Shechem, that Shimon and Levi had the final word, "Will our sister be treated like a harlot?" (Bereishit 43:31) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַכֹּזֶנֶת יַעֲקֹבֶה אֶת אֲחֹתֵנוּ: (בראשית פרק לד, לא) Yaakov saved his ringing rebuke of them for the end, ensuring that his words will reverberate not only in the heads of his sons, but throughout the generations.

However, by the time Moshe comes to bless the tribes, we note something curious. Levi is blessed in glowing terms, and receives one of the lengthiest blessings, second only to Yosef. The tribe has transformed and become a mainstay within the Jewish people. Shimon, on the other hand, is conspicuous in his absence. There is no direct mention of the tribe at all at the end of the book of Devarim. It's as if the tribe has ceased to exist. So while we have one tribe that has flourished and achieved a pinnacle within the hierarchy of the Jewish nation, the other has effectively disappeared from view.

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Rabbi Yitzchak Caro (1458-1535, Rabbi Yosef Caro's uncle) in his commentary Toldot Yitzchak raises an interesting question. Yaakov gave his sons their blessings through the Divine spirit – ruach hakodesh – that rested upon him. If so, why didn't he separate Levi from Shimon? After all, a few short years later the greatest prophet the world has known will emerge from this tribe. The first High Priest and his descendants who will serve in the Tabernacle and later the Temple will come forth.

Shimon, however, doesn't produce the progeny that comes close to matching Moshe, Aharon, Miriam, Pinchas and more. In fact, during the time in the wilderness, it was the leadership from the tribe of Shimon that brought shame to the nation which precipitated the plague that cost the lives of 24,000 people. Why didn't Yaakov know that this is what would happen, and therefore already at the initial stage of his words distinguish Levi from Shimon, blessing one while admonishing the other?

He answers that Yaakov did in fact see that in the future both good and bad would emanate from these two brothers, these two tribes. He saw them as one unit, and therefore, unlike with all the other brothers who received individual messages and blessings, he had no choice but to speak to them as one.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) emphasizes, together with a number of other commentators, the fact that they were brothers, united in thought and action.

"There is a clear delineating line in Shimon and Levi, one that equipped them especially to head any future leadership. They're brothers and displayed this sense of brotherhood to its fullest extent. They truly feel that any evil that befalls the smallest member of the family [Dina] has happened to them. There is no selfishness or self-centeredness, just a feeling of brotherhood."

בְּאוֹפִיִּים שֶׁל שְׁמֵעוֹן וְלֵוִי מִתְגַּלֶּה קוֹ, שֶׁהֵיָה מְכַשִּׁיר אוֹתָם בִּיחּוּד לַעֲמֻד בְּרֹאשׁ הַהֲנַגְהָה הָעִתִּידִית. הֵם אֲחִים, וְהֵם גִּילּוֹ רִגְשׁ אֲחוּהָ (מְשׁוּרֵשׁ "אָחָה": מְחוּבְּרִים זֶה אֶל זֶה בְּחוֹט הַמֵּאֲחָד אֶת כּוֹלָם) בְּמִידַת יִתְרָה; עוֹלָם שֶׁנַּעֲשֶׂה לְקַטָּן שֶׁבְּמִשְׁפָּחָה הָרִי הֵם חֲשִׁים בּוֹ, בְּלֹא כָל אֲנוֹכִיּוֹת, כֵּאלִילוֹ נַעֲשֶׂה לָהֶם (רִש"ר הִירֵשׁ בְּרֹאשִׁית פֶּרֶק מט פְּסוּק ה')

The Toldot Yitzchak is correct in his assessment of Shimon and Levi. They share a bond of kinship and brotherhood that is second to none, and therefore they are inseparable in life and also in prophetic visions. It is their strength of character, their sense of right and wrong, that enabled them to outwit and kill the men of Shechem. But it was the same strengths that, after the sin of the Golden Calf allowed Levi to once again take up the sword and this time bring it down on his own brethren. This is the critical juncture. While Levi heeded Moshe's cry to take up arms to sanctify God's name, Shimon did not. Furthermore, Zimri

sinned most egregiously and it was only another Levite, Pichas, who put a stop to Zimri's public desecration of God's name.

This strength of character, the zeal, says Rav Hirsch, is what kept the Jewish flame alive throughout our long exile. We needed people throughout our long history of persecution to stand up and be counted, to keep the fire of Judaism burning. The danger comes when the goal is a negative one. This is why Yaakov spread them throughout the Jewish people, both in the Land of Israel and also throughout Jewish history and geography. It's vital that they create bonds of brotherhood, that they help fan the flames of Jewish pride. And yet, if they are centralized, they run the risk of letting their zeal overtake, of letting the fires spread indiscriminately.

As such, we need to reexamine Yaakov's words. He does not curse the brothers. He curses their anger and wrath, he curses the tools – swords – that they use to exact vengeance. Not because there is no place for weaponry, but because they became blinded by their rage and allowed the weapons to overtake them.

Yaakov's words are both a mission statement and a challenge.

In our daily interactions, we must be careful to speak of actions rather than people. We must be careful to keep things in perspective and ask constantly whether our actions will enhance or diminish God's name in the world. Above all, we must be like brothers, displaying a keen sense of awareness for the vulnerable, downtrodden and persecuted, and helping them where we can while not losing sight of who we are – “שמות פרק יט, ו' מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ” – “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Shmot 19:6).

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Mordechai Willig

Yehuda and Jewish Survival

Yehuda - What's in a Name? - Our people are called Bnei Yisrael in the Torah. In Megillas Esther and since, we are called Yehudim. This change can be explained historically. After the ten tribes were exiled, the tribe of Yehuda comprised the majority of Am Yisrael. As such, all of us are called Yehudim. However, the Targum Yonasan in Parashat Vayechi (Breishis 49:8) offers a different explanation. He explains that Yaakov Avinu blessed Yehuda, "Your brothers will acknowledge you (yoducha)" as their ruler, and that this blessing is a reward for Yehuda's response to Tamar. "Yehuda," the Targum has Yaakov telling his son, "you admitted to the story of Tamar. Therefore, your brothers will acknowledge you (yodon achayich) and will be called Yehudim after your name." The Targum thus links Yehuda's admission of his sin to his being acknowledged by his brothers, and to the fact that we are called Yehudim.

Perhaps these two explanations, the historical explanation, as well as the psbat of the Targum, can be reconciled. We are called Yehudim ever since the time that the ten tribes were scattered, because most Jews that were left from that time forward descended from the tribe of Yehuda. The reason the tribe of Yehuda is the one that survived is because they admitted to their mistakes. Admitting to mistakes enabled Yehuda himself to be acknowledged as the ruler of the family, and it also enabled his descendants, who followed his example, to survive.

One example of the historical phenomenon of the Jewish ability to admit to our mistakes is found in the very story of Esther. Why did the Jews of that time deserve extinction? According to the Talmud, it was because they partook of the party of the wicked Achashverosh (Megillah 12a). However, they were spared when they repented after Haman's decree (Yalkut Shimoni, Esther, 4:16; see Michtav Me-Eliyahu, Vol. 1, p. 77). Admitting their mistake and repenting enabled the Yehudim to survive and return to Eretz Yisrael by the decree of Esther's son Darius (Rashi, Chaggai 1:1). The ten tribes, by contrast, have not yet returned.

A third association with Yehuda's name, besides that of admission and acknowledgement, is that of thanks. When Yehuda was born to Leah as her fourth child, Leah said "This time I will thank Hashem. Therefore, she called his name 'Yehuda'" (Bereishis 29:35). As Rashi explains, Leah was saying, "This time I took more than my share. Hence I must thank [Hashem]."

Combining these themes of admission, acknowledgement, and thanks, we learn a valuable lesson. Only by admitting one's mistakes and shortcomings can one be in position to give proper thanks. Otherwise, our feelings of gratitude are hindered by a feeling of entitlement. Only by realizing our imperfections and our sins can we express the proper thanks and gratitude and thereby be worthy of acknowledgement by others (see R. Yitzchak Hutner, Pachad Yitzchak, Chanukah 2:5).

Realizing Our Limitations - On the verse in Yaakov's berachah to Yehuda discussed above, "attah yoducha achecha" Targum Onkelus has a very interesting explanation. He explains the pasuk as meaning "Yehuda, you admitted and were not ashamed. [Therefore] your brothers will acknowledge you" (Targum Onkelus, Breishis 49:8). How could Yehuda not have been ashamed to admit to his heretofore unknown paternity? Furthermore, isn't shame, especially in intimate matters, a praiseworthy hallmark of our people (Yevamos 79a)? How was it that Yehuda did not feel shamed?

The key to answering these questions is the realization that we only feel shame when we fall short of our expected standard of behavior.

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No one is ashamed of their inability to fly. Yehuda, aware of the fact that "there is no person who does not sin" (Koheles 7:20), was thus able to admit his sin without shame. Also, although intimate matters are usually supposed to be kept private, that value is outweighed when one has the opportunity to save someone else from harm. Thus, Yehuda admitted his paternity in an effort to save Tamar's life (Rashi, Breishis 38:25). Asked to recognize his personal effects and admit his paternity of Tamar's unborn children, Yehuda, as Rashi puts it, was called upon to "recognize [his] Creator." When one recognizes and realizes that it is the will of Hashem to admit when one falls short and sins, the shame of a public confession like the one Yehuda experienced can be eliminated. For these realizations, Yehuda deserved to be a ruler and to have our entire nation called Yehudim.

A Dynasty of Kings - Just as Yehuda's leadership and our people's survival resulted from admitting mistakes, so too was the Davidic dynasty preserved in this manner. Like his ancestor, David Ha-Melech admitted his mistakes immediately (Yoma 22b, see Maharsha and HaRav Y.D. Soloveitchik, Kol Dodi Dofek ("Hachmatzas Ha-Sha'ah"). Shaul, in contrast, did not do so when faced with his mistake in not wiping out Amalek, and his dynasty was discontinued.

The ability to admit mistakes requires humility. Like Yehuda, David possessed humility, which enabled him to confess. "I am like a worm, not a man" (Tehillim 22:7). Humility not only enables one to admit one's shortcomings, but it also allows one to accept rebuke, and even to maintain silence when faced with provocations.

In the haftarah of Parashas Vayechi, David tells Shlomo, "Shim'i ben Gera cursed me a powerful curse" (Melachim I 2:8). In fact, Shim'i had called David a murderer (Shmuel II 16:7) and pelted him with stones (ibid., 6). However, David protected Shim'i from Avishay, who wanted to kill him (ibid., 9-10), explaining: "Hashem told him to curse. Perhaps Hashem will repay me with goodness instead of the curse" (ibid., 11-12). David Ha-Melech, in demonstrating such humility, was in fact following in the footsteps of the greatest prophet and the humblest of men, Moshe Rabbeinu. When Yehoshua told Moshe to imprison the prophets who were prophesying Moshe's demise (Rashi, Bamidbar 11:27-28), Moshe rebuffed him (ibid., 29). David, learning from Moshe's example, was able to demonstrate humility and maintain his silence in the face of provocation. As a reward, Hashem repaid David for his decision to protect Shim'i and elevated David to the heavenly level of the patriarchs, by which David became the fourth wheel in the Divine Chariot (Chafetz Chaim, Shemiras Ha-Lashon, Sha'ar Ha-Tevunah 8).

We know that the Davidic dynasty will culminate in the arrival of Mashiach. Bar Kochba, a descendant of David who was proclaimed Mashiach by Rabbi Akiva in Beitar, in the end fell short of expectations by showing a lack in the qualities of David. Bar Kochba mistakenly thought that Rabbi Elazar Ha-Modai, whose prayers protected Beitar, was a conspirator. In his rage, he kicked and killed him. As a result, Beitar fell and Bar Kochba was killed (Midrash Eichah 2:4). An angry leader, who lacks the humility and forbearance of David, cannot be the Mashiach.

A Dynasty of Torah Leadership - Torah leadership also requires humility. Hillel, a descendant of David, established a centuries-long dynasty of Torah. He famously retained his patience even in the face of outrageous provocation (Shabbos 31a) and Beis Hillel admitted when they made Torah mistakes, and upon realizing them, ruled in accordance with Beis Shammai (Eduyos 1:12, 13, 14). Hillel himself was the personification of humility (Shabbos 30b). Famously, in our practice, the Halachah always follows Beis Hillel because they not only quote Beis Shammai's opinion, but even cite it before their own (Eruvin 13b). Obviously the law is not decided in Beis Hillel's favor simply because of their ethical behavior, but rather, we hold like them because one who humbly listens to, respects, and quotes another's opinion, will likely reach a more proper conclusion in deciding the Halachah (R. Chaim Shmulevitz, Sichos Mussar, Sha'arei Chayyim, Ch. 46).

Keys to Survival Begin at Home - Yehuda was privileged to have our entire nation named after him because he promptly admitted his mistakes. His illustrious descendants David Ha-Melech and Hillel established dynasties of kingship and Torah, respectively, by following the lead of his humility. Thus, the Jews have survived history because of our adherence to the principles of our namesake, Yehuda. Confessing, acknowledging and thanking, the three related verbal expressions connected with Yehuda himself, are the critical survival skills of our people.

These same concepts are equally critical within a Jewish home and family. The model of Yehuda's own rulership occurred within the context of his own family, and must serve as inspiration for Jewish families forever. The Rambam writes that a husband should be viewed as a king (Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Hilchos Ishus, 15:20). To deserve this treatment, however, he must fulfill the first promise of the ketubah: "I will cherish you in the manner of Jewish men (Yehudain) who cherish their wives in truth (be-kushta)." He must acknowledge his debt to his wife, thank her constantly, and admit his mistakes in recognition of the truth (see Onkelos, Breishis 42:21).

Acknowledgement of one's personal debt to a spouse and appropriate and sincere gratitude,

as well as sincere apologies when one makes mistakes, are crucial elements of a proper Jewish home. The phrases "I'm sorry" and "thank you" are integral for the success, and even the survival, of a Jewish marriage. As a community and as individuals, it is not enough to be called Jews. We must live up to the name Yehudim to survive, thrive, and merit the ultimate Jewish leader, Mashiach ben David, a descendant of Yehuda.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perz

Speaking to the Heart

There is something that Yosef (Joseph) does at the end of the parasha (and the Book of Bereishit) that our Sages see as a tremendous example of kindness and sensitivity.

There is a concept of being concerned and sensitive to the needs and views of others. Yosef and his brothers are returning from the burial of Ya'akov (Jacob) their father. The brothers were concerned now that their father had died it would be a time that Yosef would get even with them, or even G-d forbid kill them, for the terrible sin of selling Yosef. It seems that they believed that as long as their father was alive he wouldn't do it but that after he passed away perhaps he would. Our Sages ask what brought on the brothers to think this now, after all these years with Yosef, 17 years since they arrived in Egypt, that now he would exact revenge. They give a number of answers, and one given in the Midrash Tanchuma is that the brothers saw Yosef stopping at the pit that they had thrown him in, where he offered a prayer, reflecting (actually saying a beracha) that Hashem had saved him in this place.

The brothers at a distance perhaps thought that perhaps Yosef had remembered the trauma and had never forgiven them. The truth is that the brothers for all these decades were plagued by this, it gnawed at their conscience at the terrible thing that they had done in selling Yosef all those years ago.

Therefore, it did not take much for the brothers to be reminded of the terrible thing they had done, when they saw him at the pit, and perhaps now their father had passed away and he was grieving, Yosef might take revenge.

We see Yosef explains that he is not in the place of G-d and that things worked out for the best, and after all of his claims it says: "And he consoled them, and he spoke to their heart." What could he do more than to console them, what does it mean that he "spoke to their heart"?

Our Sages say this is an example of understanding the needs and concerns of others in sitting with them until they are consoled and feel that all of their concerns have been allayed. That is the sensitivity that we need.

We are not allowed to remind a person who did something bad of their bad deed, to conjure up

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images which will make them feel bad. Yosef does more than that. He goes out of his way to lay their minds to rest to assure them that he has completely forgiven them, even though it was still gnawing at them decades later. What kindness and sensitivity!

May we all be like Yosef, to emulate this example that when people have concerns about us, thoughts about us that we know may not be true, or that they are concerned about their relationship with us, that we go out of our way to make peace between people, to put people's minds to rest, in order that we can move on together in a united, sensitive and kind way in all our human interactions.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

A Strong Dose of Truth

Shimon and Levi are brothers; stolen instruments are their weapons. Let my soul not enter their counsel; my honor, you shall not join their assembly, for in their wrath they killed a man, and with their will they hamstringed a bull. Cursed be their wrath for it is mighty, and their anger because it is harsh. I will separate them throughout Yaakov, and I will scatter them throughout Israel. (Breishis 49:5-7)

Shimon and Levi did not seem to get what we would call a compliment from their father Yaakov. Yet these parting words were his blessing. How can such a brutally honest analysis be considered a blessing?

One of my great teachers once told us about a very traumatic episode that occurred to him when he was but a young boy. He was in the country – upstate for the summer and one day he was strolling with his father, who was a wealthy businessman and another man that he described as a German Jew. His father was also a European Jew from Switzerland and the two men were walking and talking together as he tagged along. The conversation was dominated by this German Jew telling of the great opportunity there was to be found in Wisconsin. Wisconsin has this and that. It was clear he was making a pitch to invest in some business venture in Wisconsin.

Now my Rebbe told us that he was a young precocious boy and he had devoured the encyclopedia and he knew a little bit about a lot and so he asserted himself into the conversation, "What's the big deal about Wisconsin!? There are only so many people in the whole state. There are more cows than people etc." Now the European expectation was that children should be seen but not heard from, but this was an American kid and he had clearly broken ranks and violated that protocol.

At that moment this German Jew turned to him with fury and berated him repeatedly, "What you don't know, don't talk about! What you don't know, don't talk about!" My Rebbe told us that he was shaken by the event. It shook

him to his core. That moment of what felt like verbal abuse scarred his psyche and left him upset for the rest of the summer. That's what happened!

65 years later, my Rebbe tells us, his father had already left this world but his elderly mother, now in her mid – 90's was living nearby in relatively good health with a fulltime aid and a nurse. One Erev Shabbos he gets an urgent call from the nurse that his mother has a fever and her blood pressure is weak. He tells them to run to the emergency room and he will meet them there.

The doctor on call steps out from behind the curtain after examining his mother and tells my Rebbe, "You mother has an infection but we can easily treat it with penicillin. Do you know whether or not your mother is allergic to penicillin?" My Rebbe said that he started to think to himself, "I'm not allergic. My sisters are not allergic. My brother is not allergic to penicillin. So, my mother is probably not allergic either." He is about to declare with confidence that his mother is not allergic to penicillin, when suddenly a voice from 65 years earlier charged into the present moment and arrested him in mid-sentence, "What you don't know, don't talk about! What you don't know don't talk about!" He looks up at the doctor and honestly admits that he does not know whether or not his mother is allergic to penicillin. The doctor said that he can easily check it out on her medical records. He comes back moments later and declares, "Well, it turns out that your mother is allergic to penicillin."

Had he spoken what he assumed to be true and had he not been revisited by that brutish and furious voice at that very moment then, based on his word the doctor would have administered penicillin and given her already weakened state, he would have brought about the early demise of his beloved mother.

The Mishne in Brochos tells us, "One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad just as he recites a blessing for the good, as it is stated: "And you shall love HASHEM your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might"" (Devarim 6:5). We see that what seems bad in a given moment is also worthy of a blessing. A negative experience might prove to be a blessing in disguise. So, Shimon and Levi were blessed with a strong dose of truth.

Home Weekly Parsha VAYECHI
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The traditional rabbinic approach as to why this portion of the Torah is titled "vayechi Yaakov" even though the subject matter of this Torah portion concerns itself with the death of Yaakov is that as long as his descendants – the Jewish people – are alive and functioning, then Yaakov is still considered to be alive.

The message here is one of immortality and continuity, family and generations. Like life itself and its counterpart, death, these words mentioned immediately above are difficult to define. Other nations and empires that are long ago extinct in terms of presence and participation in current world events, also have biological descendants alive and present in today's world population.

Nevertheless, we think of Rome and Babylon, Greece and Persia, the Holy Roman Empire and even the Soviet Union as being swept into the dustbin of history, never to rise to power again. So, the rabbis must be telling us a deeper message than mere biological and genetic survival from the past until today.

I have often thought that a great part of the secret of Jewish survival lies in the fact that different – completely different – generations are able to bond together, recognize each other and have the same common goals, values and lifestyle. My father was born before the Wright brothers flew an airplane and he lived to see human beings walk on the moon.

In spite of the difference in age, background and even language, he had close contact with and a great influence on his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They somehow recognized who he was in his essence and beliefs and easily responded to his presence and later treasured his memory. So, to a certain extent we may say that he lived on through his descendants.

Yaakov recognized the different personalities, qualities and talents of each of his children and grandchildren. His blessings to his children and grandchildren, as recorded for us in this week's Torah reading, clearly indicate this fact. He had no one-size-fits-all blessing to bestow. And it is perhaps that fact that guarantees that as long as his descendants are alive, Yaakov also lives.

For every one of his descendants could say in response to the blessing that each one received – all of them different and personal – that their old father and grandfather understood them and recognize them for what they were. And because of that, they treasured his memory and championed his cause throughout the ages.

Relationships that bridge time and space, generations and world upheavals can only be forged upon the recognition and acceptance of the uniqueness of the parties involved. There is no blessing ultimately in national and personal life that is brought about by conformity. The pithy remark of the great Rebbe of Kotzk was: "If I am I and you are you, then I am I and you are you; but if I am you and you are me, then I am not I and you are not you." The blessings of Yaakov to his future generations reflect the wisdom of this truism.

Shabbat Sharon
Rabbi Berel Wein

COVENANT & CONVERSATION
Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ztl
On Not Predicting The Future
VAYECHI

Jacob was on his death-bed. He summoned his children. He wanted to bless them before he died. But the text begins with a strange semi-repetition:

"Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come.

Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel."

Gen. 49:1-2

This seems to be saying the same thing twice, with one difference. In the first sentence, there is a reference to "what will happen to you in the

days to come" (literally, "at the end of days"). This is missing from the second sentence.

Rashi, following the Talmud,[1] says that "Jacob wished to reveal what would happen in the future, but the Divine Presence was removed from him." He tried to foresee the future but found he could not.

This is no minor detail. It is a fundamental feature of Jewish spirituality. We believe that we cannot predict the future when it comes to human beings. We make the future by our choices. The script has not yet been written. The future is radically open.

This was a major difference between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. The Greeks believed in fate, moira, even blind fate, ananke. When the Delphic oracle told Laius that he would have a son who would kill him, he took every precaution to make sure it did not happen. When the child was born, Laius nailed him by his feet to a rock and left him to die. A passing shepherd found and saved him, and he was eventually raised by the king and queen of Corinth. Because his feet were permanently misshapen, he came to be known as Oedipus (the "swollen-footed").

The rest of the story is well known. Everything the oracle foresaw happened, and every act designed to avoid it actually helped bring it about. Once the oracle has been spoken and fate has been sealed, all attempts to avoid it are in vain. This cluster of ideas lies at the heart of one of the great Greek contributions to civilisation: tragedy.

Astonishingly, given the many centuries of Jewish suffering, biblical Hebrew has no word for tragedy. The word *ason* means "a mishap, a disaster, a calamity" but not tragedy in the classic sense. A tragedy is a drama with a sad outcome involving a hero destined to experience downfall or destruction through a character-flaw or a conflict with an overpowering force, such as fate. Judaism has no word for this, because we do not believe in fate as something blind, inevitable and inexorable. We are free. We can choose. As Isaac Bashevis Singer wittily said: "We must be free: we have no choice!"

Rarely is this more powerfully asserted than in the Unetaneh tokef prayer we say on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Even after we have said that "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed ... who will live and who will die", we still go on to say, "But teshuvah, prayer, and charity avert the evil of the decree." There is no sentence against which we cannot appeal, no verdict we cannot mitigate by showing that we have repented and changed.

There is a classic example of this in Tanach.

"In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The Prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, 'This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.' Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 'Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: 'Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people: This is what the Lord, God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you.'"

2 Kings 20:1-5; Isaiah 38:1-5

The Prophet Isaiah had told King Hezekiah he would not recover, but he did. He lived for another fifteen years. God heard his prayer and granted him stay of execution. From this the Talmud infers, "Even if a sharp sword rests upon your neck, you should not desist from prayer." [2] We pray for a good fate but we do not reconcile ourselves to fatalism.

Hence there is a fundamental difference between a prophecy and a prediction. If a prediction comes true, it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true, it has failed. A prophet delivers not a prediction but a warning. He or she does not simply say, "This will happen", but rather, "This will happen unless you change." The prophet speaks to human freedom, not to the inevitability of fate.

I was once present at a gathering where Bernard Lewis, the great scholar of Islam, was asked to predict the outcome of a certain American foreign policy intervention. He gave a magnificent reply. "I am a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a retired

historian, so even my past is passé.” This was a profoundly Jewish answer.

In the twenty-first century we know much at a macro- and micro-level. We look up and see a universe of a hundred billion galaxies each of a hundred billion stars. We look down and see a human body containing a hundred trillion cells, each with a double copy of the human genome, 3.1 billion letters long, enough if transcribed to fill a library of 5,000 books. But there remains one thing we do not know and will never know: What tomorrow will bring. The past, said L. P. Hartley, is a foreign country. But the future is an undiscovered one. That is why predictions so often fail.

That is the essential difference between nature and human nature. The ancient Mesopotamians could make accurate predictions about the movement of planets, yet even today, despite brain-scans and neuroscience, we are still not able to predict what people will do. Often, they take us by surprise.

The reason is that we are free. We choose, we make mistakes, we learn, we change, we grow. The failure at school becomes the winner of a Nobel Prize. The leader who disappointed, suddenly shows courage and wisdom in a crisis. The driven businessman has an intimation of mortality and decides to devote the rest of his life to helping the poor. Some of the most successful people I ever met were written off by their teachers at school and told they would never amount to anything. We constantly defy predictions. This is something science has not yet explained and perhaps never will. Some believe freedom is an illusion. But it isn't. It's what makes us human.

We are free because we are not merely objects. We are subjects. We respond not just to physical events but to the way we perceive those events. We have minds, not just brains. We have thoughts, not just sensations. We react but we can also choose not to react. There is something about us that is irreducible to material, physical causes and effects.

The way our ancestors spoke about this remains true and profound. We are free because God is free and He made us in His image. That is what is meant by the three words God told Moses at the burning bush when he asked God for His name. God replied, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh. This is often translated as “I am what I am,” but what it really means is, “I will be who and how I choose to be.” I am the God of freedom. I cannot be predicted. Note that God says this at the start of Moses' mission to lead a people from slavery to freedom. He wanted the Israelites to become living testimony to the power of freedom.

Do not believe that the future is written. It isn't. There is no fate we cannot change, no prediction we cannot defy. We are not predestined to fail; neither are we pre-ordained to succeed. We do not predict the future, because we make the future: by our choices, our willpower, our persistence, and our determination to survive.

The proof is the Jewish people itself. The first reference to Israel outside the Bible is engraved on the Merneptah stele, inscribed around 1225 BCE by Pharaoh Merneptah IV, Ramses II's successor. It reads:

“Israel is laid waste, her seed is no more.”

It was, in short, an obituary. The Jewish people have been written off many times by their enemies, but they remain, after almost four millennia, still young and strong.

That is why, when Jacob wanted to tell his children what would happen to them in the future, the Divine Spirit was taken away from him. Our children continue to surprise us, as we continue to surprise others. Made in the image of God, we are free. Sustained by the blessings of God, we can become greater than anyone, even ourselves, could foresee.

[1] Rashi to Gen. 49:1; Pesachim 56a; Bereishit Rabbah 99:5.

[2] Brachot 10a.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayechi

The Shechina Is Not Only Present at the Kosel

Chazal say that the reason Yaakov Avinu bowed towards the head of the bed (Bereshis 47:31) is because the Shechina (Divine Presence) is

present above the head of a sick person. For that reason, despite the fact that he was sick and weak, Yaakov Avinu turned around and bowed towards the head of his bed.

I saw an interesting observation in a sefer called Tiv haTorah: Why is it that the Shechina is on the top of the bed of a sick person? The Tiv haTorah suggests that when a person is lying sick in bed, he may think that perhaps the Ribono shel Olam has abandoned him—that He is angry with him and punishing him. Chazal say that this is not the attitude a person should have. A person should have the attitude that despite my illness and despite my suffering, the Ribono shel Olam does not hate me. There must be some reason why the Ribono shel Olam wants me to experience this, either as a kaparah, or for whatever reason it may be, but this is for my own good. Therefore, Chazal say: You should know that here in this debilitating state, the Ribono shel Olam is with you! Don't give up hope, don't feel abandoned, and don't feel like an outcast. For this reason, the Shechina hovers over the head of the sick patient.

The Tiv haTorah cites a story of a Jew named Rav Tzvi Kowalsky. (I happen to have known him. He was a nephew of a certain long-time fund raiser for the Ner Israel Rabbinical College. Rav Tzvi used to come visit his uncle and I developed a connection with him.) He was a big Talmid Chochom. At one time, he learned b'chavrusa with the Chazon Ish. He was the Rosh Kotel of the Socatchover Kollel in Bnei Brak. He was literally a holy man. At the end of his life, he was quite sick and suffered a lot. When people would come in to him, they would give him “kvitlach” (small pieces of paper with short prayers and the person's name), which he would take and put on the top of his bed.

He said it was like putting “kvitlach” into the cracks between the stones of the Kosel haMaaravi. Just like Chazal say that the Shechina never departed from the Kosel Hamaaravi (Western Wall), so too the Shechina is present above the bed of a sick person. This is the Kosel, right here! The Shechina is here!

The point we are trying to convey is that a person, despite his illness, should never feel abandoned by Hashem. Why is Hashem doing this? We don't know the answer to that. But we can rest assured that it is not because He has abandoned us, and therefore the Shechina resides above the bed of a sick person.

Never Forgetting to be Appreciative

The pasuk says “The eyes of Israel were heavy because of age; he was not able to see and he brought them near to him and he kissed them and hugged them.” (Bereshis 48:10) Yosef came into his father with his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim. “Yaakov told Yosef, ‘I did not ever expect to see your face (again) and now Elokim has shown me also your children.’” (Bereshis 48:11)

However, it is striking to realize that this is occurring seventeen years after Yaakov Avinu was reunited with Yosef, upon his arrival in Mitzrayim! Yet seventeen years later, Yaakov Avinu is still commenting to Yosef that he never expected to see him. In Parshas VaYigash, Yaakov tells Pharaoh he is 130 years old (Bereshis 47:9). Yaakov is now 147. So why is Yaakov suddenly saying here “I did not even expect to see you, Hashem has been so good to me that He has shown me also your children”? That is old news! Why does he mention it now?

The answer is that for most people, something that happened seventeen years ago is old news. Despite how great an experience may have been, as time goes on, our nature is to forget favors. People forget how amazed and thrilled they were at the time when good things happened to them.

Do we remember our weddings and how grateful we were that we got married? Do we remember the birth of our first child? Do we remember how thrilled we were when we were zoche to march our children down to the chupah? Yes, we remember, but it becomes old news. Perhaps these events come to mind on an anniversary, but the excitement of the moment certainly fades with time.

The pasuk is saying that for Yaakov Avinu, despite the fact that this happened seventeen years ago, he was in constant thanksgiving mode to the Ribono shel Olam every single day. He is still thanking Hashem for

what happened when he first came to Egypt. It was constantly on his mind!

Understanding Yaakov's Bracha to Yosef

The following is an observation I heard in the name of Rav Shmuel Berenbaum, z"l, the Rosh Yeshiva in the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn, NY. In Parshas Vayechi, when Yaakov is on his death bed, he calls in his sons and gives each of them brachos. Some of them do not exactly sound like blessings. However, they are all brachos. As we have said many times, the biggest bracha that someone can give to another person is to point out to him his strengths and weaknesses. The person should know what he should do with his life, what abilities he has and where he needs to improve himself. That, in effect, was what Yaakov was doing here.

Even to Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, who had their foibles pointed out to them, that in itself is a bracha. He was telling them that they have these character traits, and this is something that they need to work on in the future. Chazal say that Shimon and Levi were zealots, and that Yaakov Avinu pointed it out to them. Levi, at least, was able to perfect his attribute of zealotry. That is why Levi, at the time of the aveira (Sin) of the Egel Hazhav (Golden Calf) stood up for that which was right. That is why Moshe Rabbeinu was able to praise Levi and say about that shevet (tribe) "Who said to his father and mother 'I did not see him' and his brother he did not recognize and his children he did not know for they observed Your Word and kept Your Covenant" (Devarim 33:9).

There is a common denominator to all of these brachos (even though some of them sound like brachos and some almost sound like klalos), which is pointing out the natural strengths and abilities of each individual shevet and suggesting what they should do with their lives. That is the biggest bracha that a person can give someone else.

In Yehudah, Yaakov sees Royalty (Malchus). In Yissachor, he sees Torah Study. In Dan, he sees the ability to judge. All this is well and good until we get to Shevet Yosef. By Shevet Yosef, it does not seem—at first blush—like Yaakov is mentioning any of Yosef's strengths. "Yosef is a charming child.... The daughters of Egypt used to climb up on the walls of Egypt to gaze at his beauty (Rashi)." (Bereshis 49:22) It seems that Yaakov is saying, l'Havdil, that Yosef is gorgeous. He has the looks of a celebrity, and he was treated like a celebrity!

This is how we talk about a Jewish child? Have you ever heard someone praise a choson like that? One might say he is smart, he is personable, he is clever, but would we praise a choson by saying "He is drop-dead good-looking!"? Nobody talks like that. This is not Jewish speech. Where is the description of Yosef's personality traits? Where are the qualities of his soul mentioned?

Yaakov's 'bracha' to Yosef continues: "They embittered him and became antagonists; the masters of arrows hated him." (Bereshis 49:23). Rashi explains: He was hated by his brothers who were sharp tongued like an arrow. Put it together: What is the praise of Yosef? He is gorgeous. He is handsome. All the girls swoon for him. And you know what? His brothers hated him.

Where are his strengths mentioned? Where do we see his techunos ha'nefesh (innermost qualities)?

Rav Shmuel Berenbaum said a very interesting thing, which is very relevant and very current. People gravitate to people who love them, admire them, and consider them important. People tend to part company from people who don't treat them nicely, are not kind to them, and don't appreciate them. In what context did Rav Shmuel Berenbaum say this? We are painfully aware of a plague that has affected our community in recent decades—the phenomenon of the drop-out youth, the 'off-the-derech' children, children who are raised in what seem to be wonderful homes, but for some reason, throw it all away. They leave a Torah lifestyle and hang out on the streets with the worst of people.

This is a very complex situation which can have numerous causes. But Rav Shmuel Berenbaum said that sometimes the reason for this situation is that—for some reason—the child does not feel loved by his family, by his own peers, and by frum society. On the other hand, he feels that the kids on the street love him. They treat him nicely. They treat him with

respect. So where is he going to go? In my school, they sometimes treat me like dirt. My parents are always down my throat. Nobody loves me. 'They' (on the 'street') love me. SO where does he go? Human nature is for people to gravitate to and associate with other people who they feel love them and appreciate them.

Now we understand the bracha of Yosef, and we understand his kochos (strengths): His brothers hated him. The brothers represented frum society. They slandered him. He came to Egyptian society and the girls are swooning over him. 'Everybody loves me here.' What might we expect of a lesser individual? "I am going to chuck this Yiddishkeit thing! Who needs it? My brothers treat me like mud, and these Egyptian girls can't get enough of me."

What did Yosef do? He remained a faithful Jew. He remained steadfast to his religion, in spite of the fact that the girls swooned and the brothers hated him. That is kochos ha'nefesh (strength of character) and commitment. This is the same strength of character that allowed him to withstand the temptations of the wife of Potiphar. That is what Yaakov Avinu was telling us in his bracha. He was describing the strength of his son Yosef. In spite of the fact that the girls climbed up on the wall to see him, in spite of the fact that he was loved by them, and in spite of the fact that he was hated by his brothers, nevertheless he remained an honest and faithful Jew.

Parashat Vayechi

by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Recovery & Hope

This is being written on the tenth of Tevet, the day dedicated to recalling the beginning of the Babylonian siege of Yerushalayim, eventually leading to the destruction of the first holy Temple.

In addition, the Chief Rabbinate of the Medina declared this day as "General Kaddish Day" for the descendants of the holocaust victims to recite Kaddish over those whose day of death is unknown.

Every passing day brings us closer to when the murderers and torturers, and their victims, will have passed on. It is incumbent upon us to remember and not forget all the details of the Shoah, because to remember Amalek is a Torah mitzva.

I have mixed emotions regarding visiting the extermination places in Poland and elsewhere. On the one-hand I don't want to tread on this earthly presence of Gehennom. On the other hand, since I was brought up in an atmosphere of Torah, of love and compassion at home and at the yeshivot I attended, I have an under-developed sense of hatred.

King Shlomo states in Kohelet (3,8):

עַתָּה לְאַהֲבָה וְעַתָּה לְשׂוֹנֵא עַת מלחמה וְעַת שְׁלוֹם

A time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

A visit to any of the places where an Aisavic descendant treads would contribute greatly to my tikun to hate. But I will probably forgo this "dubious" experience and spend the rest of my days concentrating on "Love thy brother as thy self," and leave "a time for hate" to another "thoughtful Jew".

The Tenth of Tevet

Back to the day of fasting commemorating the beginning of the siege of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, of the Holy City which ended with the destruction of the First Temple...

The people of Israel met and fought many enemies, all of them cruel, ruthless, and thirsty for Jewish blood. We emerged from the wars with ugly scars, but we remember Yehoshua bin Nun, King David, the period of the Judges, Passover, Purim, Hanukkah, Independence Day, Yom Kippur and more.

The Holocaust, who won? The people of Israel who managed to survive the German killing machine (even though today we number about thirteen million Jews in the world, millions less than our number of 18 million at the outbreak of the war), or were the Germans who killed six to seven million Jews victorious? Strange question, but definitely a legitimate one!

To arrive at an answer, it is necessary to determine what were the goals of the Germans – the descendants of Esau, the brother of Ya'akov?

There were two goals – one immediate and the other more distant. The immediate goal was the physical annihilation of European Jewry, followed by the extermination of all the Jews. With the larger goal in mind, of the extermination of Judaism! No longer a God who demands justice, kindness, and mercy. That “good” should overcome evil, the love of fellow man who was created in the image of God, that is to say the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, the seven Noachide mitzvot and the 613 mitzvot for the people of Israel.

The measure of victory or defeat is the degree that Judaism exists in the world. Those who are angry at the Creator and abandon the observance of Shabbat, kashrut and all the other requirements that make up Judaism, because he cannot understand the holocaust, represent a degree of victory for the Nazis of all shades, as opposed to those who adhere to Judaism, who raise the banner of historic sanctified Halachic Judaism.

The various anti-Semitic groups the world over are in essence present day Nazis and all are either financially supported by the Christians or encouraged by them. These haters of Jews and HaShem will not stop as long as there is one loyal, strong and dedicated Jew who continues to live under the holy umbrella every day here in the Holy Land.

National Recovery – The Future

Looking back, it is difficult to grasp what the situation was with our people at the end of World War II.

In 1939, the nation of Israel numbered about 17 million men, women, and children, and after 6 brutal years of war and murder, only 11 million Jews remained in the world.

The general feeling of our people was depression and defeat. We looked up at the sky with a heart-wrenching question, ‘Where was our father in heaven?’ and the answer we received was ‘Where were human beings?’ We found ourselves with six hundred thousand refugees in the largest cemetery in the world called ‘Europe’.

Thousands of Jews were murdered after the war when they returned to their former places of residence. The British locked the country’s gates to the refugees and the United States agreed to accept only a few.

The people of Israel were sick and devoid of all hope. The feeling was that our decline as a people was only a matter of time because who thought of getting married and having children?

In addition to our situation in Europe, hundreds of thousands of our brothers suffered difficult lives in Moslem countries.

We were on the brink of national insanity.

Then, three years after the war – the blink of an eye in historical terms – HaShem brought about the establishment of the State of Israel. The first law that was passed by the new State was the Law of Return whereby the State opened its doors to all Jews – to the sick and broken in body and spirit.

Over time, the refugees found a new life and a will to live.

People who lost their entire families and believed they would never be able to love again, started families and had children. The smiles that hadn’t been seen for years returned to faces that had seen the Angel of Death.

The State of Israel gave its citizens not only a sense of security but also the feeling that our God has the power to avenge a small part of the evil done to our people, such as the execution of the tyrant Eichmann who was tried before a court in Jerusalem and hanged by a Jew who that morning had worn tefillin.

These things were presented to the survivors by the Jewish state:

1- Recovery and hope.

2- Descendants and continuation.

3- Protection of the Jewish people, and punishment of our enemies.

In parashat Chayai Sarah, it is told how Abraham our father realized that his guests were not ordinary passersby who regularly visited his home, but angels of HaShem, each one sent to carry out a particular mission.

One was sent to heal Abraham and save Lot.

The second was sent to inform Abraham and Sarah about the future birth of Yitzchak.

And the third was to overturn the five evil cities in the Jordan Valley.

These three roles are the same as those that faced the State of Israel after the Holocaust.

Many of the survivors vowed that they would never put themselves in the fragile position of loving and losing. And the State united their broken hearts and restored to them the desire to live and to love themselves and others.

Like Abraham and Sarah, the remnant of the Holocaust was close to despair of establishing a continuation of the people of Israel, and the State provided them with the will and ability to continue their existence.

And as far as punishing the haters of Israel is concerned, we should ask our holy soldiers who sacrifice so much to defend the people of Israel after two thousand years of inability to defend ourselves.

My message to our brothers and sisters abroad, to the people of Torah there, to the yeshiva leaders and the rabbis of the communities, to the directors of Jewish schools and the heads of organizations: What would you give to be present at that time in Avraham’s tent together with the ministering angels? To participate in the alleviation of the pain, to hear the promise of the continuation of the people of Israel, and to take revenge on the haters of our people?

After all, these things are present in our everyday lives in Medinat Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom

Nachman Kahana

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week’s Insights is dedicated in memory of Avraham Chaim ben Simcha.

Prince Charming

A charming son is Yosef, a charming son to the eye [...] (49:22).

In this week’s parsha, Yaakov Avinu gathers his sons for a final time in order to bless them before he dies. In actuality, Yaakov Avinu didn’t merely bless his children, he actually defined who they were and articulated their strengths (and to some, their weaknesses as well) and the character traits that were to be passed down to their children.

Rashi (ad loc) explains that, among the blessings that Yaakov gave to Yosef, he mentioned that Yosef was impervious to ayin hora or “evil eye.” This is based on the Gemara (Baba Basra 118b) that interprets the verse to mean that Yosef’s charm was “above the eye” – i.e. beyond the reach of the evil eye. Rashi also mentions that part of the blessing to Yosef’s sons (48:16) included that they would multiply like fish. The very same Gemara explains that because fish are covered with water no evil eye controls them.

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood concepts is that of ayin hora. How are we to understand the power of the evil eye and how does it really work? Is it just some mystical concept or does it have some practical understanding from which we can learn how to overcome it, or at least avoid the issue? Rav Moshe Feinstein z”l paskened (Even Ha’ezer 3:26), “We definitely need to be concerned with the ayin hora, but not overly particular. With these types of matters, the principle is – the one that is not bothered by it, it doesn’t bother him.” This is difficult to understand. Does ayin hora have real efficacy or is it merely imagined?

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 107b) states, “Rav explained the verse – ‘Hashem will remove all illness from you’ (Devarim 7:15) as a reference to the ayin hora – the source of most illness. In fact, he once went to a cemetery and discovered that 99 out of 100 had died from an ayin hora, while only one had died from other causes.” Obviously, ayin hora is a powerful force, how are we to deal with it?

More to the point: If ayin hora has a real power to it, then how does a blessing to be impervious to the evil eye have any efficacy? For example, one cannot be “blessed” that a knife shouldn’t pierce their skin. So is the power of ayin hora real, and if so how does Yosef avoid the negative effects of it?

The Gemara (Yoma 35b) discusses how Hashem holds everyone accountable for his behavior during his lifetime: Hashem asks each soul

why it didn't spend more time studying Torah. If a person answers because he was too poor, Hashem asks, "Were you poorer than Hillel?" If he answers because he had uncontrollable desires to fulfill, Hashem asks, "Were your desires more than Yosef Hatzadik?"

What does this Gemara mean? How is one supposed to compare himself to those great men? How are they an achievable standard that one should apply in one's own life? In fact, what made those great men so unique that they were able to overcome their own circumstances and successfully conquer their personal trials?

The answer to these questions is actually the key to understanding what ayin hora is, how we are affected by it, and most importantly, how to rise above it.

What made Hillel (and Yosef) so unique? In fact, we can even ask a deeper question: The Torah was given approximately 3,500 years ago, but Hillel lived only about 2,000 years ago. What was the standard for those 1,500 years? In other words, with what did Hashem challenge those who didn't study Torah because they were too poor?

The answer is that they were off the hook. Because the standard of the times was that if a person was too poor then he was too overwhelmed and distracted with making a living. Meaning that almost everyone in the world (as the Gemara above says, 99 out of 100) looks around and sees what are the societal standards and then acts accordingly.

But Hillel changed all this. What made Hillel (and Yosef) so unique is that he didn't look at what everyone else was doing, he looked within himself as to what his true capabilities were.

This is the key: most people choose to live a common life. What do others have? I want that. Before taking action or making a purchase, the thought is how will that make others look at me? This defines how they dress, what kind of car they drive, what kind of house they buy, and what kind of vacations they take. Most people live a life reflective of other people's perception of themselves.

This is very dangerous because gazing at something is a way of exerting control over it (this is also one of the reasons that it is prohibited to gaze at someone that one cannot be with). The Gemara (Baba Basra 2b) calls this Hezek Re'iyah – damage of gazing, and this has halachic ramifications when it comes to real estate because others are able to exert a real type of control.

This type of seeing is very powerful – consider the feeling a person has when he knows he's being watched. This can have a deleterious effect because he knows he is being constantly scrutinized and perhaps even criticized. This scrutiny is the evil eye. By choosing to live the common life through the perception of others, we are allowing the evil eye to control us.

When a person is under siege (any kind – whether by lack of sleep or depression or under the constant scrutiny of others) his body acts in very strange ways. The body is severely weakened and more susceptible to illness, disease, and other maladies. Thus, ayin hora is a very real danger.

So, how are we to avoid it? By taking a cue from Hillel and Yosef – that is, not allowing others to have influence and control over our lives. We must make every effort to judge ourselves and act in accordance with our own potential and not by what our friends or others do. Likewise, we must do things for ourselves and not to impress others, make them think kindly of us, or worse, incite envy.

This is what the blessing to Yosef meant by "above the eye" – that he was not living in anyone else's reality and did not care what their perception of him was. Instead, Yosef focused on doing things he himself was capable of achieving; no matter what others were doing. This is very hard to achieve, however, if one succeeds then he can avoid ayin hora because he is no longer operating in the realm of the ayin.

This is what Rav Moshe Feinstein meant when he said that if it doesn't bother you then it won't affect you. If one really doesn't look at others and doesn't subject his life to what others think of him then the ayin hora will not affect him. Unfortunately, most people have a difficult time achieving this. The majority of people care what Yeshivas (or colleges) their children go to and what others think of those schools.

They want people to view them as being successful or well dressed. These things are what drive ayin hora and must be avoided.

We should choose Yeshivas based on what is good for each individual child, not care what everyone else thinks is a Yeshiva pedigree. We should drive comfortable cars that we enjoy, not cars that primarily make a statement to our success. We should wear clothing that makes us feel happy, not just scramble to keep up with the fads.

This is what the Gemara means that a technique for avoiding ayin hora is to take one's thumbs and place them in the opposite palms:

The Gemara Berachot (55b) states, "If a man entering a town is afraid of the evil eye, let him take the thumb of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand, and say: I [inserting his name], son of [his father's name], am of the seed of Yosef over whom the evil eye has no effect, as it is written, 'Ben porat Yosef, ben porat alei ayin.'"

Taken at face value it sounds like merely hocus pocus kabbalistic rituals. But with our understanding of ayin hora it becomes clear what a person is trying to convey with this act of taking thumbs into one's palms.

The fact that humans (and some primates) have opposable thumbs is very significant; it is what allows one to lock the hand and take things firmly in one's grasp. Having thumbs represents grasping and taking control of something. Thus, a person who wants to avoid ayin hora takes his thumbs into his palms to indicate that he is not in anyone's else's grasp (vis a vis ayin hora) rather he is from the spiritual children of Yosef and is totally within his own domain and impervious to ayin hora.

Parshat Vayechi

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

PARSHA OVERVIEW

After 17 years in Egypt, Yaakov senses his days drawing to a close and summons Yosef. He has Yosef swear to bury him in the Machpela Cave, the burial place of Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka.

Yaakov falls ill and Yosef brings to him his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe. Yaakov elevates Ephraim and Menashe to the status of his own sons, thus giving Yosef a double portion that removes the status of firstborn from Reuven. As Yaakov is blind from old age, Yosef leads his sons close to their grandfather. Yaakov kisses and hugs them. He had not thought to see his son Yosef again, let alone Yosef's children. Yaakov begins to bless them, giving precedence to Ephraim, the younger, but Yosef interrupts him and indicates that Menashe is the elder. Yaakov explains that he intends to bless Ephraim with his strong hand because Yehoshua will descend from him, and Yehoshua will be both the conqueror of Eretz Yisrael and the teacher of Torah to the Jewish People.

Yaakov summons the rest of his sons in order to bless them as well. Yaakov's blessing reflects the unique character and ability of each tribe, directing each one in its unique mission in serving G-d. Yaakov passes from this world at age 147. A tremendous procession accompanies his funeral cortege up from Egypt to his resting place in the Cave of Machpela in Chevron.

After Yaakov's passing, the brothers are concerned that Yosef will now take revenge on them. Yosef reassures them, even promising to support them and their families. Yosef lives out the rest of his years in Egypt, seeing Ephraim's great-grandchildren. Before his death, Yosef foretells to his brothers that G-d will redeem them from Egypt. He makes them swear to bring his bones out of Egypt with them at that time. Yosef passes away at the age of 110 and is embalmed. Thus ends Sefer Bereishet, the first of the five Books of the Torah. Chazak

PARSHA INSIGHTS

A Taste of Honey

"...and he will provide kingly delicacies" (49:20)

The world in which we live is a very round place.

A chicken's egg, the human eye, the spawn of tadpoles, an oyster, a grain of sand, the stem of a flower, the suction pad of a squid, the rings of a tree trunk, the moon and the sun. And, of course, the world itself.

There are few squares in creation. There's something called a cross sea: A cross sea (also referred to as a squared sea or square waves) is a sea state of wind-generated ocean waves that form nonparallel wave systems. Cross seas have a large amount of directional spreading. This may occur when water waves from one weather system continue despite a shift in wind. Waves generated by the new wind run at an angle to the old. Iron pyrite crystals come close to being perfectly cubic. But Most of the natural world is built on endless permutations of the circle.

Why? Why is the circle the ideal form of creation? When Hashem created the world, He brought into existence a single point, an infinitesimal dot, and from there He drew forth the entire Universe. (Talmud Bavli, Yoma 54b)

If you take a dot and expand it equally in all directions, you get a circle. The circle is the ideal natural form because it expresses creation itself.

The square, on the other hand, the rectangle, and the other rectilinear shapes are the hallmarks of man.

The easiest way for man to build is with straight lines. Anything curved is more demanding technically, and more expensive.

Why is it more difficult for man to build a circular object than a square one? If the natural world is patterned on the circle, surely the circle should be the natural shape of man's works as well, and the circle should be his paradigm and not the square.

The Talmud (Menachot 29b) tells us that Hashem created this world with the letter Heh:

If you look at the letter Heh, you will see that it is, in fact, a combination of two other letters, Dalet...and an inverted Yod.

The Dalet consists of two lines at right angles to each other, which point to the four cardinal directions of the compass:

The numerical value of Dalet is four. The lines of the Dalet represent expansion away from that primeval point of existence.

The Dalet is an archetypal rectilinear shape. Man's creations are based on the straight line because they flow from the Dalet that is their source.

However, this world was not created with the Dalet alone. It was created with the Yod as well, and the Yod had another role in creation. With the Yod, Hashem created the future world.

The Yod is really no more than the tiniest dot. The ideal dot has no direction and occupies no space. In order for us to write a Yod, we have to give it some dimension. Otherwise, it would be invisible. However, the ideal dot cannot be drawn in this world. A point that occupies no space is something that can only exist in a world that is above space — the future world. When this world focuses on the world beyond, it fulfills its purpose. When the Dalet focuses on the Yod — when rectilinear dimension focuses on a point that has no dimension — this world reaches its perfection.

When man sublimates his creations to that higher plane, when the dimensionality of the Dalet aspires to the transcendence of the Yod, earth touches heaven.

Then the letter Heh is complete.

Although the preeminent shape of nature is the circle, there exists a natural phenomenon that seems to defy this axiom.

Throughout recorded history, observers have marveled at the hexagonal pattern of the honeybee's elaborate storage system. More than 2,000 years ago, Greek scholars commented on how bees apparently possess "a certain geometrical forethought" in achieving just the right type of enclosure to hold honey efficiently. In the 19th century, Charles Darwin described the honeycomb as a masterpiece of engineering that is "absolutely perfect in economizing labor and wax." The honeycomb is a hexagon, a six-sided circle, if you like. Why does the honeycomb seem to depart from the natural roundness of the creation and lean towards the linearity of man? Why is the honeycomb a synthesis of the circle and the square?

The answer is that the hexagon represents an ideal synthesis of form and function.

If the honeycomb were round there would be a lot of wasted space between the cells and the entire structure would be less strong.

Were the honeycomb octagonal, which would be even closer to the ideal circle, the modules would not interlock; there would still be some space in between each cell in the honeycomb.

Thus, the hexagon is the perfect blend of the circle and the square, the ideal synthesis of function and form, of this world and the world beyond this world.

Why was it, though, that Hashem chose the honeybee of all creatures to express this synthesis?

The bee is a unique creature. It itself is not a kosher creature, but its produce — honey — is. The honeybee represents the transformation of that which assur, prohibited, into that which is mutar, permitted. In fact, assur is better translated as "bound." What makes something prohibited is our inability to reach the inner spark of holiness that gives it existence in this world. It is bound up, tied, and inaccessible. We cannot connect to it, and it connects only to itself. It is trapped, bound, assur.

Hashem has given the Jewish People the job of connecting this world to the one beyond it. Left to himself, man degenerates into an obsession with physicality. He constructs monoliths to scrape the skies, vaunting geometry.

That which connects only to itself is inherently tameh, ritually impure.

Tumah results from the failed potential for connection: For example, Lashon Hara, speech that divides people, is inherently tameh, and in Biblical times caused visible lesions on the skin. The monthly cycle of the human reproductive capacity causes tumah when it does not lead to the beginning of new life. It expresses a failure to connect to what is beyond it. Therefore, with the breakdown of the lining of the womb, a woman must immerse in a mikveh. The word Mikveh is from the language of tikveh — hope — which is all about the future. The future world.

The honeybee symbolizes the elevation of the potential into the actual, the sublimation of tumah into taharah.

The honeybee takes the square and makes it into a six-sided circle.

Rav Kook Torah

Psalm 84: Prepare Yourself for Prayer

The Dwellers of Your House

This beautiful psalm expresses our yearnings to be close to God and His holy Temple: "My soul longs and pines for God's courtyards!" (Ps. 84:3). Yet its most famous verse opens with the word Ashrei (fortunate): "Fortunate are those who dwell in Your house. They will continue to praise You, selah." (Ps. 84:5)

The Sages designated this verse to introduce Psalm 145 in the daily prayers. In fact, because of this opening verse, that chapter in the prayers is commonly referred to as Ashrei.

But who are these fortunate 'dwellers' in God's house? And would it not be preferable to pray in His house, rather than just sit there?

Preparations for Prayer

The Sages recognized that heartfelt prayer requires some degree of mental preparation. They taught, "One should not rise to pray until first acquiring a reverent state of mind" (Berachot 30b). We cannot make the sudden switch from our mundane activities to earnest prayer without a mental effort to clear our thoughts and focus our minds.

The Talmud describes two levels of mental preparation for prayer. The minimal level, which is expected of all people, is to acquire a general attitude of solemnity and reverence. The Sages referred to this state of mind as koved-rosh, literally 'heavy-headedness.' We need to do away with any light-headedness and frivolity, and direct our thoughts toward higher values and eternal truths.

There is, however, a more intensive level of preparation for prayer. The chasidim rishonim, the saintly pious of ancient times, would meditate for a full hour before each prayer. They would not begin praying until they knew that "their hearts were fully directed toward their Father in heaven."

Why did these pious individuals need so much time to prepare for prayer?

Directing Both Mind and Heart

The minimal level - focusing our thoughts on lofty matters - does not necessitate such a lengthy preparation. In a relatively short time, we can purify our thoughts by reflecting on positive and holy images.

But the chasidim rishonim also wanted to uplift their hearts - "until their hearts were fully directed." Full control of our emotions and desires is a far more complicated matter. Personality traits, wants and desires are connected to our physical side. It takes time and effort to analyze our feelings and inclinations and guide them toward holy goals.

The pious of old based their lengthy preparations on the verse, "Fortunate are those who dwell in Your house." The psalmist is not referring to a person who makes a brief visit to the house of God. This is not just a quick focusing of one's thoughts on holy matters. Rather, the verse speaks of those who dwell in God's house. These saintly individuals meditated at length, refining their desires and purifying their character traits to be in sync with their mind's enlightenment. Such an intense preparatory effort requires a lengthy stay in the realm of the spiritual and the eternal.

Spiritual Stability

The verse concludes with the assurance that those who dwell in Your house "will continue to praise You, selah."

The Sages taught in Eiruv 54a that the word selah indicates something of a continuous and eternal nature. Those who dwell in God's house, as they strive to elevate their hearts and emotions, attain a more stable level of holiness. They acquire a harmony in heart and soul that enables them to continually "praise You, selah." In this way, they experience a consistent level of holiness and God-awareness.

Now it is clear why this verse was placed at the beginning of Ashrei, to be recited at the start of the prayer service. It reminds to prepare our state of mind before praying - and to take inspiration from those remarkable chasidim rishonim who would "dwell in God's house" in deep meditation, focusing their minds and uplifting their hearts.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vayechi

Stand and Deliver

This week the Book of Braishis ends. Yaakov (Jacob) summoned his son Yoseph (Joseph) and discussed final arrangements with him. He asked to be transported to Chevron and to be interred in the same cave as his father, mother, and grandparents. Yoseph returned home and an unprecedented event occurred. Yaakov took ill. He is the first human that the Torah records as getting sick. Yoseph was informed and quickly hurried to his father's bedside. The Torah tells us that when Yoseph was announced, "Israel (Jacob) exerted himself and sat up on the bed" (Genesis 48:2). Yoseph enters the room and Yaakov proceeded to recount major events of his life to him. Yaakov talked about his divine revelations and the blessings that the Almighty bestowed upon him. He discussed the death of Rachel and explained why he buried her in Bethlehem and not Hebron. Then Yaakov proceeded to bless his beloved son Yoseph's children in a unique manner. He designates Yoseph's children as shevatim (tribes) with equal rights and inheritance as his other sons.

One portion of the episode needs clarification. The Torah is usually short on detail. Why then does the Torah tell us that when Yoseph walked in Yaakov exerted himself and sat up in bed? Why is that significant? Who cares if he sat up or lay down? If he was able to sit, why should he not? And if it was very difficult for him to sit up, why did he? And isn't what Yaakov said more relevant than how he said it?

Rashi explains that the seemingly supplementary detail teaches us a lesson. A father whose son has risen to power must show respect. It may have been quite difficult for Yaakov to sit, however it was important. One must show respect for royalty, even if it is his own child who has risen to power. I'd like to analyze the incident from another angle.

American historian Paul F. Boller Jr. relates the following story: At noon on January 1st 1863, the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation was placed in front of Abraham Lincoln. He stared

intensely at it as it lay before him on his desk. He picked up his pen to sign it, and was about to dip the quill into the ink when he hesitated and put his arm down. He paused, closed his eyes, and began the process again. Determinedly he picked up the quill, dipped it in the ink, and put it down. With a grim face he turned to Secretary of State William N. Seward and said, "My hands have been shaking since nine o'clock this morning. My right hand is almost paralyzed. If I am ever to go down into history, it will be for this act. My whole self is in it. However, if my hand trembles when I sign this proclamation, whoever examines it will say hereafter, 'he hesitated'".

With that, the President mustered his strength, dipped the quill into the ink, and slowly but resolutely signed in perfect form — Abraham Lincoln.

As he lay on his deathbed, Yaakov Avinu was about to perform an unprecedented act. He was about to bestow the title of shevatim, tribes, to his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe. This was an honor only relegated to his own children. Then he blessed them with words that were destined to become the hallmark of paternal blessings for generations to come. "By you shall (the children of) Israel bless their children — May G-d shall make you like Ephraim and Menashe. Thus shall be your children."

Those were not blessings that could be endowed in a prone position. As weak as Yaakov was, he knew that the future of two young tribes lay in the strength of his blessing. He wouldn't give it lying down. Yaakov Avinu knew that any sign of weakness that he would convey in transferring that most important message would be recognized for eternity. He mustered his strength and sat up to give that blessing that would wax eternal. Execution of great actions needs great strength and fortitude. Our forefather Yaakov knew that just as there are things you can't take lying down, there are also many things, namely greatness and blessing, that you cannot give lying down.

May you be like Ephraim and Menashe

Yaakov's blessing to his grandsons Ephraim and Menashe and a lesson for our lives.

Rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Safran

"May you be like these two, like Ephraim and Menashe..."

As a quiet dusk settles on Friday evening, ushering in Shabbat, we bless our sons with the names of Yaakov's grandsons. When we do, do we ever pause to wonder, what makes these two so singular among the generations of Israel that their names should be on our lips when blessing our own children? Why, of all the great and righteous men who stand out in the long millennia of Jewish history and experience, should these two names carry such power and grace?

For starters, these two, raised in Egypt and surrounded by the comforts and honor befitting their father's position managed something too often elusive in the face of great wealth and power — they managed to remain good sons and devoted grandchildren. By doing so they ensured that there would be a next link in the great chain of Jewish tradition. In blessing them, Yaakov wanted for all future generations the indescribable gift that had been given to him, the knowledge that the next generation and the one after that would remain true to Jewish tradition. What loving zayde wouldn't bless them!

We must remember that the Egyptian court and culture was not welcoming to Jewish tradition. Far from it. For these two, nothing "Jewish" came easy. In this, they were not like our own children for whom everything "Jewish" comes easily. Ephraim and Menashe weren't raised in a neighborhood of other caring, devoted Jewish families; a neighborhood filled with fine yeshivot and thriving shuls. They didn't grow up in a community with kosher markets on every other street corner. No, they were Jewish in spite of their surroundings; they were Jewish because they desired it in the marrow of their bones.

Yaakov understood that this quality, this determination to be Jewish, is what we want for our children and grandchildren; a level of devotion and commitment that comes from the kishkes, that comes from within.

Their love of Jewishness would have been reason enough for Yaakov to bless them, but they possessed another quality that differentiated them in the Torah narrative – there was no rivalry between them. Jealousy did not curse their relationship as it did Cain and Abel's. They weren't at odds like Yitzchak and Yishmael. They did not fight in their mother's womb like Yaakov and Esav. They bore each other none of the animosity shown Yosef by his brothers.

Ephraim and Menashe represent a clear and necessary break from such cruel rivalry. They were and remained brothers in the truest sense. There was peace between them. They demonstrated that as sure as the love and respect between husband and wife ensure shalom bayit, peace among siblings makes for a life of joy and blessing.

The love and respect between Ephraim and Menashe was deeply held. To understand just how deeply, we need only pay close attention to the moment of Yaakov's blessing, when he reversed hands and declared that the, "younger brother shall become greater than he, and his offspring will fill the nations." Even at that moment, when the younger received a blessing before the elder, there was no discord! Certainly, everything we knew about Torah brothers to this point would have led us to expect strife to follow. And yet, there was no anger, no animosity, only peace.

Life is rarely fair, even to siblings. One has talents the other does not. One is taller. One has a stutter. One is successful. The other struggles. Despite such disparities, we pray for our children the gift of peace, that our children live peacefully together forever on, even after we parents, and grandparents have left this worldly stage.

Yosef brought his two sons Menashe (the elder) and Ephraim (the younger) to receive Yaakov's blessings. "Joseph took the two of them - Ephraim with his right hand, to Yisrael's left, and Menashe with his left, to Yisrael's right – and he drew them close to him." In the next posuk we learn however, that Yisrael did not take his cue from Yosef, but rather "extended his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head though he was younger and his left hand on Menashe's head."

Yosef protested but nothing Yosef said could convince his father that he had erred. Yaakov declares, "I know, my son, I know."

I have often pondered this mysterious "choreography", convinced that there had to have been a very deliberative reason for Yaakov's blessing. I only began to understand when I came upon a compelling insight offered by my grandfather, HaGaon Rav Bezalel Zev Shafran ZT"L, and in doing so began to appreciate the source of the brothers' goodwill.

My grandfather references the well-known posuk (in Devarim 17:11) where we are told to always and without exception follow the decisions of the beth din (court), even if, "you are convinced that they are wrong". Rashi tells us that even if the court seems to be saying that "right is left, and left is right", still we must listen. The last word always belongs to the beth din.

Lo tasur min ha'davar asher yagidu lecha yamin u'small – You shall not deviate from the word that they will tell you, right or left."

We are not to question the beth din but rather we are to say, "God who enjoined the Mitzvot, commanded that I perform all His commandments in accordance with all that they, who stand before Him, teach me to do..." In other words, the Beth Din HaGadol, are the emissaries of God Himself.

Their word is God's word.

My grandfather teaches (Yalkut HaChanochi 5) that the true meaning of the Sifri cited by Rashi is found in Midrash Tanchuma (Naso 29), "A person should not say, 'I will not fulfill the commandments of the elders, since they are not from the Torah'". That is, they should not say, "I will not follow the ruling of the Beth Din. As the Torah notes, 'And you shall do according to...the law which they will instruct you.'" (Devarim 17:10-11) As God declares in Job (22:28) "You will decree, and it will be fulfilled for you."

We follow the Beth Din because God agrees with the Beth Din.

My grandfather likens this to what is written about Yaakov at the time that he blessed Menashe and Ephraim. He made left right and right left. "And he placed Ephraim before Menashe. He made the younger go before the older; and HaShem fulfilled his decree."

From this my grandfather divined the lesson that we are not to stray from what our elders – chachamim teach us. Yaakov switched right and left, something that, on its face, strikes us as wrong – after all, Menashe is the elder, should not he receive the blessing? But then we learn that God Himself affirms Yaakov's "decision" when Ephraim's tribe was the first to offer korbanot when the Sanctuary was dedicated.

When Yaakov declares, "I know, he (Menashe) too will become a people and he too will become great; yet his younger brother (Ephraim) shall become greater than he, and his offspring will fill the nations" it is not simply a prophecy, but rather a decree.

What lay at the heart of Ephraim and Menashe's embrace of Judaism? The very same thing that formed the foundation of the bond between them – a respect of the authority of tradition and God. This too is the reason we bless our children and grandchildren in their names, so that the generations that follow will understand the power of mesorah and tradition to keep the chain of Jewish life from breaking.

In due time the wisdom and truth of our obedience will become evident. This is the message Yaakov has left for us. Absolute faith in God and in His duly appointed chachomim – the Beth Din HaGadol sitting adjacent to the Beit HaMikdash – is the key to pure Jewish existence. God, His Torah and its legitimate interpreters, not straying an iota from authentic Torah.

Total commitment and unquestioned faith is the unique characteristic of Ephraim and Menashe. Their faith led them to overcome all the distractions and challenges of their time and culture so that they could be fully Jewish; it allowed them to live in peace and harmony, without discord and rivalry.

So, like Yaakov, we pray and bless our children, praying that they will not just be "like" these brothers but will be in fact Ephraims and Menashes; that they will embrace being Jewish in their hearts and souls and that they will pursue and enjoy peace with each other.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Vayechi (Genesis 47:28-50:26)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "And Joseph fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his [Joseph's] neck" (Genesis 45:14).

The final verse of the last portion of Vayigash summarizes the astonishing achievement of the Israelites in Egypt: 'And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt in the country of Goshen and they took possession of it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly' (Genesis 47:27). Could anything be a clearer testament to the resilience of Jacob's descendants who, in a relatively short period of time, managed to grow rich in real estate, to be fruitful and to multiply?

Yet according to Rashi, this very next verse, the opening of Vayechi, sends us in the exact opposite direction, a 180-degree turn for the worse, informing us that the Egyptian bondage was then beginning! Interestingly, Rashi's interpretation is not based on the words of the verse itself (Genesis 47:28), but rather on the almost hidden or interior meaning of the Torah embedded in the white space – or lack of white space – between the final verse of Vayigash and the opening verse of Vayechi. The portion of Vayechi opens without a parchment hint that a new chapter is beginning, or that a new story is being told.

There are no paragraphs or indications of chapters in the text of the Torah scrolls. Rather, a white space – anywhere from a minimum of nine letters wide to the end of the entire line – is the Torah's way of indicating that a pause or separation of some kind exists between the previous verse and the following section.

What is unique about Vayechi is that it is the only portion in the Torah with no white space preceding it, as the last verse in Vayigash flows right into the opening verse of Vayechi. This lack of a division leads Rashi to comment that the reason why our portion is setumah (closed) is because "...with the death of Jacob, the hearts and eyes of Israel become closed because of the misery of the bondage with which they [the Egyptians] had begun to enslave them" [Rashi ad loc.].

For Rashi, the achievement of Vayigash lasts no longer than the blink of an eye, or the amount of time it takes to finish one verse and begin another. In one verse the Israelites may be on top of the world, but Rashi wants us to understand that the message of the lack of white space is that we are now witnessing the beginning of the end.

But the truth is that the slavery does not come until a generation – and an entire biblical book – later, when we are told of the emergence of a new king over Egypt, ‘who did not know Joseph’ (Exodus 1:8). In the meantime, we are still in the book of Genesis; Joseph, with the keys to the treasury in his pocket, is the Grand Vizier of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, and his kinsmen are doing astonishingly well on the Egyptian Stock Exchange. So why does Rashi’s commentary appear to be ‘jumping the gun’?

Rabbi David Pardo explains in his commentary Maskil l'David that the first intimations of Jewish slavery are indeed to be found in the portion of Vayechi, but in a later verse describing an apparently uncomfortable situation in the wake of Jacob’s demise:

“And when the days of mourning for Jacob were over, Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh saying, ‘If now I have found favor in your eyes, speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, my father made me swear, and he declared: I am dying. In my grave which I have dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me...’”(Gen. 50:4-5).

Does this request sound like words spoken by the Grand Vizier of Egypt? Does the number two figure at a Fortune 500 company, who undoubtedly confers with the president on a daily basis, need an appointment to see him, forced to go through the usual hierarchy of administrative personnel that junior staff have to go through? Why not a simple knock on the door on the part of Joseph?

Why does the Torah even go to the trouble of reporting the process by which Joseph presents a petition – through intermediaries – to have his father buried? And Joseph doesn’t even go through a secretary; he begs (‘if I have found favor in your eyes’) the ‘house of Pharaoh’, which generally refers to the household staff, the servants of Pharaoh. The Grand Vizier asks a maid or butler to whisper his need to bury his father in Pharaoh’s ear. Is this the level to which a second-in-command must stoop in order to get time off for a parent’s funeral?

I would suggest that perhaps the almost obsequious manner in which Joseph must arrange to have his request brought before Pharaoh indicates not so much a general change in Joseph’s political position, as the delicacy of this particular petition. Therefore, it serves as a moment of truth for Joseph as well as for the readers of his story.

Joseph may have reached the top of the social ladder in Egypt. He speaks Egyptian, dresses as an Egyptian, has become renamed Egyptian (Tzafenat-Pane’ah), and is married to a native Egyptian (perhaps even to his previous master’s daughter). From slave to Prime Minister, Joseph has certainly lived out the great Egyptian dream. Now, however, he is forced to face the precariousness and vulnerability of his position.

Ordinarily a person wants to be buried in his own homeland where his body will become part of the earth to which he feels most deeply connected. Indeed, in the ancient world the most critical right of citizenship was the right of burial. The wise Jacob understands that Pharaoh expected Joseph to completely identify with Egypt, to bring up generations of faithful and committed Egyptians after all that his adopted country has given to him. But this was impossible for Jacob – and the patriarch hoped that it would also be impossible for his children and grandchildren as well. They were in Egypt, but not of Egypt. They might contribute to Egyptian society and economy, but they could never become Egyptians. Jacob understood that his burial in Canaan would be the greatest test of Joseph’s career, and would define the character of his descendants forever. Hence, he makes his beloved son solemnly swear not to bury him in Egypt. Hence, our Midrash understands that Hebrew servitude in Egypt begins at this very juncture, when Joseph understands that the Hebrews would always be stranger-slaves in Egypt. Indeed, Egypt is a story of every Jewish Diaspora in history. Shabbat Shalom!

Yaakov Avinu blessed his sons with brachos appropriate to their future callings in life. They and their children after them for generations engaged in many different professions, some of them even becoming dentists...

May a Cohen Go to the Dentist?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Yankel Katz (*Names are fictitious) called me recently with a very surprising shaylah:

“I am scheduled to have a dental implant placed in my mouth. My dentist told me that the procedure may require the insertion of cadaver bone around the implant. Since I am a cohen, I immediately realized that I may have a serious halacha problem on my hands, or more accurately, in his hands and my mouth. May I have these products inserted? May I even go into the dentist’s office knowing he has these remains (parts of a corpse) on hand? Maybe I cannot even enter the building?”

I admit that I was more than a bit incredulous that human remains are commonly used today in basic dentistry and medicine. I did some research and discovered that indeed, Yankel’s information is accurate. Many forms of dental, oral, podiatric and other kinds of surgery utilize cadaver-derived products. Surgeons and dentists use these human products (typically bone, skin, and heart muscle) in various grafting procedures. Similarly, many podiatrists use human remains in the construction of foot implants. Because of this, most periodontists (gum specialists) and dentists specializing in implants store human muscle and bone in their offices. Thus, Yankel’s shaylah is realistic: May a cohen enter an office building knowing that there is probably a dental or foot clinic somewhere in the building that contains human remains? Does this prohibit a cohen from freely entering large office buildings?

Furthermore, a non-cohen who causes a cohen to become tamei will also be violating the Torah. Obviously, the ramifications of these shaylos are ominous, and the potential repercussions could be catastrophic for people employed in most cities. Because of these considerations, I researched this shaylah with utmost seriousness.

There are three potential halachic issues involved in this shaylah:

I. Benefiting From Human Remains (Issur Hana’ah)

II. The Mitzvah of Burial

III. Tumah.

To address these questions, we first need to gather some factual information. I began by asking Yankel’s dentist the following questions:

- 1) How extensively are cadaver bones and muscle used?
- 2) How much material does a dentist keep in his office?

I received the following answers:

- 1) Every periodontist and oral surgeon has this material in his office. In addition, many general dentists have it too if they perform gum surgery or implant surgery.
- 2) There is no practical way to answer this question accurately. Specialists such as oral surgeons probably have a lot. I keep between 2-10cc. They are usually stored in 0.5, 1, and 2cc bottles.

And now some background to the halachic shaylos involved:

I. BENEFITING FROM A CORPSE

May one benefit from a corpse or from human remains?

The Gemara rules that one may not benefit from a corpse (Avodah Zarah 29b). However, the Gemara does not discuss whether this prohibition applies only to the remains of a Jew or also to those of a non-Jew.

Why should it make a difference?

The Torah pasuk teaching that one may not benefit from a corpse refers to a Jew. Thus, many poskim conclude that the prohibition is restricted to the remains of a Jew (Tosafos and Rashba, Bava Kamma 10a; Nekudos HaKesef and Gra, Yoreh Deah 349; Shu’t Radbaz #741; Mishneh LaMelech, Hilchos Aveil 14:21). Others rule that remains of either Jews or non-Jews are equally forbidden (Shu’t Rashba 365; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 349:1). Still others compromise between these two positions, contending that the prohibition to use a gentile cadaver is Rabbinic, whereas not using a Jewish corpse is prohibited min haTorah (Pischei Teshuvah ad loc.).

In a circumstance of pikuach nefesh one may of course benefit, as is true with virtually all mitzvos of the Torah. Although tooth replacement is not a life threatening urgency, it is important to use the best quality dental implant.

To quote Yankel's dentist, himself an observant Jew:

"In my opinion, the severity of this halachic issue should hinge on the detriment caused by tooth loss. Clearly losing one tooth or even all the teeth will not result in death. However, tooth loss often results in dietary/nutritional issues. People who have a difficult time chewing will not have a proper diet. Although people who lose their teeth can still eat, they tend to eat soft foods, which are usually high in carbohydrates and low in protein, vitamins, and minerals. Foods that are high in protein, vitamins, and minerals, such as meat, poultry, grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables, tend to be harder to chew. Consequently, people who eat mainly soft foods may become undernourished. I have seen many cases where people receiving their first set of dentures lose a lot of weight due to the difficulty involved in learning how to use them. Some people adapt and those who do not often seek implants if they can afford it. The only thing preventing most people from having implants is the exorbitant cost, since insurance does not usually pay for them at this time."

At this point, I think it is important to explain the difference between dentures and implants.

DENTURES VERSUS IMPLANTS

Dentures are removable appliances that replace some or all of the teeth. They are usually not firm enough to allow a proper bite and chew, and thus a patient using dentures usually regains only a very partial ability to chew. In addition, they are often uncomfortable.

To install dental implants, the dentist utilizes a surgical screw to which he cements crowns or bridges. Alternatively, he uses the implants as anchors to hold complete dentures in place. In either instance, the resultant bite is much stronger than dentures and allows the patient an almost total ability to chew a regular diet.

Dental researchers introduced implants in the '60's, and they became mainstream practice in the '90's. They are now usually considered the "standard of care" for tooth replacement.

Therefore, one can understand the practical importance of using high-quality implants, assuming, of course, that no compromise of halacha results for either the patient, the dentist, or cohanim in the vicinity.

USE OF HUMAN TISSUE

Rav Moshe Feinstein wrote a teshuvah concerning transplanting human remains in non-life-threatening situations (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:229, 230). Clearly, one may transplant such organs as kidneys, livers, and heart because of pikuach nefashos (life-threatening emergency). However, transplanting items such as bone, cornea, muscle, and ligament are not usually for life-threatening situations. As explained above, dental implants relieve a non-life-threatening emergency, although one could argue that these situations are considered choleh kol gufo, where halachic rules are somewhat relaxed. Nevertheless, treating a choleh kol gufo does not permit violating a Torah prohibition.

We noted above that there is a dispute whether one may use remains of a non-Jew; Rav Moshe concludes that, under extenuating circumstances, one may rely on the lenient opinions. A second question now presents itself, which is whether one may assume that the remains used are those of a non-Jew, since using remains of a Jew is certainly prohibited min haTorah. Again, here also Rav Moshe ruled leniently that one may assume that the remains are of non-Jewish source, since most people are not Jewish (Mishneh LaMelech, Hil. Aveil 3:1).

NOT THE NORMAL USE

Some poskim permit the use of human remains for non-life-threatening emergencies because of a different line of reasoning. The Gemara (Pesachim 25b) rules that someone who is ill, but does not have a life threatening condition, may apply a balm made from orlah fruit (that grew in the first three years of a tree's growth), notwithstanding that the Torah prohibits benefiting from such fruit.

Why is this permitted where the situation is not life threatening?

This is because many prohibitions that are assur b'hana'ah (forbidden to benefit from), are prohibited min haTorah only when the prohibited item is used in its normal way. Smearing fruit on one's skin is not a typical, normal use. Since orlah is prohibited min haTorah b'hana'ah only when used in its normal way, smearing orlah fruit as a balm involves only a rabbinic prohibition, which is relaxed for an ill person.

However, this leniency does not apply to all prohibitions. For example, the Torah prohibits using kilayim (forbidden fruit of a grapevine) even in an atypical way. For this reason, an ill person may not smear kilayim as a balm, even though he may smear orlah balm.

Where does the prohibition to use human remains fall? Is it like orlah, and is permitted for an ill person to use in an atypical manner, or like kilayim and prohibited.

The poskim dispute whether the prohibition not to use human remains applies to using them in an atypical way, Shu't Radbaz #979 and Mishneh L'Melech, Hilchos Aveil 14:21 are lenient, whereas Rabbi Akiva Eiger (notes to Yoreh Deah 349) prohibits. If it is permitted, there is a basis to permit the use of human remains from a Jew for someone who is ill when the situation is not life-threatening.

Rav Moshe rules that min hatorah one may not use human remains in an atypical way, although other poskim are lenient (Shu't Har Tzvi, Yoreh Deah #277). The latter approach might allow using muscle and bone for implants even from a Jewish cadaver.

However, since there are alternative sources for implants, such as bovine tissue, it is halachically unclear whether this justifies use of human implants. Although some dentists feel that the cadaver-based material is superior, others do not agree. Therefore, someone who is considering cadaver implants should ask a shaylah from his or her Rav, whether or not one is a cohen. In addition, although the dentist may have asked a shaylah and been told that he or she may use human implants, the patient's Rav may feel otherwise. Thus I believe that a frum dentist who received a psak that he may use human tissue should advise his frum patients to ask their own shaylah.

II. THE REQUIREMENT TO BURY THE DEAD

Is one required to bury a small amount of human remains?

The poskim dispute how small an amount of Jewish remains requires the mitzvah of burying. Some contend that one must bury even an amount as small as a k'zayis (Tosafos Yom Tov to Shabbos 10:5). Others contend that one is required to bury only that which could represent an entire body (Mishneh LaMelech, Hilchos Aveil 14:21). However, it seems that all agree that there is no Torah mitzvah to bury the remains of a gentile, except due to tumah concerns. Thus, this question would not affect our shaylah once we assume that the remains involved are of a non-Jew.

III. TUMAH AND A COHEN

A human cadaver (meis) of either Jew or gentile conveys tumah when a person touches remains or carries them. Although these halachos do not affect most Jews nowadays, a cohen is still forbidden to come in contact with human remains in a way that he will become tamei.

Jewish remains convey tumah through ohel, which means that a cohen may not be under the same roof or in the same room as the remains. However, if all the doors and windows in the room holding the remains are closed, the tumas ohel is probably contained within that room (see Nekudos HaKesef on Taz, Yoreh Deah 371:3; see also Shu't Noda BiYehudah, Yoreh Deah #94). However, there is a lesser form of tumah, called sof tumah latzeis (lit., the tumah will eventually leave), that extends beyond the closed doors or windows, though only in the direction that one will eventually remove the tumah.

OHEL AND A NON-JEW

The poskim dispute whether non-Jewish remains convey tumah through ohel; i.e., does someone in the same room as non-Jewish remains become tamei? According to those who contend that non-Jewish remains convey tumas ohel, a cohen may not enter a room containing a gentile corpse or part of a corpse. Thus, a cohen should be careful not to enter any hospital except for a life-threatening emergency, since there is likely to be human remains somewhere in the hospital. Similarly, a

cohen may not enter a museum without carefully verifying that it does not contain any human remains -- an unusual circumstance. According to those who contend that non-Jewish remains do not convey tumas ohel, a cohen may enter a hospital when one may assume that it contains no Jewish remains.

The Shulchan Aruch rules that non-Jewish remains do not convey tumas ohel, yet a cohen should still be machmir not to be in the same ohel as gentile remains. Thus, a cohen should not visit someone in the hospital unless there is an extenuating reason, i.e., there is something important that only he may accomplish. Similarly, a cohen should not enter a museum without verifying that it does not contain human remains. [This discussion is limited to a case where the remains in the hospital are of a non-Jew. In a situation where there are likely to be Jewish remains in the hospital, a cohen would be allowed to enter the hospital only for a life-threatening emergency (pikuach nefashos).]

Thus, if we assume that the remains contained in the dental office are a non-Jew's, then a cohen entering the office would not entail a halachic violation, but would be something that should be avoided (according to the above ruling of the Shulchan Aruch). However because of other halachic factors (too complicated to explain in this article), there is a basis to be lenient and allow a cohen to enter the dentist's office and certainly the building. Personally, I would encourage the dentist to store the remains in a way that guarantees that there is no tumas ohel, a procedure that I will gladly explain to any dentist on an individual basis, but that is too complicated to elucidate in this article.

WHAT ABOUT YANKEL KATZ'S IMPLANT?

So far we have discussed whether one may use human remains as an implant and whether a cohen may enter the office. Assuming that Yankel's Rav rules that he may rely on the remains being of a non-Jew and that one may use gentile remains, the shaylah is still not completely resolved. Because Yankel has the bone graft installed in his mouth, he will now be touching and carrying the remains, and a cohen may not touch or carry non-Jewish remains. Is there any possible solution to this issue, or must Yankel opt for a non-human product? The answer to this question lies in a different direction.

IS THERE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF REMAINS THAT CONVEYS TUMAH?

Here the issue is, how small an amount still conveys tumah? Although the amount of flesh that conveys tumah is one k'zayis, the amount of human bone that conveys tumah in this situation may be as small as a k'se'orah, the size of a barleycorn, which is tiny (Ohalos 2:7; Rambam, Tumas Meis 4:4).

How big is a k'zayis? The estimates of the poskim range from as little as 3 cc. to as much as 25 cc. A dentist typically uses less than this amount in a patient, although sometimes he might use a larger amount. Thus, one should verify this information in order to ask a shaylah. However the amount of bone used is certainly greater than the size of a barleycorn, thus precluding a cohen from receiving a dental implant of human origin.

There is one other aspect about dental offices that one should know: Some dentists keep a human skull on hand for explanation and education. A cohen should clarify in advance before visiting a dentist whether he is a skull-bearer, and should make similar research before scheduling an appointment at the podiatrist and other physicians, who often also use human remains in their surgeries or have cadaver models on hand for visual explanations. A concerned practitioner will procure plastic replicas rather than genuine human parts to minimize difficult situations for a cohen.

A cohen has the privilege of blessing the people, in addition to serving in the Beis HaMikdash, may it be built speedily in our day. Concurrent with these privileges come many responsibilities, including the requirement of avoiding tumah. This necessitates an awareness of possible tumah situations and being aware of new developments in our constantly changing society.

Revivim

Nine years ago, the idea of enacting a "Basic Law: Torah Study" was mentioned here for the first time, and thank God, the coalition now intends to enact such a law * There are three goals for the law: a declarative determination that the Torah is a supreme value; greater funding over other studies; and postponing the recruitment of Torah learners * Rabbi Haim Druckman ztz"l fulfilled in his life the commandment "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" both in the simple sense, and as interpreted by our Sages "That you shall make the name of Heaven beloved"

Recently, I was happy to hear that the coalition intends to establish in a Basic Law the value of Torah study, an idea I raised about nine years ago as part of this column. The title of the article in 'Revivim' of October 24, 2013, Issue 565 was: "Basic Law: Torah Study". Friends who searched the Internet claim that this was the first time this idea was brought up in a printed article. It seems that this is an opportunity to repeat the basics I wrote in that article, with a few additions for accuracy and clarification.

The Value of Torah study

First I wrote: "When attempting to present a vision for the State of Israel, it is imperative to first address the mitzvah of Talmud Torah (Torah study), because the unique vision of the Jewish people is revealed in the Torah; the further we expand and deepen our study of it, the more we will understand our special role as a nation, as individuals, and as family and community members.

This mitzvah is so great that our Sages said it is equivalent to all the commandments.

"Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper storey of Nithza's house, in Lydda, when this question was raised before them: Is study greater, or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Practice is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered, saying: Study is greater, for it leads to practice. Then they all answered and said: Study is greater, for it leads to action" (Talmud Kiddushin 40b). There are two meanings to the conclusion of our Sages: First, that Talmud Torah is great. Second, that it leads to action. It follows that if Talmud Torah does not lead to action, it is not great. From this we also learn the importance of action which stems from the Torah.

The Three Levels

The Jewish nation's study of Torah must take place on three levels:

- 1) Study aimed at promoting great Torah scholars who will elucidate issues for the benefit of the Clal (general populace), including morei hora'ah (law deciders), community rabbis, dayanim (judges), (rabbis) for advanced yeshiva studies.
- 2) Study aimed at training rabbis working in the fields of education and counseling: teachers, instructors, counselors, psychologists, and social workers.
- 3) Torah study for all Jews, in order to know the basics of Torah – its general rules and details – so one can manage his life according to its path. To achieve this, a lot of study time must be dedicated in the formative years of one's life, and later on throughout the years, to set times for Torah study.

At the end of the article I wrote: "In order to secure this utmost national value in our public life, a "Basic Law of Torah Study" should be enacted, affirming that "The State of Israel is committed to encourage and fund the study of Torah in Israel," while detailing the three levels of study mentioned above.

The Purpose of the Law

There are three main objectives for the law: the first, in principle, to establish in a Basic Law the supreme status of the value of Torah study, and the vision that Torah study will add light and blessing, faith and morality to all areas of life, to Israel, and to the nations of the world. As the prophet said: "In the days to come, The Mount of the LORD's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the LORD, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For instruction (Torah) shall come forth from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war" (Isaiah 2: 2-5).

The second objective is to enshrine in the Basic Law the greater funding for Torah study relative to all other important studies. And also in relation to members of different religions, who will not be able to claim that the governmental funding for Torah study comes from a budget intended for all religions, but rather, as the vision of the Jewish state, the value of Torah study has been enshrined on its banner, in order to spread faith and morality in Israel, and to all the families of the world.

The third objective is enshrining in the Basic Law the postponement of the recruitment of Yeshiva students whose Torah study is for the sake Judaism's existence, and the fulfillment of the vision of the People of Israel.

Torah Study for the Growth of Talmidei Chachamim

As mentioned, Torah study should take place on three levels. One, the study of Talmidei Chachamim (Torah scholars) who delve deeper into the Torah in order to understand its foundations and reasons, and reveal its light to the Clal, to the family, and to the individual. To clarify its halachot (laws) and guidance; what is mutar (permitted) and what is assur (forbidden); what mitzvah is obligatory, and what is reshut (optional); Sabbaths and holidays; legal procedures; resolving personal and public conflicts; establishing decent work procedures; long-term planning for a healthy, spiritual life for society, and the economy. These Torah scholars will also lead the communities, teach in yeshivas, and serve as judges in the Jewish Law courts.

From this, it will be possible to have a good and blessed influence on the entire world. For thanks to the developing science and the enormous power given today in the hands of humans, we desperately need moral guidance. There are nations who live in unprecedented abundance, but their lives are liable to lose their deep spiritual meaning, and thus become dreary and futile. Beside them live nations, many of whom are poor, destitute and suffer from hunger and disease, and their terrible frustrations are liable to erupt and endanger the world.

It is the role of the People of Israel to spread the light of faith, Torah and morality to the world, and thus, extend blessing and vitality to all peoples. To this end, we need to develop Talmidei Chachamim who will devote themselves to their studies while at the same time, have knowledge of the culture and its values, so that they can illuminate and guide the actual lives of the individual, and society.

Torah Study for the Training of Educators and Counselors

The second level relates to the training of Talmidei Chachamim who will engage in education, teaching, counseling, and therapy. There is no need to expand on the field of education and its importance, but it is clear that in order for teachers to be able to fulfill their mission, they must know a great deal of Torah – in breadth, and depth. For psychologists and social workers as well, it is appropriate that in addition to all the wisdom and professional knowledge accumulated over the generations, they should delve deeper into the areas of the Torah that pertain to their vocation, so they can continue the light and blessing of the Torah into their professional lives.

Torah Study for All

The third level relates to the mitzvot of Torah learning imposed on every Jew, who should attempt to encompass all the foundations of the Torah, in Halacha, Mussar (ethics), and Machshava (thought). This is because studying the Torah with Derech Eretz, honesty, and an ayin tovah (positive outlook) strengthens the national and personal identity of every Jew, and reveals the light of his soul. Out of this, one's character traits are perfected, and brings him to perform good deeds. That is why every Jew is obligated in the mitzvah of Torah study (Rambam Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:8).

Moreover, each person's individual study contributes to the entire Clal. First, because it is impossible to create a good society without all its members being full partners in its vision. Second, since there is no person who is similar to his fellow man, consequently, every Jew who studies Torah reveals in it, his own special spark. And since part of the study is done in a group, thus his insights arise as questions or answers and are included in the general study, deepen the understanding, and take part in the complete revelation of the Torah.

Unfortunately, within the framework of institutionalized education, students are unable to learn everything that is needed to guide life from a Torah point of view. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on perfecting the study program, and developing frameworks for setting times for Torah study for adults.

Torah Scholars and the Soldiers

Since one of the objectives of the law is to regulate the postponement of the service of yeshiva students, it is necessary to mention the general purpose of public Torah study. The Torah designated the Kohanim (priests) and the Levites

to be Torah learners and teachers for the Jewish people, but in no way is this a separation from Clal Yisrael. On the contrary, in Israel's camp in the desert, the Kohanim and Levites resided in the center of the camp. And in the Land of Israel, in addition to the Temple being in the center, the Levites and the Kohanim were scattered throughout the tribes of Israel, so that they would be connected to all of Israel wherever they were, and could teach them Torah. The terumot and ma'asrot (tithes) that the Israelites gave to the Kohanim and Levites, was also intended to strengthen the connection of the Torah scholars to the working people, with whom they rejoiced in good days of abundance, and grieved with in times of sorrow and hardship.

Furthermore, one of the main roles of the Kohanim and the Levites was to encourage military service, since in addition to the Kohen Ha-Gadol (high priest) who was responsible for the work of the Temple, another Kohen was appointed whose role was to encourage the warriors of Israel, and he was called the "Kohen Mashuach Milchama" (a Kohen who is anointed for purposes of war) (Deuteronomy 20:2-4). With him were other Kohanim and Levites who accompanied all the soldiers in Israel to their camps, and their job was to encourage the soldiers by blowing trumpets and saying words of encouragement, as a rabbinical and educational corps. They also served as military police, since it was the Levites who served as policemen, who dismissed from the camp those entitled, and punished those who evaded the campaign (Mishnah Sotah 8:6).

Rabbi Haim Druckman ztz"l

This week we attended the funeral of Rabbi Haim Druckman ztz"l, who in his life fulfilled the mitzvah "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart", both in the simple sense, and also in the sense of what our Sages said: "That you shall make the name of Heaven beloved, in that he should read Torah, and learn Mishna, and serve Torah scholars, and he should be pleasant with people in his business transactions. What do people say about such a person? Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah, fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah, woe to the people who have not studied Torah. So-and-so, who taught him Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how proper are his deeds. The verse states about him and others like him: "You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Yoma 86a).

In addition to his special leadership and outstanding devotion, Rabbi Haim Druckman ztz"l was the beloved and faithful student of our teacher and mentor Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda. Like him, he explained and repeated to his students, the necessity of studying Torah in the name of all of Israel, and for the sake of all of Israel. And that the Second Temple was destroyed because the Torah scholars did not recite the initial blessing over the Torah, in other words, they did not learn out of faith in God "Who chose us from all the nations" and from that "gave us His Torah". As a continuation of this, he taught that true Talmidei Chachamim should be the first to understand the magnitude of the mitzvah in military service, and the magnitude of the mitzvah to settle the Land of Israel and engage in its development from a scientific, social, and economic point of view. Talmidei Chachamim should increase shalom (peace) in the world, because shalom expresses the divine idea that unites all parts of Am Yisrael, and the goodness and truth in all views.

The "Basic Law of Torah Study" is intended to raise Talmidei Chachamim like the example of Rabbi Haim Druckman ztz"l.

This article appears in the 'Besheva' newspaper and was translated from Hebrew. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

לע"נ

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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 ('eret'). 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-eret Canaan va-yevarech oti,
va-yomer eilai, [and blessed me saying:]
'Hineni MAFRECHA ve-HIRBITICHA 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-rishtecha et 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 yihyeh 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; Ephraim 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"). Ephraim 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 Ephraim. 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 Eza 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, Ephraim 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 Ephraim 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 Ephraim may reach higher levels than Menashe, he insists upon blessing both of them together. Yaakov does not want these slight differences between Ephraim 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 Ephraim. Despite their different destinies, Ephraim 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 Ephraim 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 Ephraim 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-bitarim' - 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 leader. 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 recognize 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 Ephraim and Menashe, "ha-mal'ach ha-goel...", 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 Ephraim 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' Ephraim & Menashe in a similar manner, and save them from Egyptian influence, to the point that they should be known as Yaakov's offspring, and not as Egyptian princes [hence "v'yikareh bahem shmi, v'shem avotei..."]

B. HA-TACHAT 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 'pilegash') - 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.

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?

[parenthetic 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'reisheet #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'forno 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'forno'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'rakhah 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'forno (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'khorah 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'khor, 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'forno'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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Parashat Vayechi: A Family Becomes a Nation

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

:
This week's parasha 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 Sedom), 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 *decidence* 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'uven'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.

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-I 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-Yeishav, Mikkeitz, and Va-Yigash have shown that the sons of Ya'akov are highly diverse people. Re'uven, 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 Levi) demands a different set of leadership characteristics than does leading a nation into a new land, conquering it, and apportioning it (Yehoshua, Shevet Ephrayim). 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: VaYeishav, 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 Canaan. Yosef also assures his brothers before his own death that Hashem will "remember" them and eventually return them to Canaan. But our parasha also directs our attention to the dual connections established by the Avot with Eretz Canaan:

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 Canaan, 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 Canaan 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 Canaan, 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 Hebron, 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 Canaan? Avraham has been promised by Hashem that he will receive Eretz Canaan. 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 Canaan. 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 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 Canaan 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 Canaan. 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 Hebron:

- 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 Canaan 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 Canaan 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 Canaan 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 Canaan 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 Canaan, 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 Canaan, it also guarantees that Bnei Yisrael will not forget their connection to the land.

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