

**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.**

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

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.**

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**Mazel-Tov to Margie & Steve Eiserike on their special wedding anniversary!  
Mazel-Tov to their children and grandchildren on this joyous event!**

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Sefer Bereishis focuses on families from early human history, rapidly covering 2332 years from the birth of Adam and Chava to the death of Levi (last of Yaakov's sons to die). During most of this period, relationships among siblings range from murderous to strained. After killing his brother, Kayin responds to a question from Hashem with: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). Immoral behavior quickly descends to Hashem deciding to unwind the world and start over with a plan B.

After the flood, Shem's descendants still struggle living with each other. Sarah sends Yishmael away to prevent him from adversely 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. Yosef's brothers cannot speak to him in peace, and they throw him into a pit from which traders (descendants of Ishmael) take and sell him to slave traders going to Egypt. During a severe famine, Yosef sends the brothers food from Egypt but insists that all the brothers come to him if they want any additional food. Once Yosef reveals his identity, the brothers "reconcile," but the other brothers never really accept Yosef's assurances that he will continue to protect them.

Given the difficult relations in the family, the surprise is that all of Yaakov's children merit to stay in the family and become the tribes of B'Nai Yisrael. Even so, the sons of Leah never feel secure living under the protection of Yosef, son of Rachel. Rabbi Haim Ovadia asks why Yaakov selects Yehuda – not Yosef – to lead the political future of B'Nai Yisrael. Yaakov does not trust Reuven, and Shimon and Levi have murdered the men of Shechem. Yehudah is the oldest son Yaakov trusts, and Yaakov leaves the political future with Yehudah. (Rabbi Ovadia explores why Yaakov selects Yehudah rather than Yosef.) Yaakov leaves the religious priority with Levi, but it is unclear how much of this selection comes from Hashem rather than Yaakov. Rabbi Ovadia discusses further disputes among descendants of the brothers and relates how and when the various tribes fade out of B'Nai Yisrael.

Relations between brothers are not always difficult. Manasseh and Ephraim have no reported disputes in the Torah, and Manasseh has no dispute with Yaakov's decision to give his younger brother the stronger bracha. In Sefer Shemot, we shall see that Aharon has no problem with his younger brother Moshe being the political leader of B'Nai Yisrael. However,

closeness of Yaakov's sons does not always last for many generations. For example, Rabbi Ovadia notes that Shimon's descendant Zimri performs ugly idol worship in front of B'Nai Yisrael in breaking with Levi (Moshe). After the reign of Joshua, Ephraim becomes involved with murder, idolatry, and a political split of Yisrael from Yehudah.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander carries the theme of relationships among Jews to later history. When David becomes king, for the first seven years of his reign, he rules only the territory of Yehudah and nearby land (from Hebron). Shaul's son Ish Boshet rules the rest of the territory of B'Nai Yisrael. After seven years, Ish Boshet's men go against and assassinate him. At that point, all the tribes ask David to rule the entire country. David moves the government to Jerusalem, which had not been part of any of the tribes' territory, so he can rule from a location that is not associated with any one tribe. For the last thirty-three years of his reign, David leads a unity government, and this unity lasts through the reign of King Solomon.

With unity comes strength. For too long, Israel has had several political parties, with none of them holding a majority in the Knesset. Any Israeli government must deal with five factions – religious, secular, haradi, Arab, and overseas. The struggles of brothers and tribes in the early days of our people continue, but now with five distinct factions. Israel has never had a single political party controlling a majority of the Knesset. In the 2022 elections, three parties combined have 71 of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Seven more parties each have 5 or more seats. Fragmented political power keeps Israelis fighting over the political direction of the country. Hopefully at some future time the various factions in Israel will come together, respect each other's views, and work for a better future.

We still have a mandate to represent God's mitzvot and values and to influence our people and other nations to follow God's desires. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, started me on the path to learn more about this legacy, a study that I keep exploring. May we all leave this world a better place than we found it. May we see this day in our lifetimes.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezl Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

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### **Haftarat Parshat Vayechi: A Lion in Jerusalem**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \*  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

This week's haftara speaks about the last will and testament of King David, conveyed to his son, Shlomo. After this, the haftara closes with a short, matter-of-fact summary of David's reign: *"The length of time that David had reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned in Hebron for seven years, he reigned in Jerusalem for thirty-three years"* (I Kings 2:11).

At first glance, this seems like a simple biographical note, similar to summaries of the reigns of the subsequent monarchs that appear throughout the book of Kings, noting how long they ruled and where they lived. Upon closer inspection, however, we can discern a deeper significance to this fact about David, one which sheds light both on his own character and the national character of the Jewish people, then and now.

After the death of Shaul, as recorded at the end of I Samuel, David began to reign as king in Hebron. However, at that point he was not, in practice, king of all of Israel. Shaul's son Ish Boshet still ruled over the majority of the tribes, while David held sway only over the tribe of Yehuda and its immediate environs. Only seven years later, when Ish Boshet's rule crumbled and he was assassinated by his own men, did David assume rule over the entire nation of Israel.

At that point, we are told )II Samuel, chapter 5(, that the tribes of Israel approached David in Hebron and asked him to assume kingship over all the people. After that covenant was established, the very first thing that David did was to capture the city of Jerusalem and move his capital there. As king of the entire nation, he could not maintain his capital in a sectarian city like Hebron, which was closely associated with the tribe of Yehuda from which he hailed. Rather, **it was important for him to rule from Jerusalem, a city that is not associated with any particular tribe, but is the territory of the entire nation** )Rambam Hilchot Beit HaB'chira 7:14(, symbolizing the impartial and national nature of his rule. ]emphasis added[

Hence, David's reign in Hebron and that in Jerusalem differed not only in simple geography. They differed fundamentally in their scope and nature. As king in Hebron, David ruled only over a specific subset of the Jewish people. He was tasked with looking after their needs in accordance with their specific character. When ruling from Jerusalem, however, he was responsible for all the tribes, without privileging any one over the others. **Jerusalem, in that sense, symbolizes a sense of holistic responsibility for the Jewish people, and the recognition that all its different tribes are equally important and have something to contribute.** ]emphasis added[

Rabbi Moshe Alshich )Tzfat, 1508–1593( offers a powerful reading of this contrast between Hebron and Jerusalem in his commentary on our parsha )49:9(:

*“Yehuda is a lion’s cub”* – This is a reference to King David, who at first would be a cub ruling only in Hebron over Judea, but who afterward would become a full-grown lion ruling all of Israel ]in Jerusalem[ as a lion is king of beasts. Why was David's full rule not consummated immediately? It was because he had to fulfill the prophecy *“From the prey, my son, you have risen,”* to acquire that highest level of kingship. At first, when he and his brothers conspired to kill Yosef, and cast him into a pit, Yehuda did not protest, since he did not wish to lord over his brothers. He was able to control only himself, keeping his silence and not joining in the fray. In this same way, David first took control of only his own tribe. Only afterward did Yehuda muster the fortitude to stand up to his brothers and convince them not to kill Yosef. And this is parallel to David's later success in winning over the other tribes until he ruled them all. From thence forward he would be called a lion.

In our own day, the lesson of leadership through unity could not be more pressing. During his tenure, former Israeli President Reuven Rivlin articulated a language of **four modern “tribes” of Israel – religious, secular, haredi, and Arab. To this we might add the Jews of the diaspora** in their various denominations, whose membership and contribution to Am Yisrael as a whole cannot be underestimated. Even if we have very deep, principled disagreements with many of our brothers and sisters, recognizing the inherent worth and value of every Jew, as well as the non-Jewish members of our society, must be a paramount Jewish value symbolized by the city of Jerusalem. Recognizing the inherent value of Jerusalem, both symbolically and in a very real practical and physical sense, as the eternal seat of Jewish kingship is essential in guaranteeing our future as a unified nation.

**Jerusalem is the eternal capital of Israel, not only politically, but spiritually and ethically as well.** It represents our commitment to one another and the idea that God, our true King, is ruler of all of us equally. May we be blessed, despite political pressures to the contrary, to **always remember that David's full sovereignty only begins when he rules in Jerusalem.** ]emphasis added[

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsny.org) or 212-935-8672. **Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.**

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-vayechi-rabbi-brander-5786/>

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## Vayechi: Shhhhhh... The Secret of Immortality

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2007

*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 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 shhhhh... **the secret of immortality.**

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-vayechi/>

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## **For Real This Time, What’s the Story with Christmas Gifts?**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2017

So what is the story with Christmas gifts and office Christmas parties?

Last week we saw that the Talmud draws a number of red lines to ensure that our active involvement in the surrounding society does not lead us into religiously problematic areas. One of those red lines is around practices that relate to the religious holidays of other faiths.

The first Mishnah teaches that we may not do business with pagans on, or even three days preceding, their holidays. The underlying concern is that we should not be supporting non-Jews in their *avodah zarah*, a term that refers less to idolatry than to the worship of foreign gods. Noahide laws prohibit non-Jews from worshipping foreign gods, and it is forbidden for us to even indirectly aid them in this act. What is notable is that the Talmud does not frame the problem as one of us connecting to the world of *avodah zarah*. It is all about how we relate to its practitioners.

Taking this restriction at face-value would lead us to conclude that we cannot give gifts or attend holiday parties. But there are many reasons to challenge this conclusion.

Perhaps the most obvious challenge is to question whether these gifts or parties really have any religious meaning at all. Aren’t they just part of the secular celebration of Christmas, and not a religious practice in any way?

In fact, we find a number of cases in the Talmud where great rabbis gave gifts to non-Jews on their holidays. Both Rava and Rav Yehudah sent presents to non-Jews on a pagan holiday, explaining that they knew that the particular non-Jews in question “*did not worship idols.*” (*Avodah Zarah* 64b-65a). Significantly, the gifts here are referred to as *korvana*, an “offering,” or even, “a sacrifice,” a gift clearly connected to the holiday itself. Although they were holiday gifts, the focus on the practitioners allows them to be given when they do not hold religious meaning for the recipient.

What if a person’s doorman is a devout Catholic, would such gift giving then be forbidden? This brings us to the question of whether Christianity is seen as a form of *avodah zarah*, and if so, from whose perspective?

While the Talmud goes to lengths to define which acts are considered to be acts of worshipping *avodah zarah*, it never discusses which faiths are considered to be *avodah zarah* religions. Not all religions outside of Judaism are defined as such. Islam, which arose after the Talmud, was deemed by halakhic authorities not to be *avodah zarah*: it was a monotheism free of the use of images.

When it came to Christianity, however, Rishonim ruled almost unanimously that it was a form of *avodah zarah*. This does not mean it was considered to be idolatry, or – as is often widely misunderstood – that the Trinity was seen as a form of

Polytheism. The term *avodah zarah* means “foreign worship,” and this refers either to the worship of foreign gods (“*You shall have no other gods before me*”, Ex. 9:3), or to an act of worship which is foreign, that is, the worship – even of God Godself – through an image or some other physical object (“*Lest you corrupt and make for yourself some image...*”, Deut. 9:16). Christianity’s idea of a God who becomes incarnate, and its concept of the Trinity, makes their idea of God at odds with the Jewish one; a “foreign” God. And the use of images, statues and icons in its services – which was true for all denominations prior to the Reformation – is likewise seen as a foreign form of worship.

All of this sounds harsh to modern, tolerant sensibilities. We do not want to be putting ourselves in a position to judge the rightness or wrongness of others’ religious practices. Halakhah, however, had to do so – not so much to judge others, but to determine the implication of their religious practices for us. Next week, we will see how a more tolerant approach towards other’s religions was integrated into these and related halakhot.

Working with this current framing, we must ask: if the person to whom you wish to give the gift is a devout Christian... is it then a problem? Not necessarily. This question already arose, in a different form, for the Rishonim, and the answer to it led

both to a rethinking of the restrictions against business on Christian holidays, and also to a reconfiguring of how we relate to Christians and Christianity.

For Tosafot and the other Rishonim, the problem wasn’t gifts, it was doing business. Sundays were the prime market days, and Jews in the Middle Ages did business on these days with Christians in apparent disregard of the Talmudic restrictions. Tosafot gives a number of justifications for his community’s practice. One set of rationales acknowledged that the restrictions did still apply, but argued that they could be overridden to prevent *eivah*, enmity and hatred that would be directed at the Jews were they to refrain from doing business with Christians on Sundays. A different, more positive, formulation can be found in the Tosefta (1:3) which states that “*We ask after the welfare of Gentiles on their holidays for the sake of darkhei shalom, of promoting positive relations between Jews and Gentiles.*”

A restriction which had been framed in terms of how we relate to, and support the activities of, our non-Jewish neighbors is thus overridden for the sake of maintaining positive relationships with exactly these same neighbors!

The principle that certain restrictions can be bent for the sake of making peace or avoiding hatred is anchored in this week’s parasha:

“*Said Rabbi Ilai in the name of Rebbe Eliezer son of Rabbi Shimon, It is permitted to alter the facts for the sake of peace. As it states: ‘Your father commanded before he died saying... please forgive the sin of your brothers’ (Gen. 50:16). Rav Natan said, It is a mitzvah to do so...*” (Yevamot 65b). Of course, bending the truth might be different than overriding certain restrictions, but the principle is there. And the case of Yosef and his brothers was not just one of promoting peace, it also was about preventing *eivah*: “*Lest Yosef bear hatred towards us and requite onto us all the evil that we did to him*” (Gen. 50:15). Sometimes *eivah* and *darkhei shalom* are two sides of the same coin.

However, *darkhei shalom* can also stand alone. Healthy relations with the members of the society in which one lives can be an intrinsically good thing, and it can at times justify permitting certain restricted practices even when Jews have little to fear from their neighbors. This approach is expressed in Yerushalmi (1:1) which states that the restrictions in the Mishnah are limited to non-Jews whom you do not have a relationship with. But when it comes to a non-Jew whom you know, then “*it is permissible, because it is nothing more than flattering them.*” To show a colleague or friend that you understand that it is her holiday, and to act towards her in ways that are expected, is understood by her and by everyone to be a form of good manners and respectful interaction, and not a way of supporting or identifying with her religious holiday.

Yerushalmi goes so far as to apply this even to participating in the holiday celebrations: “*We taught: If he enters a town and sees them rejoicing, he rejoices with them, for it is nothing other than flattering them.*” It is quite shocking to read that

a Jew is permitted to participate in a celebration taking place on a true pagan holiday. And yet, for Yerushalmi, the proper context of the Jew's rejoicing is understood by all present, and the rejoicing is thus permitted. Rema cites Yerushalmi's permission to rejoice with them, but interprets it to ultimately be about concerns for ill will, choosing to see less value in darkhei shalom here for its own sake (YD 148:12).

So, as far as attending holiday parties at one's work are concerned, if they are not religious, even if they are holiday-themed, there should be no problem at all. But even if there are religious elements, one could attend such parties for the sake of darkhei shalom to foster positive interactions, or, minimally, so as not to look bad or hurt one's relationships with her co-workers, boss, or clients.

When it comes to holiday gifts, Rema permits them to be sent on the holiday itself. He states, however, that if possible, the gift should be sent the day or night before (YD 148:12). This ruling is based on Trumat HaDeshen (195), who cites the concern of possible enmity. He also makes explicit that the holiday in question is not Christmas: *"Even nowadays, if one wants to send a gift on the eighth day after Nittel (the nativity day, i.e., Christmas), on the day that they call New Year, he should send it to him the night before and not on the day of the holiday itself. But if the day before is Shabbat, he can send it on the holiday itself, for there will be hatred if he sends it to him many days before the holiday."*

What emerges from all this is that it is permitted to give a gift at Christmastime to your co-worker or doorman, although it is best to give it before Christmas itself. For some of the recipients, the gift has no religious meaning anyways. But they may even be given to our religious co-workers, whether to prevent bad feelings or to promote good will and positive relations.

We have discussed all of this is without even addressing the second set of answers that Tosafot gives for doing business on Sunday, answers that lead to a broader rethinking of halakha's approach towards Christians and Christianity. We will look at these issues next time.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

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### **Vayhi: Did Jacob Know He Was Entering Exile?**

#### **Human Awareness and Divine Plan**

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel \*

The reader of the Torah knows something the characters do not. Long before Jacob descends to Egypt, God has already foretold to Abraham that his descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, enslaved and oppressed for some four hundred years (Genesis 15). From the vantage point of *berit ben ha-betarim* (covenant between the halves), Jacob's journey to Egypt is no accident; it is the fulfillment of a divine decree. It also is plausible that Jacob was consciously aware of God's covenant with Abraham through family tradition. But the Torah repeatedly invites a more difficult and human question: did Jacob himself understand that this descent to Egypt marked the beginning of exile?

#### **Covenant Without Clarity**

This question is sharpened by the narrative itself. The Joseph cycle contains remarkably little overt prophecy. In fact, God speaks directly to Jacob only once in the entire narrative, as Jacob began his departure for Egypt (46:2–4). The Torah introduces the revelation by noting that Jacob was afraid to descend to Egypt. Several classical commentators seek to identify the source of this fear.

Ramban offers a far-reaching interpretation: Jacob intuited that this descent marked the beginning of exile. His fear stemmed from an awareness — perhaps instinctive, perhaps theological — that Egypt would not merely be a place of refuge. Yet as Rabbi Elhanan Samet observes, this explanation raises a methodological problem. How could Jacob know

this? He is responding to immediate and pressing circumstances: a devastating famine and the astonishing discovery that Joseph, long presumed dead, is alive and ruling Egypt. Nothing in the text suggests that Jacob consciously identifies his journey with the covenantal vision shown to Abraham two generations earlier.

Hizkuni offers a more plausible middle ground. Jacob does not know that exile is beginning, but he suspects it. Jacob's fear reflects uncertainty rather than foreknowledge. He senses that something momentous is unfolding but cannot yet be certain.

God's response subtly confirms this suspicion without fully resolving it. Jacob is told not to fear descending to Egypt, "for *there I will make you into a great nation.*" This promise itself implies permanence. A great nation cannot emerge in the span of a few remaining years of famine relief. Egypt is now identified as the place where Israel's national identity will take shape. What Jacob feared instinctively (according to Hizkuni) is now given divine validation: this is not a temporary sojourn, but rather the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham.

### **Gained Over Time**

Only later does the clarity of the characters gain expression. Toward the end of his life, Jacob tells Joseph, "God will be with you and will bring you back to the land of your fathers" (48:21). The tone here is now markedly different. The promise of return has become explicit, suggesting that Jacob now understands Egypt as a long-term sojourn.

That understanding becomes even clearer in Joseph's final words. Speaking to his brothers decades later, Joseph declares that God will surely remember them and bring them up from Egypt, and he binds them by oath to carry his bones with them

when that moment comes (50:24–25). Joseph not only anticipates redemption; he anticipates bondage. Egypt, once a place of salvation, becomes a place from which salvation will be needed.

The Torah thus presents exile not as a fully conscious choice at its inception, but as a reality that becomes legible only over time. Jacob enters Egypt out of necessity and hope, not with a clear sense of historical destiny. Awareness of exile emerges gradually.

This narrative choice is theologically significant. The Torah does not portray its patriarchs as omniscient actors executing a known script. They live forward, with partial knowledge, responding faithfully to circumstances whose deeper meaning will only be revealed in retrospect. Exile begins not with clarity, but with confusion — and redemption, when it comes, will likewise be recognized only when it is already underway.

\* Yeshiva University and National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3398>

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### **Memory, History and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

Some time ago, I was watching old home movies that were filmed during the early 1950s. On the screen I saw myself as a little boy. The movies were filled with laughing, dancing, singing relatives and friends — most of whom are no longer alive.

I had the surrealistic experience of watching my parents — both long deceased — when I was actually much older than they were at the time when the movies were taken.

Looking at old movies or old photographs has a way of casting a spell on us. It transports us into the past. For a few short moments, we may vividly feel that we've returned to the past, that we are reliving an earlier time in our lives.

Studies of memory have demonstrated that we do not merely remember past events, but we also remember the feelings associated with those events. We smell freshly baked bread — and suddenly we are a child in our mother's kitchen. We hear a synagogue melody — and suddenly we are a little boy holding our father's hand in the synagogue, we are a little girl sidling up against our mother.

Our lives are deeply enriched by the memories of our past. We especially value those precious instants when we seem to be transported into the past, into the world of our memories.

This phenomenon has great relevance for our understanding of our relationship to history. As Jews, and as human beings, we are able to expand our memories far beyond our own personal experiences. By reading and studying, we enlarge our historical memories to include the generations that have preceded us. The more expansive our knowledge of the Jewish past, the more intense and the more vibrant should be our own Jewishness. We see the past not as something distant and impersonal, referring to others; but rather, we experience history as part of our own extended memory. It is personal and immediate. We empathize with and identify with our ancestors, almost as though we are with them.

This week's Torah reading includes Jacob's blessing of his grandchildren and concludes with the words: "*and let my name be named in them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth*" (Bereishith 48:16). The medieval Italian Jewish commentator, Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, suggests that Jacob wanted his descendants to feel linked to their righteous ancestors, so that they would live their lives so as to be worthy progeny of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were to recall their ancestors not as abstract personalities, but as genuine presences in their lives.

For the Jewish people, history has always been experienced as a dimension of the present. As we go through life, we bring along our ancestors. We carry their names, we feel their presence.

Professor Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his book *Zakhor*, makes a distinction between history and memory. History is an academic discipline dedicated to uncovering data from the past. It is cold, objective, dispassionate. On the other hand, memory is warm and personal. Professor Yerushalmi notes a paradox that while modern Jewry has experienced a phenomenal explosion in the field of Jewish history, at the same time the Jewish memory seems to have declined seriously. Jews may know more facts about Jewish history, but they may feel less connected to those facts.

We need to understand without any equivocation that Jewishness lives and is transmitted by means of memory, by feeling a living connection with our past. The study of history should lead us to expand our memories and our identification with our people's past; it should help us to feel that we are part of the long chain of Jewish tradition.

Home movies and old photographs are made of inanimate material. The people in the pictures cannot change. What gives life to the figures is our memory. Likewise, the data of Jewish history can only come alive if we animate them, if we treat them not as abstractions but as real and ongoing presences in our lives, if we can feel — at least at special moments — that we ourselves have re-entered the past.

Our continuity as a people is inextricably linked to our historical memory. We bring the past into the present; we project the present into the future. This is one of the great responsibilities of Jewish parents and grandparents — to imbue the younger generations with a sense of belonging to, and participating in, the history of our people.

This is also one of our great privileges and a source of our deepest fulfillment as Jews.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/bridges-not-walls-collection-articles>

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## **Hashem is My Shepherd**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

When Dovid debuted his famous Psalm, “*Hashem is my shepherd*,” many people objected. The Medrash (*Shocher Tov* 23) tells us that they wondered how Dovid could compare Hashem to the lowly profession of the shepherd. Dovid responded, I took guidance from Yakov who declared (48:15), “*Hashem has shepherded me throughout my life.*”

In fact, the Medrash (*Shimos* 2) tells us that Moshe got his training as a leader as shepherd of Yisro’s sheep. He took such good care of the sheep that Hashem declared, “*Let him be entrusted to care for My sheep*,” the Jewish people.

What exactly is the quality of a shepherd that caused Yakov, Dovid, and even Hashem Himself to admire the profession and see it as an analogy for benevolent leadership?

Dovid describes the role of the shepherd, “*In lush meadows He pastures me; by calm waters He allows me to rest.*” Therefore, “*Even as I walk in the darkest of times, I do not fear.*” The trust that the sheep have in the Shepherd is similar to the principle of juxtaposing redemption to prayer. Each morning, we are careful to first describe the redemption from Mitzrayim, and then to segue directly into prayer without interruptions. Our faith is not blind or small-minded. Our faith is based on experience of how Hashem cared for us in the past. When we identify the many times that Hashem shepherded us lovingly with blessing and redemption, we can apply that trust to a current crisis and — instead of channeling those emotions into fright — we are able to channel our emotions into heartfelt Tefilla to Hashem.

Rav Matisyahu Salomon suggests that when Yakov looked back at his awesome lifetime full of crisis and resolution, he realized that there were times that he failed. When the brothers reported how Yosef demanded that Binyomin be brought to him, Yakov exclaimed, “*Why have you done bad to me?*” In retrospect, Yakov realized, that this demand was a fulfillment of Yosef’s prophetic dreams, and it was meant to transition the Jewish family into Golus (exile) with dignity.

Similarly, when Yakov met Paroh, Yakov described his life as bad (difficult). In retrospect, Yakov realized that every challenge he had with Esav and Lavan was paving the way for us, his descendants, to succeed when we encounter similar challenges. The tests of Yakov’s life were chosen by the Shepherd as the exact, precise conditions in which he needed to be in at any particular time.

In fact, Rav Matisyahu suggested, that we should take notice of the way the Hebrew word for shepherd is spelled in Yakov’s statement. Instead of being spelled רועה it is spelled רעה with tradition telling us to read it with the appropriate

vowels to mean shepherd. The spelling guides us to appreciate that Yakov was saying that things that looked to me as **רָעָה** – bad, were revealed to the discerning eye as being from the **בָּרוּךְ** – the trusted Shepherd.

When Dovid authored that famous Psalm, he was tapping into an amazing illustration of trust that exists between sheep and their shepherd. After a shepherd tends to the sheep loyally, if he tells the sheep to move on, the sheep trust him and accept the new conditions. This was Yakov's recognition which he shared with Yosef and which the Torah records for us as a national legacy. Dovid described this national legacy well when he said, *“Even as I walk in the darkest of times, I do not fear because I trust that You are with me”* guiding and controlling precisely every step of the way.

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](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.

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## Vayechi – Uncommon Common Sense

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* © 2021

Before Yaakov's passing, Yosef brings his children, Menashe and Efraim, to receive a blessing from their saintly grandfather. As we do to this day, Yaakov placed his hands on the heads of his grandchildren when blessing them. The physical connection helps to focus our intent, and thereby increases the intensity of the blessing. The dominant hand adds greater focus than the weaker hand. Yosef, therefore, carefully places his older son, Menashe, on Yaakov's right side in order that Yaakov should place his right hand on Menashe's head. In this way, the older son will receive the greater impact of the blessing.

Yaakov, then, carefully crosses his hands and places his right hand to his left on the head of Efraim. He explains to Yosef that both children will be great. However, he had seen through prophecy that Efraim's descendants will be greater. Therefore, the greater strength of the blessing should be given to Efraim.

The Torah uses an unusual word to describe Yaakov's action of crossing his hands and says, “*Sikeil es yadav*” –“he gave intellect to his hands.” The Rada”k explains that the Torah is telling us that Yaakov 's actions displayed intellect and wisdom. As Menashe was older, it would have been natural and normal to place his right hand upon Menashe. However, since he knew through prophecy that Efraim was to be given the greater part of the blessing, he chose to divert his right hand to Efraim. In this way, when someone saw how Yaakov's hands crossed over each other, they could see wisdom and intellect through the action of the hands. Whereas, if Yaakov had placed his right hand on Menashe, that would not display intellect or wisdom, as he is simply following the normal way of the world, to place his right hand upon the older child.

When we consider the context of the Rada”k's statement, it does not seem so simple for Yaakov to place his right hand on Menashe's head. The Torah clearly states that Yaakov was blind. Menashe and Efraim had initially approached Yaakov to embrace and kiss him when they arrived. Yosef then pulled them away and carefully arranged their position so that Menashe should be on Yaakov's right side. It would seem to be an act of great wisdom to intentionally put his right hand on either grandson at that point. Yosef had not yet told Yaakov who was standing where, and Yaakov could not see on his own. Why does that Rada”k say that there is no wisdom displayed by placing his right hand on Menashe?

True wisdom is much more than simply understanding and recognizing the world around us and discerning right from wrong. Recognizing and understanding the facts and the issues is only the first step of wisdom. True wisdom is when there are two conflicting concepts and one has to understand how to balance those factors. When Yaakov weighed Efraim's future descendants against the fact the Menashe was older and decided to choose Efraim, that was a mark of wisdom. He had clearly weighed the factors and veered away from the obvious choice. Had he chosen to place his right hand on Menashe, the action would not show any wisdom. No one would be able to see that he had weighed two issues and made a decision. He would have simply made the obvious choice.

There are many situations in life where we feel strongly about issues. We can sometimes feel a certain level of pride in our moral compass and in the strength of our convictions. The Rada"k is teaching us here that feeling strongly about an issue is only the first step towards wisdom. True wisdom requires weighing two important but opposing issues. To do that, we first must see both sides of the issue and feel that both sides matter and have validity. Only then can we begin to weigh the issues against each other. Especially when we feel strongly, we need to stop and consider what other considerations there may be. When we weigh those considerations and see how our strong emotion was in error, that is when we have displayed true wisdom.

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

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## **Favorite Son vs. Man of the People**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

]Ed. note: In the past, I have printed Rabbi Ovadia's first version of this essay. Rabbi Ovadia had a later draft that he planned to edit. This draft contains additional outstanding insights, so I am printing it here with very slight edits.[

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, with 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, but the rest of the bible 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 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, and the splitting of the tribe 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. Whereas 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 thousands 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 could 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. ]Ed. note: Rabbi Ovadia here presents an atypical analysis of Joseph's actions.[

### **“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 fulfill 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 is going to 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

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **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. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights )copyright( to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

## Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation \*\*

We are deeply saddened by the horrific events at the Bondi Beach Chanukah celebration and our thoughts are with all those impacted. We extend heartfelt condolences to their bereaved families and to all those injured. Their memory shall remain a blessing and a source of enduring strength to our people.

This Shabbat we are finishing the book of Bereishit -- don't miss it. We read how Yaakov gathers his children to bless them. After blessing his own sons, he turns to Yosef's two children.

Yosef brings his sons forward, placing Menashe, the firstborn, at Yaakov's right hand, and Ephraim, the younger, at Yaakov's left. But Yaakov deliberately crosses his hands, placing his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Menashe.

Yosef immediately objects, reminding his father that Menashe is the older son and deserves the more prominent blessing. Yet Yaakov insists, saying that he knows exactly what he is doing.

And this leads to this week's Shabbat table question:

What the heck, Yaakov?! You've done this before. You chose a favourite once already -- and it nearly led to Yosef's death, ending instead with slavery and decades of family trauma. Have you learned nothing?

So why does Yaakov do it again? That's this week's around-the-Shabbat-table discussion: Why did Yaakov do this again!(?)

Shabbat Shalom. B'Ahavat Yisrael.

\* Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message for the congregation? [

**Bridging the Generations: The Holocaust and Its Legacy:** The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand is hosting the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on January 25, 2026, in Auckland. Created in 2005 by the United Nations, 27 January -- the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau -- is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which honours and remembers the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This year's commemoration is dedicated to strengthening the crucial link between the past and the future, empowering younger generations to carry the torch of remembrance and responsibility.

\*\* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

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### Rav Kook Torah Vayechi: Jacob's Sword and Bow

Before his death, Jacob gathered his sons together and blessed them. To his beloved Joseph, Jacob promised an

additional portion, “which I took from the Amorites with my sword and bow” )Gen. 48:22(.

It is striking just how out of character this statement is for Jacob. Jacob was the ish tam, the scholarly man who dwelled in the “*tents of Torah*.” Jacob was the one who greeted his angry brother with gifts, not weapons. Jacob was the one who castigated his sons for attacking the residents of Shechem after the abduction of his daughter. So what is this talk of swords and bows?

The Sages interpreted his statement as referring — not to weapons of war — but to instruments of prayer:

*“Does it not say, ‘I do not trust in my bow, and my sword will not save me’ )Psalms 44:7(? Rather, ‘my sword’ refers to prayer, and ‘my bow’ )be-kashti( refers to supplication )bakashah(.” )Baba Batra 123a(.*

Is this just a homiletical interpretation of Jacob’s curious pronouncement? What do swords and bows have to do with prayer?

### **Mental Preparation for Prayer**

Thousands of years ago, a sect of especially pious individuals, known as the chasidim rishonim, resided in the Land of Israel. The Mishnah records their practice of meditating for a full hour before each prayer. They would not begin to pray until they were certain that “*their hearts were fully directed toward their Father in heaven*” )Mishnah Berakhot 5:1(.

What kind of meditative techniques did these chasidim rishonim use?

Rav Kook suggested that Jacob’s “sword” and “bow” are mental tools employed to ready oneself for prayer. These weapons represent methods to clear one’s thoughts and refine one’s mental images in preparation for a pure experience of prayer.

*“The meditative method that utilizes the refined visualization of ‘the great negation’ — necessary in order to cleave to the light of the Ein Sof — this technique purifies all of life’s forces. It raises them above all lowly, mundane qualities. It also elevates everything associated with the person who meditates using mystical unifications, by reflecting on this profound thought with all the depths of one’s spirit and soul, with spiritual clarity and elevation.”*

The “sword” is thus a technique to slash and cut away all erroneous thoughts, pruning away all limiting concepts of God. This process is the “*great negation*.” We reject the idolatrous defining of the Infinite and the Unlimited, and we gain awareness of the all-encompassing light of the Ein Sof.

### **Taking Aim**

And what about Jacob’s “bow”? This refers to focus and concentration. As Rav Kook continues:

*“Prayer that is based on this lofty yearning is infused with pure inspiration. It scores its mark like the bow and arrow of a champion archer. ‘With my sword and bow’ — ‘with my prayer and supplication.’”*

Thus the “bow” is a metaphor for a state of mental focus during prayer. The imagery is taken from the practiced art of an

expert archer, who takes careful aim before releasing the arrow. In fact, the Hebrew word for intention — *kavanah* — literally means “*to take aim*.”

This is a quality of pure Divine service that Jacob used to free himself from the pagan influences of the Amorites — “*with my sword and bow*.”

)Adapted from *Shemonah Kevatzim* II: 198. *Orot HaKodesh* vol. IV, p. 448(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/VAYEHI-76.htm>

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## **When Can We Lie? (5775, 5782)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, Former UK Chief Rabbi\*

After the death of Jacob, Joseph’s brothers were afraid. Years earlier, when he had revealed his true identity to them, he appeared to have forgiven them for selling him as a slave.]1[ Yet the brothers were not wholly reassured. Maybe Joseph did not mean what he said. Perhaps he still harboured resentment. Might the only reason he had not yet taken revenge was respect for Jacob. There was a convention in those days that there was to be no settling of scores between siblings in the lifetime of the father. We know this from an earlier episode. After Jacob had taken his brother’s blessing, Esau said, “*The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob*” )Gen. 27:41(. So the brothers came before Joseph and said:

*“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.”* When their message came to him, Joseph wept. Gen. 50:16-17

The text makes it as plain as possible that the story they told Joseph was a lie. If Jacob had really said those words, he would have said them to Joseph himself, not to the brothers. The time to have done so was on his deathbed in the previous chapter. The brothers’ tale was what we may call a “*white lie*.” Its primary aim was not to deceive but to ease a potentially explosive situation. Perhaps that is why Joseph wept, understanding that his brothers still thought him capable of revenge.

The Sages derived a principle from this text. *Mutar le-shanot mipnei ha-shalom*: “*It is permitted to tell an untruth* )literally, “*to change*” the facts( *for the sake of peace*.]2[ A white lie is permitted in Jewish law.

This is not the only place where the Sages invoked this principle. They even attributed it to God Himself.]3[ When the angels came to visit Abraham to tell him and Sarah that they were about to have a child, “*Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?’*” God then asked Abraham, “*Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’*” )Gen. 18:12-13(.

God did not mention that Sarah believed that not only was she too old to have a child – she believed that Abraham was as well )this turned out to be quite untrue: Abraham had six more children after Sarah’s death(. The Sages inferred that God did not mention it because He did not want there to be bad feeling between husband and wife. Here too the Sages said: it is permitted to change the facts for the sake of peace.

It is clear that the Sages needed both episodes to establish the principle. Had we only known about the Sarah case, we could not infer that it is permitted to tell a white lie. God did not tell a white lie about Sarah. He merely did not tell Abraham

the whole truth. Had we only known about the case of Joseph's brothers, we could not have inferred that what they did was permitted. Perhaps it was forbidden, and that is why Joseph wept. The fact that God Himself had done something similar is what led the Sages to say that the brothers were justified.

What is at stake here is an important feature of the moral life, despite the fact that we seem to be speaking of no more than social niceties: tact. The late Sir Isaiah Berlin pointed out that not all values coexist in a kind of platonic harmony. His favourite example was freedom and equality. You can have a free economy but the result will be inequality. You can have economic equality, communism, but the result will be a loss of freedom. In the world as currently configured, moral conflict is unavoidable.]4[

This was an important fact, though one about which Judaism seems never to have been in doubt. There is, for example, a powerful moment in Tanach when King David's son Absalom mounted a coup d'état against his father. David was forced to flee. Eventually there was a battle between Absalom's troops and David's. Absalom, who was handsome and had fine hair, was caught by it when it became entangled in the branches of a tree. Left hanging there, Joab, captain of David's army, killed him. When David heard the news he was overcome with grief:

The King was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said:  
*"O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you — O Absalom, my son, my son!"* 2 Samuel 18:33

Joab was brutal in his response to the King:

*"Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life ... You love those who hate you and hate those who love you ... Now go out and encourage your men."* 2 Sam. 19:6-8

David's grief at the loss of his son conflicts with his responsibilities as head of state and his loyalty to the troops who have saved his life. Which comes first: his duties as a father or as a king?

The existence of conflicting values means that the kind of morality we adopt and society we create depend not only on the values we embrace but also on the way we prioritise them. Prioritising equality over freedom creates one kind of society – Soviet Communism for example. Prioritising freedom over equality leads to market economics. People in both societies may value the same things but they rank them differently in the scale of values, and thus how they choose when the two conflict.

That is what is at stake in the stories of Sarah's laughter and Joseph's brothers. Truth and peace are both values, but which do we choose when they conflict? Not everyone among the rabbinic Sages agreed.

There is, for example, a famous argument between the schools of Hillel and Shammai as to what to say about the bride at a wedding. )See Ketubot 16b( The custom was to say that *"The bride is beautiful and graceful."* Members of the School of Shammai, however, were not prepared to say so if, in their eyes, the bride was not beautiful and graceful. For them the supreme value was the Torah's insistence on truth: *"Keep far from falsehood"* )Ex. 23:7(. The School of Hillel did not accept this. Who was to judge whether the bride was beautiful and graceful? Surely the bridegroom himself. So to praise the bride was not making an objective statement that could be tested empirically. It was simply endorsing the bridegroom's choice. It was a way of celebrating the couple's happiness.

Courtesies are often like this. Telling someone how much you like the gift they have brought, even if you don't, or saying to someone, *"How lovely to see you"* when you were hoping to avoid them, is more like good manners than an attempt to deceive. We all know this, and thus no harm is done, as it would be if we were to tell a lie when substantive interests are at stake.

More fundamental and philosophical is an important Midrash about a conversation between God and the angels as to whether human beings should be created at all:

*Rabbi Shimon said: When God was about to create Adam, the ministering angels split into contending groups. Some said, 'Let him be created.' Others said, 'Let him not be created.' That is why it is written: 'Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace clashed' )Psalms 85:11(.*

Mercy said, *'Let him be created, because he will do merciful deeds.'*

Truth said, *'Let him not be created, for he will be full of falsehood.'*

Righteousness said, *'Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds.'*

Peace said, *'Let him not be created, for he will never cease quarrelling.'*

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took truth and threw it to the ground.

The angels said, *'Sovereign of the universe, why do You do thus to Your own seal, truth? Let truth arise from the ground.'*

Thus it is written, *'Let truth spring up from the earth.' )Psalms 85:12( Bereishit Rabbah*

This is a challenging text. What exactly were the angels saying? What does it mean to say that *"God took truth and threw it to the ground?"* And what happened to the claim made by the angel of Peace that humans *"will never cease quarrelling?"*

I interpret it as meaning that humans are destined to conflict so long as contending groups each claim to have a monopoly of the truth. **The only way they will learn to live at peace is by realising that they, finite as all humans are, will never in this life achieve truth as it is in Heaven.** For us, truth is always partial, fragmentary, the view from somewhere and not, as philosophers sometimes say, *"the view from nowhere".*<sup>1</sup> [ ]emphasis added[

This deep insight is, I believe, the reason why the Torah is multi-perspectival, why Tanach contains so many different kinds of voices, why Mishnah and Gemara are structured around argument, and why Midrash is built on the premise that there are *"seventy faces"* to Torah. No other civilisation I know has had so subtle and complex an understanding of the nature of truth.

Nor has any other so valued peace. Judaism is not and never was pacifist. National self-defence sometimes requires war. But Isaiah and Micah were the first visionaries of a world in which *"nation shall not lift up sword against nation."* )Is. 2:4; Mic. 4:3( Isaiah is the poet laureate of peace.

Given the choice, when it came to interpersonal relations the Sages valued peace over truth, not least because truth can flourish in peace while it is often the first casualty in war. So the brothers were not wrong to tell Joseph a lie for the sake of peace within the family. It reminded them all of the deeper truth that **not only their human father, now dead, but also their heavenly Father, eternally alive, wants the people of the covenant to be at peace, for how can Jews be at peace with the world if they are not at peace with themselves?** ]emphasis added[

#### FOOTNOTES:

1[ This is the theme of the Covenant & Conversation essay entitled "The Birth of Forgiveness."

]2[ Yevamot 65b.

]3[ Midrash Sechel Tov, Toldot, 27:19.

]4[ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin, Henry Hardy and Ian Harris, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. See also the important work by Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.

]5[ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986. The only person to have achieved a non-anthropocentric, God's-eye-view of creation, was Job in chs. 38-41 of the book that bears his name.

#### **AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:**

]1[ Why can't there be both truth and peace simultaneously? Are these values always at odds?

]2[ Do you agree peace is more important than truth?

]3[ Can we conclude that peace is the ultimate value in Judaism?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/when-can-we-lie/> 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 Devar.

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### **What Was Jacob's "End of Days" Prophecy?**

By Mordechai Rubin \* © Chabad

The book of Genesis concludes with the passing of our forefather Jacob. On his deathbed, Jacob gathered his children to bestow blessings upon them. Just before he begins the blessings, however, we encounter a perplexing incident:

Jacob called for his sons and said, "Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. Gather and listen, sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel, your father. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my strength, and the first of my might ... 1

Jacob appears prepared to reveal a secret about "the end of days," but then shifts focus, addressing his blessings to each tribe in turn. Did Jacob ever share this revelation with his sons? What exactly is meant by "the end of days"? Was he referring merely to the blessings he was about to bestow, or is there a deeper, hidden message at play here?

#### **1. God Prevented Jacob From Revealing the Date of the Final Redemption**

Rashi quotes a well-known Midrash,<sup>2</sup> also cited in the Talmud,<sup>3</sup> which teaches that Jacob wished to reveal the date of the Final Redemption, but the Divine Presence withdrew from him and he began to speak of other things.<sup>4</sup>

As such, "the end of days" refers to the coming of Moshiach, and the blessings that Jacob subsequently gave his sons are completely unrelated.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, however, Rashi does not cite two similar interpretations found in the very same Midrash.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Simon said: He showed them the downfall of Gog, just as it says: "*It will be at the end of days.*"<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Yehuda said: He showed them the building of the Temple, just as it says: "*It will be at the end of days that the mountain of the House of the L-rd will be established.*"<sup>8</sup>

We can perhaps suggest that since the verse does not detail what Jacob told, we must conclude that something prevented him from sharing. This, then, is in line with the explanation Rashi cites, where G d prevented him from divulging the secret.

## **2. It Refers to When the People of Israel Settle the Land**

Others, including Rashbam (Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, 1085–1158) and Rabbi Abraham ben Maimonides (1186–1237), interpret these verses as referring to the time when the twelve tribes would settle in the Land of Israel. According to this interpretation, the blessings that Jacob bestows upon his sons are destined to be fulfilled "*at the end of days*," namely after the Nation of Israel has established itself in the land.<sup>9</sup>

## **3. It Is a Reference to the End of the Egyptian Exile**

Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni (10th-century gaon) understands this verse on a more simplistic level. He takes "*end of days*" to mean "*the ending of the days that are close to the present.*" In his reading, this refers to the end of the Egyptian exile.<sup>10</sup> Daat Zekanim (a compilation from the Baalei Tosafot of the 12th and 13th centuries) concurs, stating that it is a reference to the end of the 400-year exile mentioned by G d at the Covenant of the Parts.<sup>11</sup>

In this reading, it is not exactly clear what Jacob did or did not divulge to his sons.

## **4. G d Prevented Jacob From Potentially Causing Damage**

Taking on Rashi's explanation, that Jacob attempted to divulge the date of the Final Redemption, Rabbi Yisrael Friedman of Ruzhyn (known as the Ruzhiner Rebbe, 1796 - 1850), poses a compelling question: Why would the Divine Presence depart from Jacob merely because he attempted to disclose the end of the exile? To address this, he draws upon a passage from the Talmud in tractate Sanhedrin:

Rabbi Alexandri says: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (raised a contradiction in a verse addressing God's commitment to redeem the Jewish people.) The verse states: "*I the Lord in its time I will hasten it,*"<sup>12</sup> it is written: "*In its time*," indicating that there is a designated time for the redemption, and it is written: "*I will hasten it*," indicating that there is no set time for the redemption. Rabbi Alexandri explains: If they merit redemption through repentance and good deeds, I will hasten the coming of the Messiah. If they do not merit redemption, the coming of the Messiah will be in its designated time.<sup>13</sup>

The Ruzhiner understands that Jacob wanted to reveal this later time — the time redemption will ultimately come if, G d forbid, the Jewish nation is not worthy. G d intervened because He did not want Jacob to articulate this later timeframe, which could be seen as Jacob predicting the Jewish nation's failure to hasten the Redemption.<sup>14</sup>

## **5. Jacob Wished To Shorten the Exile**

The Rebbe approaches it differently, focusing on Jacob's end goal. Did he not know that G d had a plan and the plan did not include revealing the end date?

To resolve this difficulty, the Rebbe suggests that Jacob knew that it was possible for the redemption from Egypt to be the ultimate and final Redemption; however, that depended on the nation being worthy.

Telling them that they had the ability to eliminate the need for any further exile, and perhaps even hasten their redemption from Egypt, would empower them to achieve it, Jacob hoped.

G d, however, had other plans. For G d, the entire purpose of Creation is for us to serve Him of our own volition. G d knew that if Jacob had disclosed this to his sons, their service of G d would have been mixed with some ulterior motive. It would no longer be service solely of their own volition.

Of paramount importance to Jacob, however, was to hasten the Redemption and save his offspring from as much exile as possible — even at the expense of G d's ultimate desire. This is why G d had to intervene and prevent Jacob from revealing the secret — that they had the power to eliminate all future exile—to his sons.<sup>15</sup>

In the Rebbe's reading, "at the end of days" refers both to the ultimate and Final Redemption (per the Midrash) and to the end of the Egyptian exile (per Rabbi Shmuel ben Hofni). It was possible for them to be one and the same.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Genesis 49:1-3
2. *Midrash Rabbah* 98:2.
3. Pesachim 56a.
4. Rashi Genesis 49:1.
5. See also Nachmanides ibid
6. *Midrash Rabbah* 98:2.
7. Ezekiel 38:16.
8. Micah 4:1.
9. Rashbam and Rabbi Abraham ben Maimonides to Genesis 49:1.
10. Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni Genesis 49:1.
11. Daat Zekinim ibid.
12. Isaiah 60:22
13. Sanhedrin 98a.
14. Knesset Yisrael, *Likkutei HaRav Yisrael MeRuzhyn* p 43.
15. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol 20, p 228.

\* Content editor and staff writer at Chabad.org.

## **Vayechi: Our Inspiring Pasts**

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky \*

*When Jacob later became ill, Joseph took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to Jacob in order for them to receive his final blessing. )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.

\* Insight by the Maggid of Mezeritch on parshat Vayechi from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky.

\* — from *Daily Wisdom #3*

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
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**Covenant and Conversation**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

**The Last Tears**

At almost every stage of fraught encounter between Joseph and his family in Egypt, Joseph weeps. There are seven scenes of tears:

1. When the brothers came before him in Egypt for the first time, they said to one another: "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us" ... They did not realise that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. Gen. 42:21-24

2. On the second occasion, when they brought Benjamin with them and, deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep: He went into his private room and wept there. Gen. 43:29-30

3. When, after Judah's impassioned speech, Joseph is about to disclose his identity: Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Gen. 45:1-2

4. Immediately after he discloses his identity: Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Gen. 45:14-15

5. When he meets his father again after their long separation: Joseph had his chariot made ready and went to Goshen to meet his father, Israel. As soon as Joseph appeared before him, he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time. Gen. 46:29

6. On the death of his father: Joseph threw himself on his father and wept over him and kissed him. Gen. 50:1

7. Some time after his father's death: When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they 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.'" When their message came to him, Joseph wept. Gen. 50:15-17

No one weeps as much as Joseph. Esau wept when he discovered that Jacob had taken his blessing (Gen. 27:38). Jacob wept when he saw the love of his life, Rachel, for the first time (Gen. 29:11). Both brothers, Jacob and Esau, wept when they met again after their long estrangement (Gen. 33:4). Jacob wept when told that his beloved son Joseph was dead (Gen. 37:35).

But the seven acts of Joseph's weeping have no parallel. They span the full spectrum of emotion, from painful memory to the joy of being reunited, first with his brother Benjamin, then with his father Jacob. There are the complex tears immediately before and after he discloses his identity to his brothers, and there are the tears of bereavement at Jacob's deathbed. But the most intriguing are the last, the tears he sheds when he hears that his brothers fear that he will take revenge on them now that their father is no longer alive.

In a fine essay, "Joseph's tears" [1] Rav Aharon Lichtenstein suggests that this last act of weeping is an expression of the price Joseph pays for the realisation of his dreams and his elevation to a position of power. Joseph has done everything he could for his brothers. He has sustained them at a time of famine. He has given them not just refuge but a place of honour in Egyptian society. And he has made it as clear as he possibly can that he does not harbour a grudge against them for what they did to him all those many years before. As he said when he disclosed his identity to them:

"And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here,

because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you . . . God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." Gen. 45:5-8

What more could he say? Yet still, all these years later, his brothers do not trust him and fear that he may still seek their harm.

This is Rav Lichtenstein's comment: "At this moment, Yosef discovers the limits of raw power. He discovers the extent to which the human connection, the personal connection, the family connection, hold far more value and importance than power does – both for the person himself and for all those around him." Joseph "weeps over the weakness inherent in power, over the terrible price that he has paid for it. His dreams have indeed been realised, on some level, but the tragedy remains just as real. The torn shreds of the family have not been made completely whole."

On the surface, Joseph holds all the power. His family are entirely dependent on him. But at a deeper level it is the other way round. He still yearns for their acceptance, their recognition, their closeness. And ultimately he has to depend on them to bring his bones up from Egypt when the time comes for redemption and return (Gen. 50:25).

Rav Lichtenstein's analysis reminds us of Rashi and Ibn Ezra's commentary to the last verse in the book of Esther. It says that "Mordechai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews and well received by most of his brethren" (Est. 10:3) "–most" but not all. Rashi (quoting Megillah 16b) says that some members of the Sanhedrin were critical of him because his political involvement (his "closeness to the king") distracted from the time he spent studying Torah. Ibn Ezra says, simply: "It is impossible to satisfy everyone, because people are envious [of other people's success]."

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

---

By David Hornestay in memory of his  
father Abraham Hornestay, a"h,  
(Avraham Aryeh ben Chaim Shlomo  
HaKohen) whose Yahrzeit was 8 Teves

Joseph and Mordechai/Esther are supreme examples of Jews who reached positions of influence and power in non-Jewish circles. In modern times they were called *Hofjuden*, "court Jews," and other Jews often held deeply ambivalent feelings about them.

But at a deeper level, Rav Lichtenstein's remarks recall Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic, an idea that had huge influence on nineteenth century - especially Marxist - thought. Hegel argued that the early history of humanity was marked by a struggle for power in which some became masters, and others became slaves. On the face of it, masters rule while slaves obey. But in fact the master is dependent on his slaves - he has leisure only because they do the work, and he is the master only because he is recognised as such by his slaves.

Meanwhile the slave, through his work, acquires his own dignity as a producer. Thus the slave has "inner freedom" while the master has "inner bondage." This tension creates a dialectic - a conflict worked out through history - reaching equilibrium only when there are neither masters nor slaves, but merely human beings who treat one another not as means to an end but as ends in themselves. Thus understood, Joseph's tears are a prelude to the master-slave drama about to be enacted in the book of Exodus between Pharaoh and the Israelites.

Rav Lichtenstein's profound insight into the text reminds us of the extent to which Torah, Tanach, and Judaism as a whole are a sustained critique of power. Prior to the Messianic age we cannot do without it. (Consider the tragedies Jews suffered in the centuries in which they lacked it.) But power alienates. It breeds suspicion and distrust. It diminishes those it is used against, and thus diminishes those who use it.

Even Joseph, called "Yosef HaTzaddik: Joseph the Righteous" weeps when he sees the extent to which power sets him apart from his brothers. Judaism is about an alternative social order which depends not on power but on love, loyalty and the mutual responsibility created by covenant. That is why Nietzsche, who based his philosophy on "the will to power," correctly saw Judaism as the antithesis of all he believed in.

Power may be a necessary evil, but it is an evil, and the less we have need of it, the better. [1] In *Alei Tziyon* (Vol. 16, Iyar 5769): Special edition in honour of HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, 109-128. Also available online: <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayigash/josephs-tears-part-2-2>

### Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

#### Why We Bless Our Sons Like 'Ephraim and Menashe'

"And he blessed them on that day, saying, 'Through you shall Israel be blessed, saying, May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe' and he placed Ephraim before Menashe." (Genesis 48:20)

For many parents, the highlight of the Friday evening home celebration and meal, indeed the highlight of the entire week, is the moment when they bless their children. However, even this could be tension inducing if your son suddenly wants to know why his sister is blessed to grow up like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, while he has to settle for Ephraim and Menashe, Joseph's Egyptian born sons, instead of the patriarchs. Is it possible that boys are finally getting the short end of the blessing?

I believe the reason can be found if we study the book of Genesis from the perspective of family psychology. Sibling rivalry constantly surfaces as a powerful motif indicating love-hate relationships that end up more bitter than sweet. Right from the opening pages in the Bible, Cain is jealous of Abel, whose offering to God was found more pleasing than his own. Before we know it, Abel is dead, killed by his own brother - the Torah's first recorded murder.

Of course, this takes place in the early stages of recorded time, but how much has really changed by the time we get to Abraham? His two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, cannot live under the same roof. Sent into the desert with his mother Hagar, who watches helplessly as he nearly dies from thirst and hunger, Ishmael's fate is doomed if not for the *deus ex machina* appearance of the angel. True, Isaac cannot be legally charged with Ishmael's suffering, but Ishmael and his mother are driven away only because of Sarah's concern that Ishmael will have a negative influence on Isaac, destined carrier of the torch of Israel.

In the next generation, things get worse. Jacob spends twenty-two years away from home because he's afraid Esau wants to kill him. Upon returning from his long exile, richer, wiser, head of a large household, he makes all kinds of preparations to appease his brother, and if that should fail, he devises a defense strategy should Esau's army of four hundred men attack. All of this hatred came about as a result of Jacob's having deceived his father, at the behest of his mother, in order to wrest the birthright and blessings away from his less deserving brother.

Jacob's own sons live through aspects of their father's sibling experiences; since Jacob felt unloved by his father, he lavished excessive

### Likutei Divrei Torah

favoritism upon his beloved son Joseph. As a result of the bitter jealousy the brothers harbor toward Joseph, they take the radical step of slow but inevitable death by casting their defenseless brother into a dangerous pit. Had Judah's last-minute advice to sell the boy to a caravan of Ishmaelites been ignored, Joseph would have been torn to death by some wild animal, or at the very least - died in the pit from starvation.

When the Torah commands "...do not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev. 19:17), it could have easily used the word 'friend' or 'neighbor.' The word 'brother' is deliberate; the people we are most likely to hate are the ones closest to us. If the natural affection between brothers backfires, the very same potential for closeness turns into the potential for distance. No silence is more piercing than brothers who refuse to speak to each other because of a dispute over an inheritance. Unlike a feud between strangers, family members do not bury the past - they live with it, and all too often, continue to fight over it. There is even a custom, retained by some old Jerusalem families, that children should not attend their parent's funeral. The esoteric reason which is given by the more mystical commentaries is that the illegitimate children of the parents - the spirits born of the father's seminal emissions - will fight with the legitimate biological children over the inheritance. All too often we find the legitimate children fighting over the inheritance at the grave site.

There is one remarkable exception to the pervasive theme of sibling hatred in Genesis. In contrast to their ancestors, Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe, do not fight when Jacob favors the younger brother, Ephraim, with the birthright blessing. Joseph even tries to stop Jacob. "That's not the way it should be done, Father...the other one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head" (Gen. 48:18). But Jacob knows exactly what he is doing. "The older one will also become a nation...but his younger brother will become even greater..." (Gen. 48:19).

As a result of this seeming favoritism of the younger Ephraim, one might expect a furious reaction from Menashe, lashing out like Cain. But Menashe overcomes personal feelings. Unlike his forebears, there is no biblical hint of sibling rivalry between these two sons of Joseph, despite what could well be seen as

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unfair favoritism. Since we each want our children to be there for each other no matter what – and indeed, this is chiefly what my wife prays for as she lights the Sabbath candles each week – every parent blesses his sons that they have as harmonious a relationship as Ephraim and Menashe.

There still remains, however, a nagging question. Why did Jacob bestow the birthright upon the younger Ephraim? What lies substantively behind the words – and order – of this particular blessing?

As usual, the Midrash fills in the missing pieces. When the brothers first meet the Grand Vizier in their attempt to purchase food, the Bible tells us that the Egyptian provider appeared not to understand Hebrew, “there was an interpreter between them” (Gen. 42:23). The Midrash identifies this interpreter as Menashe, apparently a PhD in languages and diplomacy from the University of the Nile. Menashe seems to have been his father’s trusted aide in all important affairs of state. Ephraim, on the other hand, was studious, devoting his time to learning Torah with his old and other-worldly grandfather Jacob. In fact, when we read in our Torah portion of how Joseph is brought news of his father’s illness, the text does not reveal the messenger’s name but the Midrash identifies him as Ephraim, returning from Goshen where he had been studying with his grandfather.

Perhaps Menashe, the symbol of secular wisdom, does not object when his younger brother – expert in and dedicated to the wisdom of family tradition – receives the greater honor. From this perspective Jacob is expressing in his blessing the deepest value of Judaism: secular and worldly wisdom is significant and represents a giant achievement, but Torah must take preference and emerge as the highest priority. From the prism of the Midrash, we bless our children to excel in worldly knowledge, wisdom and Torah together, but with Torah receiving the greater accolade.

The capacity to submerge one’s abilities and gifts to those of another, especially to a sibling who is younger, shows true commitment to the direction of the divine, an overriding concern for the welfare of the nation as a whole, and a profound maturity. This is precisely the character displayed by Joseph when he gratefully accepted his double portion (blessing), but conceded the true sovereign, international and ultimately, redemptive leadership to his brother Judah (as expressed in Jacob’s final blessings, [Genesis 49:8–10, 22–26]).

In a much later period (eighth century BCE), Jeroboam of the tribe of Ephraim, whom King

Solomon had appointed over the taxation of both tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, waged a revolution on behalf of the ten Northern Tribes against the tribe of Judah, against Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon and grandson of King David, and against the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Our Talmudic Sages, who respected Jeroboam’s administrative abilities and cultural accomplishments, predicate the following conversation in the name of Raba:

“The Holy One Blessed Be He grabbed the garment of Jeroboam and told him, ‘Repent, and I and you and the son of Jesse [David, King of Israel and progenitor of the Messiah] will join together, for our travels in Paradise.’ Said [Jeroboam], ‘Who will take the lead?’ Said [the Almighty] ‘the son of Jesse.’ [Said Jeroboam] ‘If that is the case, I am not interested.’” (Sanhedrin 102a)

Apparently, the descendants of Joseph were not gifted with the largesse of their ancestor – and herein lies the tragedy of the split between Jerusalem-Judea and Ephraim-Northern Israel, as well as between Torah study and secular wisdom.

Thankfully, our Ephraim and Menashe were different. And the importance of this filial ability to overlook favoritism and remain together takes on added significance when we come to the book of Exodus, the saga of the birth of our nation. Before the nation of Israel could be molded, a family had to emerge in which a profound harmony reigned. The heroic relationship between Menashe and Ephraim paved the way for a similar harmony between Aaron and Moses, where the younger brother served as the great leader, while the elder remained his loyal spokesman and interpreter to the people. These represent a crucial beacon of possibility, especially since our nation still in formation – from the rebellion of Korah to the Knesset inter- and intra-party eruptions – has constantly been plagued by sibling strife.

When parents bless their daughters to be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, what is being evoked is the very bedrock of Jewish existence, our matriarchs. When they bless their sons to be like Menashe and Ephraim, the blessing evokes the long slow process of Genesis which finally bears fruit with the sons of Joseph, the only brothers who overcome sibling rivalry and achieve an incredible unity, with worldly wisdom merging with Torah traditions to bring the promise of redemption to a strife-torn world.

#### The Person in the Parsha

#### Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

#### Vayechi: What?! Criticize the Maccabees??

Chanukah is now more than a week behind us, so I figure that I can share with you some of the sequels of the Chanukah story. Sorry to say

#### Likutei Divrei Torah

that even though we have all recently glorified the martial, spiritual, and political successes of the Chashmonaim, or Hasmonaeans, all did not go very well in the long run.

I do not intend to depress you, but just as the heroism of Yehuda the Maccabee and his brothers inspires us in many ways, and rightfully so, there is much about their behavior post-victory that is disappointing, to say the least. My goal is to help us all learn some lessons about failed leadership that we must learn as a nation, especially at this moment in our complex and tortuous history. The largely untold “rest of the story” of the Hasmonaean dynasty deserves to be better known by us all, but especially by those whom we choose to lead us into a better future.

Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate that this week’s Torah portion, Vayechi (Genesis 47:28–50:26), provides me with a basis to insist that several persons in the parsha play a major role in the ever-unfolding drama of Jewish history, down to this very day.

To accomplish this, I will call upon my second most favorite commentary on Chumash, after Rashi, and that is Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman or Nachmanides (born 1194, Girona, Spain/died 1270, Akko, Israel and buried in Jerusalem.)

I will refer to three passages in his commentary, two in Sefer Bereshit, the first in Parshat Vayishlach, where, just a few weeks ago, we read of Yakov’s encounter with his estranged brother Esav, and the second in this week’s Parshat Vayechi, where we study Yakov’s final blessings to his sons, particularly to Yehuda. I will conclude with reference to his commentary on Sefer Vayikra, Parshat Bechukotai.

First, let us recall the captivating narrative of Yaakov meeting Esav head on. Yaakov is deathly afraid and resorts to a triad of strategies: prayer, gifts, and battle. With prayer, he hopes to enlist Almighty’s assistance; with gifts, he hopes to soften Esav’s hostility; and with battle plans, he hopes either to escape Esav’s claws or, better still, to defeat him.

Now Ramban convincingly argues throughout his many works that the stories of Tanach are “precursors” for the rest of Jewish history. “The activities of our forebears are indicators for their descendants.” Thus, the narrative of Yaakov vs. Esav is a prelude to every encounter between the Jewish nation and the nations of Esav. Esav is Edom, the Torah tells us, and Edom is identified by our sages as Rome, in all its transformations from the Caesars down the many generations of conflict between Judaism and Christianity.

Thus, writes Ramban, we are to face Rome as Yaakov faced Esav, with prayer for divine assistance, with battle through debate and resistance; but, he insists, not by appeasement and trying to win Rome over to our side with "gifts." Ramban, based upon much earlier rabbinic sources, finds fault with our patriarch Yaakov for not avoiding Esav entirely, which was quite possible given the geography of Yaakov's destination, Hebron, and Esav's territory in what is today's southwestern Jordan.

Ramban, out of respect for our ancestor Yaakov, reserves his ire for... Yehuda HaMaccabi, the major hero of the Chanukah story. He too faced a bitter enemy, the Esav of his time and place, and he prayed and certainly waged war. For that, he deserves great praise. But he also attempted the strategy of "gifts." Quoting from the Book of the Maccabees, Ramban demonstrates that after vanquishing the Greeks, Yehuda sent two delegates on a mission to Rome to form an alliance with this new power on the world's geopolitical scene. Yehuda, the brave and charismatic leader of the Jews of his time, turned to Rome for its support, a move which led to Rome's eventual occupation of the Land of Israel and, ultimately and tragically, to the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile of the people of Israel from our land, an exile which largely persists to this very day.

Let us proceed to this week's parsha. There, throughout chapter 49, Yaakov delivers his blessings to his sons. Ramban sees Yaakov's words as his last will and testament, as his instructions to his sons and their descendants down all the generations. Look at verse 10: "The staff of authority shall not be removed from Yehuda, nor shall the rod of leadership be taken from him, until the Messiah arrives, with the assembly of nations" (my translation, following Rashi).

Ramban understands this verse to be Yaakov's last will and testament, instructing his descendants until the "end of time." Royalty, kingship, majesty, governance—all belong to Yehuda and his descendants from King David until the arrival of the Messiah, himself a descendant of David.

Here, Ramban is eloquent and forceful: The sons of Matisyahu, Yehuda HaMaccabi and his brothers, were priests, descendants not of Yehuda son of Yaakov but of Levi son of Yaakov. Their role was the Temple service and its broader spiritual mission. In a moment of desperation with Jewish lives and Jewish tradition at stake, they could wage war, and they did so with great persuasion, with religious zeal, with guerilla tactics. We celebrate their efforts. But when the battle

achieved its mission, they had no right to remain the kings and rulers of the Jewish people for well over two hundred years. The tools of royalty, the throne itself, were reserved for the tribe of Yehuda. The Hasmonaeans usurped the kingdom, invited Rome into the Holy Land, corrupted the very institution of kingship, and eventually brought about religious catastrophe, mass casualty, bondage into slavery, and the Diaspora experience which endures.

Strong words indeed. I refer to even stronger words which Ramban reserves for Sefer Vayikra, Parshat Bechukotai, chapter 26:16. It is there that Ramban argues at length and with great conviction that whereas the dark predictions of the passages in Bechukotai refer to the first exile, subsequent to the destruction of the First Temple, the even darker passages in Parshat Ki Tavo allude to the second exile, which both Ramban's generation and succeeding generations have experienced.

He accuses the Hasmonaean kings, who proved to be so incompetent, of a failed leadership so disastrous that we suffer its consequences to this very day.

I hope to dedicate the next many weekly parsha columns to happier themes, but I am tempted to return to Ramban's so very cogent and apt analysis in my Person in the Parsha column for Parshat Bechukotai, now many months away, with the help of the Ribbon shel Olam.

#### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand** **Ephraim and Menashe: Role Models for Jews in Galus**

In this week's parsha, Yosef brings his two children to his father Yaakov for a bracha (blessing). Yaakov gave Yosef's children a tremendous bracha: "By you shall Israel bless saying, 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Menashe'" (Bereishis 48:20). What a bracha! In the future, whenever the Jewish people would bless their sons, they would invoke the prayer that they should be like Yosef's two sons: Ephraim and Menashe.

There is a very obvious question. Yaakov had twelve illustrious sons. Why didn't Yaakov say, for example, that the perennial Jewish bracha would be "May you be like Yehudah and Yosef" or "like Yissocher and Zevulun"? Why did Yaakov single out these two grandchildren to be the prototypes of bracha?

Several meforshim (commentators) offer the following explanation, which I most recently saw from Rabbi Eliyahu Munk (1900-1978; Germany, England). Yaakov saw a special quality in Ephraim and Menashe that he did not have the opportunity to see in his own children. Yaakov's own children were raised in

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the best of environments. They lived in the Land of Israel, in the house of the patriarch Yaakov, insulated from any bad environment. Granted, it is not trivial to raise good children even in the best of circumstances. However, there is nothing novel in the fact that Yaakov's own children turned out well. It is no surprise if a child who is raised in Bnei Brak or Meah Shearim grows up as an observant Jew. However, if people raise a child in a city such as Sioux City, Iowa — where their family is, perhaps, the only observant Jewish family in town — and the child is subject to foreign influences from all of his surroundings — and nonetheless, the child grows up as a faithful Jew, that is truly a great accomplishment.

In preparation for generations of Jews spending so much of their time in galus (exile), Yaakov Avinu formulated the greatest bracha for the Jewish people to give over to their children. "May they be like Ephraim and Menashe." Ephraim and Menashe were raised in the Sioux City, Iowa of their time. They were the only Jews in the entire country! They grew up knowing that so many things that they saw around them were not the way things should be. Despite this, they turned out just like Yaakov's own children. This is the special bracha that the Jewish people would need — the ability to be raised in a non-Jewish environment and yet turn out to be good and honest Jews.

#### **Chushim Ben Dan: Don't Adjust to an Intolerable Situation**

The Gemara (Sotah 13a) says that when the brothers arrived at Me'aras Hamachpela in Chevron to bury Yaakov, Eisav came and protested. There was one remaining plot in the burial cave. The previous burial plots were used for Odom, Chava, Avraham, Sora, Yitzchak, Rivka and Leah. Eisav claimed that the remaining plot belonged to him.

The sons of Yaakov responded that Eisav forfeited his right to the plot when he sold the birthright. Eisav counter-claimed, however, that he only sold the "double-portion" to which a first born was entitled. However, nowhere in the sale was it implicit that he was selling his own burial plot! The brothers responded that it was included in the sale. Eisav demanded that they produce the document of sale.

The brothers claimed that they did have the document, but that they had left it in Mitzrayim. Eisav insisted on delaying the burial until the brothers produced this deed of sale.

Who were the brothers going to send back to Mitzrayim? This was before the days of Federal Express. They sent Naftali, who was well known as the speediest runner among the brothers.

Chushim ben (the son of) Dan, who was deaf, inquired from someone about the delay and argument in the midst of the burial of his grandfather. Chushim was astounded when he was told what was happening. "Until Naftali returns from Mitzrayim, my grandfather should lie there in disgrace?" Chushim took a club and hit Eisav over the head and killed him. The Talmud concludes that this was in fulfillment of Rivka's question, "Why should I lose both of you on one day?" (Bereishis 27:45).

This is amazing. Out of Yaakov's twelve fine and upstanding children, and out of all the wonderful grandchildren, why was it that only Chushim ben Dan was sensitive to the intolerable nature of the situation? And why did the Gemara emphasize the fact that Chushim was deaf?

The Mir Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz (1902-1978; Mir Rosh Yeshiva; Lithuania; Kobe; Jerusalem), explains that this Gemara teaches us a remarkable fact of life. The difference between Chushim and the other children and grandchildren was that the others, unfortunately, became accustomed to the idea that their father would lie in disgrace until Naftali returned from Egypt. Why?

The answer is that it started gradually. First there was a claim. Then there was a counter-claim. Next came another counter-argument, etc. Everyone else became accustomed to the idea of the negotiations without stopping to think that the scene was a world class offense to the honor of Yaakov.

Since they all had time to adjust to this slowly developing situation, they gradually adjusted to the idea. However, Chushim was deaf and was not involved in the whole dialogue. When Chushim asked what was happening, he had not had time to adjust. He was suddenly hit by the whole terrible travesty of the situation in a single instant, as if he was hit by a load of bricks. Chushim, baruch Hashem (thank G-d), did not have time to adjust.

We learn a powerful insight into human nature from here. Human beings can become accustomed to anything. This phenomenon is both a bracha and a klala (curse). People could not live without the ability to adjust. Sometimes we find ourselves in terrible situations and we cannot imagine how we will survive. But, baruch Hashem, people are adaptable and resilient.

However, the terrible downside of this phenomenon is that we can become accustomed to anything — even to murder and violence. The first time a soldier kills in war, he is terribly distraught. But when someone

kills for long enough and sees death so often — even that can be accommodated.

The lesson is that there are times when a person must say, "I'm not supposed to become accustomed to this. I should always react with disgust and revulsion to certain situations."

Many students attend my shiur (class) as their 'last stop' in the Yeshiva. After my shiur, they often go out into the worlds of their professions. I often meet former students, a year or two later, and inquire, "So, how are things going?" They sometimes respond, "Terrible. I can't take the office. I can't take the dirt. I can't take the lewd language. I can't take the innuendoes; I can't take any of it."

I respond to them with a bracha — "You should always feel like that, because if you become accustomed to it, that is bad." There are some situations in life to which we must always react with disgust. The acceptance of an intolerable situation is itself the beginning of the problem.

(Editor's note: A few people asked why Chushim was justified in his act of killing Eisav. No one seems to have even criticized Chushim after he killed Eisav. Did Chushim do the right thing?

In response to this question, Rabbi Frand offered an explanation of why Chushim was right:

The Ramban in Parshas Vayishlach says that it was permitted for Shimon and Levi to kill the people of Shechem because they certainly were in violation of at least some of the Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach (seven laws commanded to Noah and his descendants) — avodah zarah (Idol Worship), gezel (stealing), and perhaps giluy arayos. As such, they were all chayav misah (deserving of death).

Perhaps this was the case by Chushim and Eisav. We know from Chazal that Eisav was in violation of several of the Sheva Mitzvos, including murder. As such, Eisav was chayav misah and could have been convicted by Chushim himself. Also, it could be that the very fact that Eisav did not let them bury Yaakov in a plot that he had sold constituted an act of gezel and as such, Eisav was chayav for that alone.)

#### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

##### Rabbi Daniel Stein

##### Continuity Can Be Dangerous

Persistent and continuous study is an essential feature, if not the very definition of ameilus be'Torah and an indispensable precursor to becoming a talmid chacham. Even minor or brief interruptions can have potentially deleterious and irreparable effects. For

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example, the Gemara (Kesubos 63a) relates that at the behest of his wife, Rabbi Akiva spent the first twelve years of his marriage away from home learning Torah in yeshiva. When the stipulated stint of twelve years had concluded, Rabbi Akiva made his way back with his newly acquired cadre of students in tow, all the while expressing the gratitude he felt towards his wife for her heroic sacrifice as he declared "my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers." When the entourage reached his house, before he could enter, Rabbi Akiva overheard his wife expressing regret about his imminent arrival saying, "if he would listen to me, he would sit and study for another twelve years." Rabbi Akiva took this disclosure to heart and returned to the yeshiva forthwith to complete a full tour of twenty-four years. Even though Rabbi Akiva had already traveled home and was standing at the foot of his door, he did not pop inside for a few minutes or stop to have a cup of coffee with his wife for he was afraid that even the slightest interlude might diminish his momentum and disturb his concentration. In the inimitable words of Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, sometimes twelve plus twelve does not equal twenty-four.

Nonetheless, Rashi (Breishes 47:28) interprets the seamless and uninterrupted continuity between Parshas Vayigash and Parshas Vayechi negatively, as he explains, "This section is totally closed because as soon as Yaakov died the hearts and eyes of Israel became closed due to the misery of the bondage which they then began to impose upon them. Alternatively, because Yaakov wished to reveal the date of the End of Days but the vision was closed from him." Why is the lack of a break between these two parshiyos in the Torah a cause for concern? Isn't uninterrupted study the hallmark of true diligence and hasmadah? If anything, this textual anomaly should be an indication that Yaakov and his sons were constantly learning and shteing away during this period.

Rav Yitzchok Meir Morgenstern (Likkutei Yam Hachochmah) answers that while consistent and continuous study is critical and laudable, if left unqualified and undefined, it can have adverse and harmful consequences. Without proper framing and context, intense Torah learning has the potential to become a completely self-absorbed exercise, detached from its spiritual roots and character. For this reason, the Gemara (Megillah 32a) stresses the importance of closing the sefer Torah after it has been read and states, "the greatest among them should furl the sefer Torah, for this is the most distinguished honor, and the one who furls it takes the reward of all of them." Rav Yaakov Leizer of Pshevorsk suggests that the role of furling the sefer Torah is to provide an opportunity to reflect upon the Torah's Divine properties and significance, which is impossible and inappropriate to ponder while

actively engaged in the pursuit of studying and processing its content. Rashi (Vayikra 1:1) claims that the purpose of the blank spaces in between the subjects and subsections of the Torah was for the sake of contemplation. These respites are intended not only for analysis but also for emphasizing that Torah study is first and foremost a religious obligation and endeavor. Hence, when these breaks are missing and the parshiyos flow directly from one to the next, it is a sign that the objective of coming closer to Hashem is in danger of becoming overlooked and obscured.

Chassidic doctrine holds that Torah should ideally be studied for the sake of dveikus, as the Tanya (Chapter 5) writes "study for its own sake is to study with the intent to attach one's soul to God through the comprehension of the Torah." To accomplish this goal, the Baal Shem Tov (Tzavaas Harivash) advises, "when studying Torah, pause and rest a bit every hour to bond yourself to Hashem, even though while you are immersed in the study of Torah itself this is not possible." Rav Chaim of Volozhin (Nefesh Hachaim, Chapter 4) passionately rejects this outlook and argues that the Torah is not a vehicle for clinging to God but the very representation of God in comprehensible terms. Therefore, by studying Torah for the sole purpose of understanding the material, one is simultaneously and inevitably engaged in an act of dveikus, since the Torah and Hashem are indeed synonymous. However, even though Rav Chaim of Volozhin believes that pausing Torah study to contemplate God would be nonsensical, counterproductive, and even offensive, he does concede that time should be dedicated to teaching and intermittently reinforcing the precise nature and import of Torah learning. It is lamentable that some veteran talmidim, after spending years immersed in the yeshiva system and sedorim, emerge having never stopped to properly appreciate the spiritual function of Torah study and its relationship to the religious goal of connecting with God.

The Tenth of Teves is a fast day commemorating the beginning of the siege of Yerushalayim by Nebuchadnezzar which eventually led to the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash and the Babylonian exile. A siege is designed to sever the inhabitants that are inside the city from the markets and supplies that are outside the city. Perhaps, part of the mourning on this day revolves around the separation that sometimes develops between our external actions and the internal thoughts that they are designed to evoke. Only if we pause to consider and internalize the spiritual implications of our mitzvos, and specifically talmud Torah, can we begin to combat and overcome the personal siege that exists within ourselves and aspire to restore

our continuous connection with Hashem once again.

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

#### Living the Life

And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and Yaakov's days, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty-seven years. (Breishis 47:28)

The Midrashic tells us that these were very productive and golden years for Yaakov, those last 17 years in Egypt. Therefore it says, "And Yaakov lived..." He saw his family grow to incredible numbers and he was playing an instrumental role as a grandfather, a teacher, and a guide preparing his children and grandchildren for a long and challenging history and more immediately, for a bitter exile. What exactly the curriculum was, may remain a mystery but for sure his years of ceaseless learning, his life's experiences, and his personal wisdom was being sewn into the hearts and minds of all future generations. We see that he was working right up to the very end of his life, till the very last breath, instructing and blessing his children. We can remain wondering, "What could he have possibly been imparting?"

Here is a story I heard recently that might be helpful to possibly understand what YAAKOV was so busy doing the last 17 years of his life. Two buses of boys, seventh and eighth grade classes in Israel arrived after a long trip at a waterpark. It became apparent immediately to the Rebbe in charge that the waterpark was not reserved for male clientele only as they had planned.

Now, both the seventh and eighth grade Rebbeis had the difficult task to break the news to the boys on each bus. When the eighth grade Rebbe told his class, there was a giant collective groan and as can be expected, everyone started to frown with expressions of disappointment and complaint. "No fair!" There wasn't much for the Rebbe to say to quiet the crowd.

One boy asked the Rebbe if he could take the microphone for a moment and he announced to all the other students that we should be happy. We are doing the will of Hashem. There is nothing greater than that! Rather, we should be celebrating. He started singing and incredibly so did they!

When the 7th grade Rebbe called the 8th grade Rebbe to find out how the boys took the bad news, he told him that it actually went well. The 7th grade Rebbe said, "Don't tell me. One boy took the microphone and told everyone they are doing the Ratzon HASHEM and they should be happy and everyone started singing

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ASHREINU!" "Exactly!" answered the Rebbe. "How did you know?" The 7th grade Rebbe told him the same thing happened on his bus too. Astonishingly they were two brothers.

When they got back to school, both Rebbes called up the mother of these two boys to share the unbelievable news and to ask her an important question. "What's in the water at your house? How did you teach them or train them to do this?" The mother answered that she had no idea and she thought for a while then she remembered that a few years earlier, she took her children for a trip that didn't work out and they were disappointed. So, they came back to a local ice cream shop in Jerusalem and when the ice cream was being served to them, she discovered that it's not their standard of HEKSHER.

Again, they were disappointed, and when they came home with downcast faces, their father asked them what happened. When they explained how disappointed they were, he got all excited, and told his children that instead of being sad, they should be happy. The father told them to get dressed up in Shabbos clothing, and to set the table for a major celebration. The father went out and bought a giant meal. He spared no expense. They sat and they sang together as a family.

"ASHREINU..."

What an impact a father can have on children. With quick thinking and the right attitude, he created nothing less than a revolution. Those boys on the bus won't forget so soon. There is nothing more profitable or pleasurable than doing what HASHEM wants. I don't know what Yaakov was teaching way back then, but he did a good job, because here we are many thousands of years later, still teaching and living the life!

### Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

#### An Old Shirt for a Young Prince

When our father Jacob was on his deathbed and just before he blessed all his children, he called over his favorite son, Joseph, and told him that he was giving him a special award, something the others would not get. "Son," he told his royal child who was now effectively the master of Egypt, "I have given you an extra portion over your brothers" (Genesis 48:22). The Torah does not say what that portion is. But our rabbis (Targum Yerushalmi, Genesis 48:21) suggested what that extra legacy was. Rabbi Yehuda maintains that it was the garment worn by Adam!

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What a gift to give a king! That an inheritance for a man who controlled the greatest kingdom of antiquity, who had millions under his thumb, who regulated the commerce of the whole nation, who was an absolute potentate who had all that he wanted at his command: a shirt, and an old one at that! It was quite a buildup Jacob gave for what turns out to have been merely a family heirloom. A shirt twenty-three generations old may have some sentimental value, it may be of archeological value. You may give it to other children, or to a museum; but you don't give that to a fabulously wealthy viceroy as a "special" reward.

But if that is what Jacob decided to give to Joseph, according to our sages, there must have been some very special reason for doing so. Our rabbis meant to tell us something of what Jacob wanted to teach Joseph, and the Josephs of all ages. There are three descriptions of that garment worn by Adam which indicate three major points that we must take to heart and remember. They are three lessons Jacob wanted to drive home to Joseph – because he was the wealthiest and most powerful of all his children – three correctives to the abuses that come so frequently with the acquisition of prosperity, power, and social recognition.

The first thing our rabbis said of this piece of clothing was that it was made of a special kind of leather. The Bible calls it "katnot or" (Genesis 3:21), a leather garment. And the rabbis add that it came from the skin that the serpent shed off. Joseph, he told him, I am afraid that your wealth or power is going to go to your head. You have every reason in the world to be proud of yourself. You started as a slave in a miserable prison, sold down the river by your brothers. Now you've achieved political eminence, economic domination of an empire, and social recognition, being heralded by all Egypt as its savior, and crowned by Pharaoh himself as second to him alone. You have money, you have real estate, you have power. You have, in other words, the greatest temptation any man can ever have – to lose his humility. You ride around in golden chariots; you are a titled prince; you are a shrewd businessman; the Egyptians may not want to break bread with you because you're a Jew, but still, you have made yourself your own palace. But don't forget, Joseph, don't forget that it doesn't mean a thing. Don't you ever pride yourself on being a self-made man. No man is self-made. His power is a dream. His wealth is illusory. His shrewdness is only in his imagination. His eminence is transitory. It's all a great spiel, nothing else. And just as a reminder, son, here, take this old, tattered snakeskin shirt and frame it and hang it on your living room wall for everyone to see. Every once in a while take a look at it. And let

you and your descendants and all men forever remember that the original owner of that shirt once had a complete Paradise in which to disport himself. He had Trees of Knowledge and life, and had gold and silver. He must have thought it was all his – that he was self-sufficient – and he could live as proudly as he wanted to. But then remember that he was chased out of Eden, and he was left with nothing, not even a shirt on his back. And then, only through the goodness of God, was he given a garment to wear. And, Joseph, my princely and wealthy and powerful son: where do you think even that one shirt came from? Adam's own work? His handicraft? Nonsense. It came from the skin the snake sloughed off. Man, despite his delusions of grandeur, is ultimately only a parasite!

Remember, Josephs of all generations: you're not self-made, you're God-made. Forget your golden chariots or your Cadillacs; forget your empire-building or business sense; forget your social status, whether in ancient Egypt or modern America. Remember that whatever you have came from someone else, that even the shirt you wear came from the hair of a sheep or the skin of a snake or the back of an underpaid cotton picker down South. Use your power and wealth and all you now have, but use it with humility. Keep the snakeskin in front of you, Joseph. It's the greatest gift you can receive. It's the only thing that will help you keep your balance and keep you from submitting to that great abuse of prosperity: the belief that you are a god and that you are self-sufficient.

The second thing our rabbis said about that garment was regarding its design. It had, drawn upon it, pictures of birds flying. Here was the corrective to a second, and very unusual and unexpected kind of difficulty that power and prosperity bring in their wake. One writer, I think it was Max Lerner, has maintained that in the history books of the future, our age will not be called the Atomic Age or Hydrogen Age or any other such name. It will be called the Age of the Ulcer. With increasing prosperity and with the higher standard of living, we have inherited a whole line of diseases caused by the anxiety that grips us. In ages gone by people hardly ever experienced or even knew of that whole array of illnesses we now call by that fancy name, "psychosomatic diseases" – something our ancestors would have preferred to call "an aingerreter krenk." Why the plague of migraines, the necessity of visits to a psychiatrist, the ubiquitous ulcer? It is because we do not know quite what to do with our power and our money, and because we are always seeking to increase it – and this, because of another fear: that if we don't get more, we'll lose all we have. In the midst of all the luxurious blessing, we feel a curse – a sort

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of obsessive unhappiness, a neurotic anxiety and, of course, the ulcer. What good are all these things if the price we must pay is stewed prunes, sweet cream, and amphojel? We have better beds and mattresses, but can't sleep at night. Wonderful new reclining sofas, but we are no longer able to sit back and relax, so tense are we. We have television even in color, and can't even force a sincere laugh out of our systems; we're too worried to be able to be happy. We rack our brains devising timesaving devices – and then, when we do get home earlier, we take along the office in our minds and our phones, and leave no real time for our families. We're unhappy, busy, nervous, anxious, and – of course – ulcerous.

"Joseph," Jacob must have told his great son, "Joseph, don't fall victim to these plagues. Don't destroy the value of your greatness by submitting to the anxiety that goes with it. Here's Adam's garment. He had lost every penny, been driven out of a Paradise, forced to go to work – manual labor, no less – and had nothing to his name but this garment. And look: he managed to remain so happy and satisfied with his simple life that he drew the figures of birds in flight, the symbols of careless happiness, of unconcerned joy and a feeling of uninhibited and un-anxious well-being. Remember, son, after your day of business is done, be done with it. Don't worry about losing it. Just relax, trust in God who gave it to you to keep it for you, and don't get sick looking for amusement. Just determine always to be happy with what you have. Let your mind be as free as a bird, though all you may have after all is only a shirt." "When a king is at a celebration," said the Mezeritscher Rebbe, "he is approachable to many people who otherwise would be denied admittance to the palace. Likewise, when we serve God with joy, He is more approachable."

And finally, the third thing our sages had to say about this ancient garment worn by Adam was that it was no ordinary garment at all. It was, they maintained, bigdei kehuna, the robe of a high priest, worn while serving God, first used by Adam, then down the ages through Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and now being given to Joseph. That garment, in short, was the symbol of religious tradition. It was the service and worship of our one God, being transmitted from father to son, spanning all human history from its very beginnings. Oh how worried Jacob must have been when he took leave of his earthly existence and of his twelve sons. Joseph must have troubled him more than all the others. Such a wonderful son, such a clean-minded, upright young man of true integrity and fear of God. How would he fare when tested with wealth and might? Had he, perhaps, in all this luxury and regal splendor, forgotten his old father and his Eternal God? "What about these two young

sons of Joseph I just blessed?" Jacob must have thought. "What is to become of them in this land of Egypt? Will they assimilate? Will they be Egyptian like all Egyptians, and angrily maintain that they are no different from other Egyptians who worshiped the sun as it rose on this Nile valley?" Joseph had to have a reminder with him at all times. And so Jacob gave him this high-priestly vestment, first worn by the first man. Religious responsibility, he meant to tell him, does not decrease with increased substance; it increases. Here, Joseph, is this yellow-greenish, ancient-looking, outmoded, outlandish, and, to Egyptian eyes, ridiculous-looking little robe. Wear it, Joseph. Maybe this garment of Adam, the robe of the high priest, doesn't go well with your royal purple. Maybe a brand new, shiny, and attractive Egyptian robe would look nicer and be more appealing to your young folks who never saw or understood the religious tradition of Adam and Abraham and Isaac. Maybe so, but this is yours, and now you're to wear it.

Even more than arrogance and unhappiness, the greatest victim of our American Jewish prosperity has been our religious tradition. It hasn't always looked good beside the shiny brassiness of our newfound wealth. Some of our non-Jewish neighbors might have snickered at it – or so we thought. The tallis hasn't always matched up to our tuxedos and riding habits and minks. And so we scrapped it. We disinherited ourselves from the ancient mantle which came down to us through the ages. We now wallow in the fat of the land – and the priestly garments lie somewhere unknown and un-mourned. I have been stressing the outlandish and old-fashioned look of this garment of Adam, precisely because this is the test of the Jew. Any child will automatically grab for that which is new and shiny and colorful. The test of Jewish maturity is to hold to the heart the old mantle, perhaps to polish it up, but never to exchange it. The Jew who is ashamed of it because it is so ancient looking is not an authentic Jew. Ludwig Lewisohn has given us an excellent description of the authentic Jew when he said that it depends on your reaction when walking with gentile friends through New York's East Side and seeing bearded, kaftan-robed and shtreimel-decked Jews running to Minha. If you feel uneasy and embarrassed, you're not an authentic Jew, just like the Catholic ashamed of the robed nun is not an authentic Catholic. You can test it right here in Springfield. If you're ashamed of being identified with your religion on Main Street, then – sorry to say – you're not a full Jew. The true test of authenticity is to be as Americanized as Joseph was Egyptianized; as wealthy and mighty as Joseph – and still to proudly wear the mantle of your religious tradition.

"I have given you an extra portion over your brothers" – it is only one more trifle than the others received. But it is that one garment of Adam, with its triple message of humility, happiness, and holiness, which can spell the difference between successful, satisfying Jewish living, and abortive, unsatisfying, and un-Jewish living. The Torah offers it to us, even as Jacob offered it to Joseph. Let us not wait. Let us extend our hands, open our hearts, and take it – with humility, with happiness, and in holiness.

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### **Parashat Vayechi and the Truest Kindness: Chesed V'Emet**

#### **Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman**

As Jacob's life draws to a close in Parashat Vayechi, he summons Joseph and makes an urgent request: "deal with me with chesed v'emet – do not bury me in Egypt" (Genesis 47:29). The patriarch asks to be returned to the Land of Israel for burial, and frames this plea with a striking phrase: chesed v'emet, "kindness and truth," or perhaps "true kindness."

Rashi offers the classic explanation: when one performs kindness for the dead, it is pure and genuine, as no repayment can be expected. The deceased cannot reciprocate; they cannot return the favor, offer gratitude, or enhance one's reputation.

But this raises a glaring question: What could it possibly mean to say there is no repayment for caring for the deceased? Did Jacob and Joseph not believe in divine reward and punishment? Wouldn't God's reward constitute a very real form of payback for Joseph's kindness? How can we speak of "no expectation of return" in a worldview permeated by belief in divine justice?

This question opens a window into understanding not just this particular mitzvah, but the very nature of authentic human relationships and the kind of society our tradition envisions.

#### **The Midrash on Abraham and Sarah**

Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, in the *Asufat Ma'arakhot to Chayei Sarah*, draws attention to a surprising Midrash that Abraham was praised as having attained the qualities of God specifically when he buried his wife Sarah.

This is striking: Abraham, who performed so much kindness throughout his lifetime, receives singular commendation for an act that any relative, certainly any husband, would be expected to perform. Why does the burial of Sarah merit such special praise, suggesting that through this act Abraham achieved divine qualities, when Abraham's legendary hospitality and generosity were far more extraordinary?

R. Goldvicht connects this to the theme of Chesed v'Emet. The other services that Abraham provided to humanity were those for which one could expect reciprocity, and thus could be understood as part of a social contract, recommended without necessarily being rooted in divine influence. When Abraham welcomed guests, fed the hungry, and showed generosity to all, these were admirable acts, but they operated within the framework of human social interaction. They could be explained, at least in part, by enlightened self-interest, by the recognition that such behavior builds community and often brings return benefits.

Burial, however, is different. It is an act of kindness to the departed, a "chesed shel emet" – a pure, selfless act for which no reciprocity can be expected. Thus, it is a clear manifestation not of utilitarianism or of the social contract, but of Godliness itself.

Acts that exist within the framework of mutual benefit, however admirable, do not necessarily reflect divine qualities. They can be recommended by practical wisdom, by social necessity, by enlightened self-interest. But kindness that offers no possibility of return, purely out of recognition of another's dignity and worth, transcends the human and touches the divine.

God's kindness to humanity is not motivated by what He can gain from us. The divine chesed flows from God's essential nature, from His goodness itself, not from any expectation of reciprocity. When we care for the deceased, we emulate this divine attribute most purely. We act out of pure goodness, out of recognition of human dignity, out of commitment to truth; not out of calculation of benefit.

This is why the Midrash singles out Sarah's burial as the moment when Abraham attained the qualities of God. In that act, he demonstrated that his kindness was not ultimately rooted in the social contract or in reciprocal relationships, but in something deeper, in chesed that flows from Godliness itself.

#### **Additional Layers of Meaning**

Yet other commentators offer additional layers that enrich our understanding. R. Yitzchak Kreiser (Ish Le-Re'ehu, Genesis, 469) suggests that "emet" refers to the undeniable reality of the need. In other realms of chesed, one might question whether help is truly necessary, but burial admits no such doubt. The "truth" here is the inescapable reality of human mortality and dependency.

The Kozhiglover Rav, R. Aryeh Leib Fromer, offers a homiletic insight (printed in *Responsa Eretz Tzvi II*, pp. 409-410) that adds another dimension. He suggests that while the deceased requires the assistance of others, those who are alive need the deceased as well. The tremendous mitzvot associated with caring for the departed cannot be performed in any other context. Thus, the chesed associated with these mitzvot is particularly great because they provide a final merit to a soul anguished by the loss of further opportunity to accrue merit on this earth. This perspective transforms our understanding: we do not simply do a favor for those who have died; rather, we engage in a sacred partnership.

R. Elyakim Shlesinger (*Sichot Beit Av*, pp. 66-67) notes that acts of chesed are often motivated partially by the desire of the giver to avoid witnessing the pain and suffering of others, which diverts focus from the needs of the recipient to those of the giver. In the case of funeral preparations, however, the recipient is not visibly suffering, and thus the service is more purely altruistic.

(For a more mystically oriented interpretation, see *Ma'avar Ya'abok, Sefat Emet*, ch. 27.)

#### **Two Aspects of One Obligation**

The mitzvah of burial operates on two distinct levels. On one level, it is an independent obligation identified in the Torah as a commandment (Deuteronomy 21:23), with its own goals and requirements. On another level, it is the final expression of dignity shown to a human being, and one that by definition necessitates the involvement of others. As such, burial and all that it entails is firmly rooted within the broader commandment of chesed.

This is a chesed modeled by God Himself. The Torah tells us that God personally buried Moses (Deut. 34:6) – a powerful paradigm for human emulation. When we attend to the needs of the deceased, we walk in the ways of the Divine.

Some authorities delineate two distinct responsibilities within this framework. For family members, burial is an absolute obligation. The community at large, which assists the family or steps in when there is no family, is engaged in chesed.

The Ketav Sofer offers another dimension: burial is a basic societal need that could be met minimally and functionally. The "true kindness" was not merely burying Jacob, but honoring his specific wish not to be buried in Egypt. Going beyond minimal compliance to honor the deceased's preferences – that is purely chesed. (*Responsa Ketav Sofer, Yoreh Deah 180*. Note also the analysis of R. Meir Dan Plotzki, *Keli Chemdah, Parshat Ki Tetze 6:6*.) This interpretation is relevant to understanding the Midrashic comment regarding Abraham, who would have been required to minimally attend to Sarah's burial regardless. The extent he went to in showing her proper dignity and care is evidence of the chesed the Midrash is identifying.

#### **The Priority of Attending to the Deceased**

The importance of this mitzvah is underscored by the principle that attending a funeral supersedes even Torah study (*Ketuvot 17a*). This is grouped together with hakhnasat kallah, escorting a bride into marriage. The majority of authorities rule that one must set aside learning to participate in a funeral procession. This extends to all community members at work as well (YD 361:2). The message is unmistakable: the dignity of every human being, even in death, takes precedence.

While the obligation to set aside Torah study is striking, some authorities actually considered it redundant in light of the standard rule that Torah study does not exempt one from a mitzvah that cannot be done by others. Since one's absence from a funeral will reduce the size of the crowd (even if others are present), it seems self-evident that this

mitzvah cannot be delegated. Others suggest the ruling was necessary because one might mistakenly think only the burial itself is the mitzvah, while the procession merely adds honor. The Talmud therefore teaches explicitly that the procession also takes priority.

#### The Challenge of Contemporary Practice

Despite these clear teachings, contemporary practice falls short of the ideal. R. Moshe Feinstein reportedly considered this a very serious question with no satisfactory answer. R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (*He'arot Le-Massekhet Ketuvot*, 17a [70-71]) noted that no single explanation suffices, but taken together various theories provide a general defense.

R. David Ariav surveys several possibilities: the obligation may apply only when one actually sees the deceased being transported; one actively engaged in learning may not need to interrupt; the original principle may have applied only to unified communities; the obligation may exist only at the precise moment of movement, which is generally not known in advance.

Some authorities concede that current practice represents a necessary accommodation given the frequency of death in larger cities and cemetery distances. Others note that when there is a chevra kadisha, there is less obligation on the general populace, as the chevra acts as community emissaries. (See *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* IX, Kuntres Ramat Rachel, 50, and Kuntres Even Ya'akov, 19-23, who surveys various perspectives on this issue.)

Whatever explanation is accepted, friends, neighbors, and relatives of the deceased have particular obligations. As R. David Friedman (Karliner) emphasizes (*Sh'eilat David*, chiddushim to *Yoreh De'ah* 361), their absence may constitute public disgrace and the issue must be evaluated accordingly.

#### The Meaning of Accompaniment

The term used for attending a funeral is *halvayat ha-met*, literally "escorting the deceased." The act of physical accompaniment is fundamental, prompting the question of how far one must escort.

An initial reading of the *Shulchan Arukh* indicates a minimum of four amot (six to eight feet). R. Yeshaya Shlomo Asdit asserts that the mitzvah is actually to escort the body to the cemetery, but minimally one has performed the basic duty with four amot. In defense of contemporary practice, he suggests that many are lenient about traveling to the cemetery because Jewish communities typically live among non-Jewish populations, with cemeteries located at some distance. The Chafetz Chaim observes that at minimum, the community must ensure a minyan at the cemetery for kaddish.

The Muncaczer Rebbe, R. Chaim Elazar Schapiro, after an extended effort to understand the apparently inadequate common practice, suggests the following distinction (*Responsa Minchat Elazar* I, 26, in footnote. See also IV, 2.). The Talmud states that one who sees the deceased in transit, and chooses not to accompany him, is in essence mocking the departed, and subject to the designation of "who so mocks the poor (lo'eg la-rash) blasphemes his Maker" (*Proverbs* 17:5). This criticism is applicable only to one who fails to escort the deceased even for a minimal four cubits. To go beyond that minimum, and escort to the cemetery, is an act of voluntary chesed. R. Ovadiah Yosef (*Responsa Yabbia Omer* IV, *Yoreh De'ah* 35:1) records a practice to wait until the deceased has left one's field of vision, and notes that this is apparently sourced in a comment of the Chizkuni (*Deut.* 21:7).

#### The Manner of Escorting

It is not only the act of escorting that matters, but also the manner. The pace should be deliberate and respectful, not rushed. Those escorting must not push others away, which would undermine the honor of both the dead and the living. All extraneous conversation, even Torah discussion, is inappropriate during the procession.

The *Shulchan Arukh* states that even when not obligated to accompany, one must stand when the coffin passes. According to the *Taz*, this honors those involved in the proceedings; as agents of chesed, they command respect. The *Pitchei Teshuvah*, citing R. Eliyahu of Lublin, offers a different theory: the standing is for the honor of the deceased themselves.

Contemporary authorities assert that the standing obligation applies even to one on a passing bus. R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach is quoted (*Halikhot Shelomoh: Tefillah*, ch. 13, n. 22) as maintaining that if the bus stops or turns in another direction, the passenger is obligated to descend and accompany the funeral procession. R. Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (*Responsa Salmat Chaim, Yoreh De'ah* 614) inclined toward the same conclusion.

#### Beyond the Procession

The language of *halvayat ha-met* connotes "escorting the deceased," and much discussion centers on accompanying the coffin. Nonetheless, as R. Yisrael David Harfenes notes, participating in eulogies is also a fulfillment of this mitzvah.

R. Harfenes cites an instructive practice of the Satmar Rebbe. When asked to speak at a funeral, the Rebbe would request to be the last speaker; at the conclusion of his eulogy, he would also escort the deceased. However, if he were not the last speaker, he would not necessarily remain for all speeches.

Building on this, R. Harfenes suggests: The primary responsibility is escorting the deceased. Attending eulogies is an overt act of honor, so much so that one present may have difficulty justifying leaving mid-service. However, if one is actually speaking, this constitutes such visible honor that it may be a complete fulfillment in itself.

R. Pinchas Korakh asserts that just as one who cannot escort the entire way does so for four cubits, one who cannot remain for all eulogies but listens for whatever duration possible has accomplished something significant.

#### The Contemporary Application

To return to our opening question: How can we speak of "no repayment" when Jacob and Joseph surely believed in divine reward and punishment?

The answer lies in understanding the profound distinction between divine reward and human transactionality. Of course they believed in divine justice; but that is not what Jacob was asking Joseph to transcend. Jacob was asking Joseph not to approach this act like a politician in a transactional relationship, but to set aside that entire framework and to act from a place of pure principle, out of divine attributes rather than human calculation.

The social contract – the framework of reciprocal obligations – is not inherently bad. It is, in fact, the foundation of civilized society. But chesed v'emet asks us to recognize that beneath and beyond the social contract lies something higher: the emulation of divine attributes.

God's kindness to humanity flows from His essential goodness, not from any expectation of reciprocity. When we care for the deceased, when we perform acts that offer no possibility of return benefit, we most purely emulate this divine quality.

There is much going on in this last parashah of Genesis that is ambiguous. The sons of Jacob remain anxiously unclear as to their standing with Joseph, and ultimately transmit a message to him that Jacob has instructed him to forgive them (50:16-17), which may or may not be true (see *Yevamot* 65b).

Jacob issues blessings to each of his sons that the Torah describes with the unusual formulation (*Gen. 49:28*) of "Each man with his own blessing (singular) He blessed them (plural)." The *Sefat Emet* picks up on the change in language: he was bestowing each son with blessings tailored to his unique abilities, with the understanding that he harness those talents and gifts towards the good of the family as a whole.

When blessing his grandchildren, Jacob emphasizes the younger over the older, seemingly repeating the mistake of favoritism that he committed with his own sons (see *Shabbat* 10b and *Megillah* 16b). One possibility is that he was testing them: Would there be a jealous reaction, as had happened with his sons, or would there be a sense of cooperation, a more auspicious sign for the next generation? (See *Da'at Shlomo*.)

Yet another possibility is that Jacob's target at that moment was actually Joseph, who objects to his inversion and declares that Menashe is the older son. Jacob's response is a cryptic, "I know, my son, I know." Perhaps, it has been suggested, these words contain multitudes. "I know all too well, my son, how painful it can be for an older child to be passed

over for a younger child. I was a part of that many years ago and saw the price that it extracted from the older sons. I am asking you to appreciate it now as well, as it seems you do; and to have compassion on your own older brothers who reacted so negatively when it happened to them. Perhaps you can find within your heart to forgive them." (Yalkut Ish L'Reihu, quoting Nachalat Av.)

In that case, perhaps Jacob did instruct Joseph to forgive his brothers, whether or not he ever said those words specifically. Perhaps through one action or a combination of actions, through a series of implications and subtle messages, he conveyed to Joseph the importance of seeing the larger picture and working beyond the politics of the moment.

And then, once again, at the very end of his life, he instructed Joseph to listen to his final wishes for dignity and for a resting place consistent with his spiritual vision. He asked him to do so, not because of any transactional benefit, or for any social contract, or justifiable reciprocity, but simply because kindness and giving is the very essence of his soul. In that, Jacob was making a request, but was, in truth, bequeathing a legacy; one begun by his own grandfather Abraham, and now transmitted to his own grandchildren and beyond: telling them not what to do, but who to be.]

## Vayechi

### by Rabbi Berel Wein

The book of Bereshith is completed in this week's Torah reading. The story of the emergence of first one person and then an entire family as being the spearhead of monotheistic belief in a pagan world is an exciting but difficult one.

At so many turns in the events described in the Torah the idea of monotheism and the few who championed its cause could have died at birth. Yet somehow the idea and the people advancing it survived and grew until, over the ages, it became the defining idea in the major religions of civilization.

Truth somehow survived, unable to be crushed by the great and mighty forces always aligned against it. Our patriarch Yaakov tells the Pharaoh that "my years are relatively few and very difficult ones." But Yaakov is not only speaking for himself in this statement. He speaks for the Jewish people as a whole in all of its generations and ages. And he also speaks for all those in the world who still value truth over falseness, accuracy over populism, reality over current political correctness and imposed intellectual conformity.

The Midrash taught us that the seal of God, so to speak, is truth. The book of Bereshith begins with truth inscribed in its opening words, the last letter of these first three words of the Torah spelling the Hebrew word *emet* – truth. Falseness requires publicity, media, excuses and greater falsehoods to cover and justify the original untruth.

In Yiddish there is a phrase that says: "The best lie is the truth." Truth needs no follow-up. It stands on its own for all eternity.

Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence stated that truths are self-evident. If we merely contemplate, even on a superficial level, the events as described in the book of Bereshith, we must stand back in awe to realize the power of truth and the tenacity of individuals who pursue it and live by it.

How easy and understandable it would have been for any of our patriarchs and matriarchs to have become disappointed and disillusioned by the events of their lives. Yet their ultimate faith, that truth will survive and triumph, dominates the entire narrative of this first book of the Torah. Bereshith sets the pattern for everything that will follow.

All of the Torah is a search for and vindication of truth. God's revelation at Sinai was an aid in this quest for truth, otherwise so many people could not have arrived at that moment of truth all together. But falseness, human nature, greed and apathy continually whittle away at the idea of truth as the centerpiece of human endeavor.

The rabbis taught us that the acts of the patriarchs, which are the main story of the book of Bereshith, guide us for all later generations. This Shabbat we will all rise and say "chazak" – be strong - at the conclusion of the Torah reading. The never ending pursuit of truth requires strength

of purpose and will. May we really have the strength of purpose and belief to "be strong."

Shabbat Shalom  
Rabbi Berel Wein

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## Drasha

### By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vayechi  
Squeeze Play

Yaakov had passed from this world. His twelve sons were left alone in a foreign world, and it was time for reconciliation. The brothers were afraid that with Yaakov's passing Yoseph would avenge them for selling him to Egypt. So they sent the sons of Yaakov's concubine Bilhah, with a message. "Your father commanded before his death saying, 'Thus shall you tell Yoseph, please, kindly forgive your brothers terrible deed and their sin for they have done you evil.'" Yoseph assures them that he has no intent for retribution. In fact, he promises to sustain the brothers and their families.

The Talmud in Yevamos tells us that Yaakov would not have suspected Yoseph to be vengeful and he never issued the stated command. The Talmud extrapolates from this incident that one may twist the truth for the sake of peace and harmony. Yet it seems that there was a bit more than twisting truth. It seems that there was an overt lie. And why would they use Yaakov's name in this untruth? If he did not suspect Yoseph as Rashi explains, then weren't they insulting him by saying, "your father commanded"? The 1929 Boston Braves were owned by Judge Emil E. Fuchs. Judge Fuchs cared basically for the financial management and legal affairs of the team, but the depressed economy and his unwillingness to put up with the difficult and expensive Roger Hornsby, left the team without a manager.

Judge Fuchs, an experienced adjudicator, read the rulebook and surrounded himself with a few cronies who would help him guide the team. Then he literally brought his swivel chair into the dugout and began to manage the team.

It was late in the summer of that dismal season, and the team had just been on a losing streak. Miraculously, however, it seemed that the down streak was about to end. The game was tied in the bottom of the ninth and the bases were loaded. The Braves were batting and Judge Fuchs gave the orders to swing away.

After one strike, the batter, Joe Dugan, called time and approached his well-respected manager. "Judge," the player suggested, "the rookie at third base is playing well behind the bag. If I drop a bunt, we'll squeeze in the winning run!"

The judge looked sternly at the ball player. He was stunned at the mere suggestion. "Mr. Dugan," he exclaimed, "You will do no such thing. Either we will score our runs honorably or not at all!"

The Sha'ar Bas Rabim explains that though Yaakov never explicitly gave the command to lie, he did issue a game plan for the future. Before he blessed the brothers, he gathered them together with the words, "gather yourselves together," (Genesis 49:1-2). The charge for the future was unity, and whatever it took to achieve unity amongst the brothers was the core of Yaakov's wishes. The brothers understood how to play the game of life and how their father Yaakov would have wanted it. Peace and harmony were the only ultimate goal. That is what all parents want for their children and that is what the objective of the twelve brothers was. It took a squeeze play, but harmony was achieved. Had Yaakov been alive to manage the situation he may have also chosen the exact game plan. Yaakov, with the guidance of his mother and a skillful deception, had his father give him the blessings that were intended for Esav.

My grandfather, Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, once told me that attaining the highest level of any attribute requires when to violate it! And to that end, Avraham the stalwart of kindness and compassion, was ready to sacrifice his own son at God's command, surely an act of seeming brutality. Yaakov, whose virtue is truth, knew when it was proper to mislead. And Yaakov's sons who understood the virtue of Yaakov's truth, also understood his quest for peace. They

learned, very well, that though sometimes it is time to swing away, this was the time to drop a gentle bunt.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

## Generations Forget and Remember

Vayechi

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

The drama of younger and older brothers which haunts the book of Bereishit from Cain and Abel onwards reaches a strange climax in the story of Joseph's children. Jacob/Israel is nearing the end of his life. Joseph visits him, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. It is the only scene of grandfather and grandchildren in the book. Jacob asks Joseph to bring them near so that he can bless them. What follows next is described in painstaking detail:

Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right hand to Israel's left, and Manasseh on his left hand to Israel's right, and brought them close. Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, even though he was the younger. And, crossing his hands, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though he was the firstborn...

Gen. 48:13-14

When Joseph saw that his father had placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, he was displeased. He took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to his father, "Not so, father. This is the firstborn. Put your right hand on his head." But his father refused: "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great, but his younger brother will become even greater, and his descendants will become an abundance of nations." On that day, he blessed them: "By you shall Israel bless, saying: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" He put Ephraim before Manasseh.

Gen. 48:17-20

It is not difficult to understand the care Joseph took to ensure that Jacob would bless the firstborn first. Three times his father had set the younger before the elder, and each time it had resulted in tragedy. He - Jacob, the younger - had sought to supplant his elder brother Esau. He had favoured the younger sister Rachel over Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Joseph and Benjamin, over the elder Reuben, Shimon, and Levi. The consequences were consistently catastrophic: estrangement from Esau, tension between the two sisters, and hostility among his sons. Joseph himself bore the scars: thrown into a pit by his brothers, who initially planned to kill him and eventually sold him into Egypt as a slave.

Had his father not learned? Or did he think that Ephraim - whom Joseph held in his right hand - was the elder? Did Jacob know what he was doing? Did he realise that he was risking extending the family feuds into the next generation? Besides which, what possible reason could he have for favouring the younger of his grandchildren over the elder? He had not seen them before. He knew nothing about them. None of the factors that led to the earlier episodes were operative here. Why did Jacob favour Ephraim over Manasseh?

Jacob knew two things, and it is here that the explanation lies. He knew that the stay of his family in Egypt would not be a short one. Before leaving Canaan to see Joseph, God had appeared to him in a vision: Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes.

Gen. 46:3-4

This was, in other words, the start of the long exile which God had told Abraham would be the fate of his children (a vision the Torah describes as accompanied by "a deep and dreadful darkness" - Gen. 15:12). The other thing Jacob knew was his grandsons' names, Manasseh and Ephraim. The combination of these two facts was enough.

When Joseph finally emerged from prison to become Prime Minister of Egypt, he married and had two sons. This is how the Torah describes their birth:

Before the years of the famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh, saying, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim, saying, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Gen. 41:50-52

With the utmost brevity the Torah intimates an experience of exile that was to be repeated many times across the centuries. At first, Joseph felt relief. The years as a slave, then a prisoner, were over. He had risen to greatness. In Canaan, he had been the youngest of eleven brothers in a nomadic family of shepherds. Now, in Egypt, he was at the centre of the greatest civilisation of the ancient world, second only to Pharaoh in rank and power. No one reminded him of his background. With his royal robes and ring and chariot, he was an Egyptian prince (as Moses was later to be). The past was a bitter memory he sought to remove from his mind. Manasseh means "forgetting."

But as time passed, Joseph began to feel quite different emotions. Yes, he had arrived. But this people was not his; nor was its culture. To be sure, his family was, in any worldly terms, undistinguished, unsophisticated. Yet they remained his family. They were the matrix of who he was. Though they were no more than shepherds (a class the Egyptians despised), they had been spoken to by God - not the gods of the sun, the river, and death, the Egyptian pantheon - but God, the creator of heaven and earth, who did not make His home in temples and pyramids and panoplies of power, but who spoke in the human heart as a voice, lifting a simple family to moral greatness. By the time his second son was born, Joseph had undergone a profound change of heart. To be sure, he had all the trappings of earthly success - "God has made me fruitful" - but Egypt had become "the land of my affliction." Why? Because it was exile.

There is a sociological observation about immigrant groups, known as Hansen's Law: "The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget." Joseph went through this transformation very quickly. It was already complete by the time his second son was born. By calling him Ephraim, he was remembering what, when Manasseh was born, he was trying to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh had nothing to do with their ages and everything to do with their names. Knowing that these were the first two children of his family to be born in exile, knowing too that the exile would be prolonged and at times difficult and dark, Jacob sought to signal to all future generations that there would be a constant tension between the desire to forget (to assimilate, acculturate, anaesthetise the hope of a return) and the promptings of memory (the knowledge that this is "exile," that we are part of another story, that ultimate home is somewhere else). The child of forgetting (Manasseh) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part.

## Bikur Cholim II

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question #1: Only visiting?

Is bikur cholim fulfilled simply by visiting the sick?

Question #2: How often?

How many times a day can one perform bikur cholim?

Question #3: Focus!

Do I need to focus that I am doing the mitzvah in order to fulfill it?

Foreword

In a previous article, we studied the laws of bikur cholim. We learned there that the original meaning of "bikur" is "examining" or "checking" and that the primary responsibility of the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to check and see what the ill person needs and to do whatever one can to meet those needs (Toras Ha'adam of the Ramban).

Many people err to think that the mitzvah of bikur cholim is simply to visit the ill and cheer them up, but do not realize that the mitzvah includes attending to the ill person's needs and praying on their behalf.

The previous article also taught that mitzvos tzerichos kavanah, performing a mitzvah requires being aware that what I am doing is something that Hashem commanded. Therefore, when I focus that this action fulfills a mitzvah, I gain reward that I do not receive if I do not pay attention that what I am doing is a mitzvah. It is also true that I can accomplish bikur cholim even if I am paid to perform the mitzvah. For this reason, a medical professional gains much merit by being aware that he is performing a mitzvah each and every time that he inquires about someone ill and assists in their care. One who does these same activities as a job, without considering that he is carrying out Hashem's mitzvah, loses the opportunity to fulfill it and to receive reward.

The previous article noted that there are several allusions in the Torah to the mitzvah of bikur cholim. It also discussed the dispute whether bikur cholim is counted separately as one of the 613 mitzvos or is subsumed under the mitzvah of following in Hashem's ways. To quote the Gemara (Sotah 14a): Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said: "How are we to understand the words of the Torah, 'You should follow Hashem, your G-d' (Devarim 13:5)? How is it possible for a human being to follow the Holy One, blessed is He, when the verse states that 'Hashem, your G-d, is a consuming fire?' (Devarim 4:24; 9:3)' Rather, it means that we are to emulate Hashem's attributes – just as he dresses the unclothed... takes care of the sick... so should we!"

Similarly, the Torah teaches, "You must clarify to them [your children] the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the pathways in which they are to walk and the deeds that they are to perform" (Shemos 18:20), which the Gemara (Bava Kama 100a) explains includes gemillas chessed, bikur cholim and other, similar, acts of kindness.

The Toras Ha'adam writes, "It is a great mitzvah to visit the ill, since this causes the visitor to pray on the sick person's behalf, which revitalizes him. Furthermore, since the visitor sees the ill person, the visitor checks to see what the ill person needs" (also see Beis Yosef, Yoreh Deah 335). We see that praying for the ill is an even greater part of the mitzvah than attending to his needs, since the Ramban first mentions praying and then refers to attending to the other needs of the ill as "Furthermore."

When praying in the presence of the individual, one can pray for his recovery in any language and does not need to mention their name. By the way, wishing the patient a refuah sheleimah is considered praying for the individual. The authorities note that someone who visits a sick person without praying for his recovery has not fulfilled all the requirements of the mitzvah (Toras Ha'adam, based on Nedarim 40a; Rema, Yoreh Deah 335:4). Therefore, medical professionals should accustom themselves to pray for their sick patients, in order to fulfill the complete mitzvah of bikur cholim.

When praying for someone ill, always include a request that the rest of the Jewish ill also recover (Shabbos 12b).

The Gesher Hachayim recommends reciting the following pesukim as an introductory prayer for the patient: The pasuk that begins with the words Veheisir Hashem mi'mecha kol cholim (Devarim 7:15), the pasuk Im shamo...kol hamachalah asher samti bemitzrayim lo asim alecha ki ani Hashem rofe'echa (Shemos 15:26) and Borei niv sefasayim... amar Hashem urefasiv (Yeshayahu 57:19).

#### Changing the name

Based on a passage in the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16b), the Rema suggests changing the patient's name (Yoreh Deah 335:10), a practice usually followed only when the patient is facing a very serious situation. When "changing" the patient's name, the common practice is to add a name, such as Chayim, Chayah or Refael, at the beginning of the patient's name. The Gesher Hachayim (Volume 1, 1:3:5) advises that the new name should always be added at the beginning – if the patient's name had been Moshe ben Sarah, the new name is Refael Moshe ben Sarah, and if it was Rivkah bas Leah, the new name is Chayah Rivkah bas Leah.

If the patient improves even slightly and survives for thirty days after their name has been changed, this new name should be considered their name permanently and is also used when children are called up for an aliyah, when making a mishebeirach or other tefillah purposes. If the

patient shows no improvement after the name is changed or passes away within thirty days of the name change, we ignore the changing of the name, both for the ill, now deceased, person and for their progeny.

For clarification, I will use two actual examples. During my mother's final illness, she contracted a different, very severe condition, and the name Chayah was added at the beginning of her name, Shterna Baila. She recovered from this condition, although her primary illness took her life a little more than a year later. Her name remains Chaya Shterna Baila.

When my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, the name Chayim was added before his name. Although he lived another three months, there was no improvement during this time, and therefore his name is Menachem Nachum, without the additional Chayim at the beginning.

#### How to change?

Some siddurim and the Gesher Hachayim suggest procedures to be followed for the name changing. Gesher Hachayim suggests that a quorum recite eighteen chapters of Tehillim (see page 31 of Volume I of his work for the list of chapters that he recommends), then selections from Chapter 119 of Tehillim, and then a special tefillah. If a minyan is present, he advises to then recite the 13 attributes of mercy of Hashem (Shemos 34:6, 7).

#### Small patient

One of the greatest acts of chesed is to stay overnight with a choleh (Aruch Hashulchan, Yoreh Deah 335:3; Shu't Tzitz Eliezer, Volume 5, Ramat Rachel, #4; Yalkut Yosef, Volume 7, page 27). A similar act of pure bikur cholim and true chesed is to stay overnight with a hospitalized child, which, in addition to fulfilling all aspects of bikur cholim enables the overburdened parents to get some proper sleep and attempt to keep their family's life in order at a very stressful time.

The Gemara (Nedarim 39b) states that the mitzvah of bikur cholim has no limit. The concluding interpretation of that Gemara is that this means that a person can fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim even a hundred times a day. If one frequently pops one's head into a sick child's bedroom to see how the child is doing, or periodically drops in to visit a shut-in, one fulfills a separate mitzvah each time, so long as it does not become burdensome to the choleh. As I mentioned in the previous article, a nurse fulfills the mitzvah of bikur cholim each time he/she checks on a patient.

Every community should have an organization devoted to the needs of the sick, and it is a tremendous merit to be involved in organizing and participating in such a wonderful chesed project (Ahavas Chesed 3:3).

The Gemara (Nedarim 40a) reports that when one of Rabbi Akiva's disciples was ill, no one came to check the patient's welfare. Rabbi Akiva entered the uncared-for dwelling, cleaned it and sprinkled water on the dirt floor (to prevent dust from rising). The student proclaimed, "Rabbi Akiva, you have brought me back to life!" After this experience, Rabbi Akiva taught that someone who visits the ill is considered as if he saved the person's life!

The Gemara states that someone who fulfills the mitzvah of bikur cholim is saved from the judgments of Gehenna (Nedarim 40a).

#### Taking care of needs

In addition to raising the sick person's spirits by showing one's concern, the visitor should also ascertain that the physical, financial, and medical needs are properly cared for, as well as other logistical concerns that may be troubling the patient. The mitzvah is to identify what the ill person needs to have taken care of and attend to that. If he needs to have household jobs attended to, getting kids to school, or financial help while the breadwinner is ill, these are all aspects of fulfilling the mitzvah of bikur cholim. Often, well-meaning people make the effort to visit the sick, but fail to fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim fully, because they fail to check if the choleh needs something (Gesher Hachayim).

#### When to visit

The Gemara (Nedarim 40a) says that one should not visit a choleh at the beginning of the day or at the end. This ruling is cited by the Toras Ha'adam and many other early halachic authorities. Despite the above, the custom is to visit the ill person, regardless of the time of the day. Why is this so? The Aruch Hashulchan (Yoreh Deah 335:8) explains

that the Gemara's visiting times are advisory rather than obligatory. The Gemara is saying that one should visit the ill person at the time most beneficial for his care, which is usually the afternoon, either because this does not interfere with medical care or because it is the best time to detect the patient's medical status. However, this is only advice and can be tempered by other practical concerns.

#### How to visit

The Gemara states that the shechinah rests above the head of a sick person (Shabbos 12b; Nedarim 40a). For this reason, it states that someone who visits a sick person should not sit on a bed, a stool or a chair, but on the floor. Alternatively, he can remain standing during his visit.

However, the Ran (Nedarim 40a) and the Rema (Yoreh Deah 335:3) rule that when the Gemara prohibits sitting on a bed, a stool or a chair when visiting someone ill, it is referring to a situation where the patient is lying on the floor – in such a situation, one should not sit higher than the shechinah. When the ill person is in a bed, one can sit on a chair that is no taller than the bed (see Yalkut Yosef, page 28, quoting Rav Eliezer Yehudah Valdenberg).

Based on a Zohar (parshas Pinchas), some contend that one should not sit near the head or the foot of the ill person, but alongside him (Beis Hillel and Shiyurei Beracha, Yoreh Deah 335:3). This ruling is alluded to also in the She'iltos.

Incidentally, since the Shechinah is in the choleh's presence (Shabbos 12b), visitors should act in a dignified manner (Shela'h). This includes both their behavior and their mode of dress.

#### Visiting on Shabbos

The Gemara quotes a dispute between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel whether it is permitted to visit someone ill on Shabbos (Shabbos 12a). Beis Shammai rules that one should not. Among the reasons suggested for Beis Shammai's opinion is that this may cause the visitor to become sad on Shabbos upon seeing the suffering of the ill (Rashi), that this violates the mitzvah of oneg Shabbos (She'iltos), or that this might cause someone to pray on Shabbos for a personal request, which is prohibited (Shevet Yehudah, Yoreh Deah 335:6). Even according to Beis Hillel, who permit doing bikur cholim on Shabbos, the Gemara says that bikoshi hitiru, this was permitted only with difficulty. Based on this, the Magen Avraham (287) disapproves of those who perform bikur cholim only on Shabbos, noting that although permitted, it is preferred that bikur cholim be performed on weekdays. The Sha'arei Teshuvah and the Biur Halacha note that someone who does not have time except for Shabbos may go, and certainly so if he thereby provides encouragement and creates smiles on people's faces.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 287:1) concludes that it is permitted to perform bikur cholim on Shabbos, like Beis Hillel, but emphasizes that one should not bless the ill person with the same refuah sheleimah wishes that are said on weekdays. This is presumably because wishing refuah sheleimah is actually a prayer on the ill person's behalf, and Chazal prohibited reciting personal requests on Shabbos. The Gemara quotes several opinions concerning exactly what you should say to the ill person on Shabbos. The last two opinions mentioned are those of Rabbi Yosi and of Shevna (or Shachna) of Yerushalayim. Rabbi Yosi cites a simple text, Hamakom yeracheim alecha besoch cholei Yisrael, "Hashem should have mercy on you among the other ill people of Israel." Shevna's text is: Shabbos hi miliz'ok urefuah kerovah lavo verachamav merubin vishivsu beshalom, "Shabbos is here; therefore one should not cry out in pain. Healing comes quickly; Hashem's mercy is great; Dwell in peace!" This means that it is prohibited to scream out in prayer on Shabbos, but the curtailed prayer I am currently reciting should be viewed by Hashem as if I indeed recited a very intense prayer on behalf of the ill and the cure should arrive soon. Some authorities follow Rabbi Yosi's opinion (Toras Ha'adam; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:6) whereas the Shulchan Aruch itself, in Orach Chayim, cites Shevna's text. The Rema writes that the custom is not to add the extra words of Shevna's prayer, but to say simply Shabbos hi miliz'ok urefuah kerovah lavo.

Yom Tov

May one wish a person refuah sheleimah on Yom Tov, or does it have the same halacha as Shabbos. In general, Ashkenazic practice is to be more lenient regarding the laws of personal prayers on Yom Tov than on Shabbos. For this reason, we recite the 13 middos of Hakadosh Boruch Hu when we take out the sefer Torah on Yom Tov, followed by a personal prayer. Yom Tov is more lenient than Shabbos regarding the prohibition of reciting a personal prayer because each Yom Tov is a day of judgment for something, as the Mishnah states in Rosh Hashanah (16a): On Pesach, we are judged for grain; on Shavuos, for fruit; and on Sukkos, for water.

As a result of this discussion, there is a dispute between the Mekor Chayim and the Aderes whether it is permitted to wish a choleh refuah sheleimah on Yom Tov, the Mekor Chayim ruling that one should use the same version used on Shabbos, and the Aderes permitting wishing refuah sheleimah, which is not usually permitted on Shabbos.

#### Beracha

If bikur cholim is such an important mitzvah, why do we not recite a beracha prior to performing it? This question is raised by the rishonim, who provide several answers:

1. One recites a beracha only prior to a mitzvah that I am certain that I will be able to perform. The patient may not want to be visited or may not want other people to take care of matters for him, in which case there is no mitzvah of bikur cholim (Shu't Harashba #18).

Not uniquely Jewish

2. Some authorities explain that we do not recite a beracha on this mitzvah because the text of birchos hamitzvos is Asher kideshanu bemitzvosav -- Hashem sanctified us with His mitzvos. These authorities contend that we recite a beracha only when a mitzvah is uniquely Jewish (Rokei'ach, quoted in Encyclopedia Talmudis, Volume IV, column 525). Since non-Jews also take care of the ill, this mitzvah does not reflect anything special about the relationship of Hashem to the Jewish people.

3. Yet another reason cited why we do not recite a beracha on bikur cholim is because reciting a beracha prior to observing this mitzvah sounds like we want the situation to exist (Ra'avad, quoted by Yalkut Yosef, page 24). We certainly would prefer that there be no ill people in the world.

4. Some rishonim note that all mitzvos upon which we recite berochos are those bound by time – meaning that there are times when we are obligated to observe the mitzvah and times when no obligation exists (Or Zarua, Birchas Hamotzi #140). Bikur cholim can be fulfilled at any time.

#### Conclusion

People who fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim are promised tremendous reward in Olam Haba, in addition to many rewards in this world (Shabbos 127a). The Kli Yakar (Bamidbar 16:29) suggests an additional reason for fulfilling bikur cholim -- to benefit the visitor -- because seeing someone who is ill influences the visitor to do teshuvah. This provides extra merit for the sick person, since he caused someone else to do teshuvah, even if it was unintentional. May Hashem send a speedy recovery to all the ill!

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#### Parshat Vayechi: Why We Bless Our Sons Like 'Ephraim and Menashe'

##### Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin

"And he blessed them on that day, saying, 'Through you shall Israel be blessed, saying, May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe' and he placed Ephraim before Menashe." (Genesis 48:20)

For many parents, the highlight of the Friday evening home celebration and meal, indeed the highlight of the entire week, is the moment when they bless their children. However, even this could be tension inducing if your son suddenly wants to know why his sister is blessed to grow up like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, while he has to settle for Ephraim and Menashe, Joseph's Egyptian born sons, instead of the patriarchs. Is it possible that boys are finally getting the short end of the blessing?

I believe the reason can be found if we study the book of Genesis from the perspective of family psychology. Sibling rivalry constantly surfaces

as a powerful motif indicating love-hate relationships that end up more bitter than sweet. Right from the opening pages in the Bible, Cain is jealous of Abel, whose offering to God was found more pleasing than his own. Before we know it, Abel is dead, killed by his own brother – the Torah's first recorded murder.

Of course, this takes place in the early stages of recorded time, but how much has really changed by the time we get to Abraham? His two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, cannot live under the same roof. Sent into the desert with his mother Hagar, who watches helplessly as he nearly dies from thirst and hunger, Ishmael's fate is doomed if not for the *deus ex machina* appearance of the angel. True, Isaac cannot be legally charged with Ishmael's suffering, but Ishmael and his mother are driven away only because of Sarah's concern that Ishmael will have a negative influence on Isaac, destined carrier of the torch of Israel.

In the next generation, things get worse. Jacob spends twenty-two years away from home because he's afraid Esau wants to kill him. Upon returning from his long exile, richer, wiser, head of a large household, he makes all kinds of preparations to appease his brother, and if that should fail, he devises a defense strategy should Esau's army of four hundred men attack. All of this hatred came about as a result of Jacob's having deceived his father, at the behest of his mother, in order to wrest the birthright and blessings away from his less deserving brother.

Jacob's own sons live through aspects of their father's sibling experiences; since Jacob felt unloved by his father, he lavished excessive favoritism upon his beloved son Joseph. As a result of the bitter jealousy the brothers harbor toward Joseph, they take the radical step of slow but inevitable death by casting their defenseless brother into a dangerous pit. Had Judah's last-minute advice to sell the boy to a caravan of Ishmaelites been ignored, Joseph would have been torn to death by some wild animal, or at the very least – died in the pit from starvation.

When the Torah commands "...do not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev. 19:17), it could have easily used the word 'friend' or 'neighbor.' The word 'brother' is deliberate; the people we are most likely to hate are the ones closest to us. If the natural affection between brothers backfires, the very same potential for closeness turns into the potential for distance. No silence is more piercing than brothers who refuse to speak to each other because of a dispute over an inheritance. Unlike a feud between strangers, family members do not bury the past – they live with it, and all too often, continue to fight over it. There is even a custom, retained by some old Jerusalem families, that children should not attend their parent's funeral. The esoteric reason which is given by the more mystical commentaries is that the illegitimate children of the parents – the spirits born of the father's seminal emissions – will fight with the legitimate biological children over the inheritance. All too often we find the legitimate children fighting over the inheritance at the grave site.

There is one remarkable exception to the pervasive theme of sibling hatred in Genesis. In contrast to their ancestors, Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe, do not fight when Jacob favors the younger brother, Ephraim, with the birthright blessing. Joseph even tries to stop Jacob. "That's not the way it should be done, Father...the other one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head" (Gen. 48:18). But Jacob knows exactly what he is doing. "The older one will also become a nation...but his younger brother will become even greater..." (Gen. 48:19).

As a result of this seeming favoritism of the younger Ephraim, one might expect a furious reaction from Menashe, lashing out like Cain. But Menashe overcomes personal feelings. Unlike his forebears, there is no biblical hint of sibling rivalry between these two sons of Joseph, despite what could well be seen as unfair favoritism. Since we each want our children to be there for each other no matter what – and indeed, this is chiefly what my wife prays for as she lights the Sabbath candles each week – every parent blesses his sons that they have as harmonious a relationship as Ephraim and Menashe.

There still remains, however, a nagging question. Why did Jacob bestow the birthright upon the younger Ephraim? What lies substantively behind the words – and order – of this particular blessing?

As usual, the Midrash fills in the missing pieces. When the brothers first meet the Grand Vizier in their attempt to purchase food, the Bible tells us that the Egyptian provider appeared not to understand Hebrew, "there was an interpreter between them" (Gen. 42:23). The Midrash identifies this interpreter as Menashe, apparently a PhD in languages and diplomacy from the University of the Nile. Menashe seems to have been his father's trusted aide in all important affairs of state. Ephraim, on the other hand, was studious, devoting his time to learning Torah with his old and other-worldly grandfather Jacob. In fact, when we read in our Torah portion of how Joseph is brought news of his father's illness, the text does not reveal the messenger's name but the Midrash identifies him as Ephraim, returning from Goshen where he had been studying with his grandfather.

Perhaps Menashe, the symbol of secular wisdom, does not object when his younger brother – expert in and dedicated to the wisdom of family tradition – receives the greater honor. From this perspective Jacob is expressing in his blessing the deepest value of Judaism: secular and worldly wisdom is significant and represents a giant achievement, but Torah must take preference and emerge as the highest priority. From the prism of the Midrash, we bless our children to excel in worldly knowledge, wisdom and Torah together, but with Torah receiving the greater accolade.

The capacity to submerge one's abilities and gifts to those of another, especially to a sibling who is younger, shows true commitment to the direction of the divine, an overriding concern for the welfare of the nation as a whole, and a profound maturity. This is precisely the character displayed by Joseph when he gratefully accepted his double portion (blessing), but conceded the true sovereign, international and ultimately, redemptive leadership to his brother Judah (as expressed in Jacob's final blessings, [Genesis 49:8–10, 22–26]).

In a much later period (eighth century BCE), Jeroboam of the tribe of Ephraim, whom King Solomon had appointed over the taxation of both tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, waged a revolution on behalf of the ten Northern Tribes against the tribe of Judah, against Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon and grandson of King David, and against the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Our Talmudic Sages, who respected Jeroboam's administrative abilities and cultural accomplishments, predicate the following conversation in the name of Raba:

"The Holy One Blessed Be He grabbed the garment of Jeroboam and told him, 'Repent, and I and you and the son of Jesse [David, King of Israel and progenitor of the Messiah] will join together, for our travels in Paradise.' Said [ Jeroboam], 'Who will take the lead?' Said [the Almighty] 'the son of Jesse.' [Said Jeroboam] 'If that is the case, I am not interested.'" (Sanhedrin 102a)

Apparently, the descendants of Joseph were not gifted with the largesse of their ancestor – and herein lies the tragedy of the split between Jerusalem-Judea and Ephraim-Northern Israel, as well as between Torah study and secular wisdom.

Thankfully, our Ephraim and Menashe were different. And the importance of this filial ability to overlook favoritism and remain together takes on added significance when we come to the book of Exodus, the saga of the birth of our nation. Before the nation of Israel could be molded, a family had to emerge in which a profound harmony reigned. The heroic relationship between Menashe and Ephraim paved the way for a similar harmony between Aaron and Moses, where the younger brother served as the great leader, while the elder remained his loyal spokesman and interpreter to the people. These represent a crucial beacon of possibility, especially since our nation still in formation – from the rebellion of Korah to the Knesset inter- and intra-party eruptions – has constantly been plagued by sibling strife.

When parents bless their daughters to be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, what is being evoked is the very bedrock of Jewish existence, our matriarchs. When they bless their sons to be like Menashe and Ephraim, the blessing evokes the long slow process of Genesis which

finally bears fruit with the sons of Joseph, the only brothers who overcome sibling rivalry and achieve an incredible unity, with wordly wisdom merging with Torah traditions to bring the promise of redemption to a strife-torn world.

Shabbat Shalom

### Rabbi YY Jacobson

[CS – Late breaking post:

#### What a True Leader Looks Like Reuben and Judah: A Psychological Profile

Summary of essay: Each of us is called to lead, in one shape or another. We are leaders in our families, companies, and communities; some of us are given an opportunity to influence scores of people. What is leadership? What does it mean to be a leader? What should leaders demand of themselves?

A most fascinating journey through the lives of two individuals in Genesis demonstrates how the few vignettes shared about them hold the key to a rich portrait of two people who, through their downfalls and triumphs, teach us about our duties as leaders in a challenging world.

#### The Final Conversation

This week's Torah portion (Vayechi) tells the story of Jacob's final conversation with his children. In astonishing candidness, moving prose, and profound vision, Jacob speaks to each of his sons, heart-to-heart, just moments before he is about to pass on to the next world.

"Come and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel," Jacob begins the fateful encounter[1]. Then he addresses Reuben, his oldest son, with razor-sharp words:

"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my power and the beginning of my might, foremost in rank and foremost in power. Water-like impetuosity -- you will not be preeminent, for you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it."

Reuben the firstborn, the rabbis explain[2], should have been entitled to the priesthood ("foremost in rank") and kingship ("foremost in power"). The Jewish priests and kings should have emerged from Reuben. But Reuben forfeited these privileges and they went instead to his brothers Levi and Judah, respectively (Aaron's family of priests came from Levi; the Davidic dynasty of kings came from Judah). Reuben remained the firstborn, "my firstborn," with many of the privileges conferred by Jewish law on a firstborn[3], but he lost the priesthood and kingship.

#### Reuben's Error

What was Jacob referring to when he spoke of Reuben ascending on his bed? The midrashic tradition[4] offers two interpretations.

This first takes us back to a disturbing scene that transpired after Rachel's death, some 47 years earlier[5].

"So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. Over her tomb, Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb. Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.

"While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went and lay with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it[6]."

Rashi[7], following Talmudic tradition[8], illuminates the backdrop behind this incident. When Rachel died, Jacob, who usually resided in her tent, moved his bed to the tent of Bilhah, her handmaid. For Reuben, Leah's oldest son, this was an unbearable provocation and a slap in his sensitive mother's face. It was bad enough that Jacob preferred Rachel to her sister Leah, but intolerable that he should prefer a handmaid to his mother. He thus removed Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's.

Almost a jubilee later, in his final moments, Jacob reminds Reuben of this episode and attributes his firstborn's loss of potential greatness to it. "Water-like impetuosity," Jacob declares, "you will not be preeminent, for you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it."

#### Reuben's Mandrakes

The midrash presents yet another meaning to Jacob's words, "For you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it." It takes us back to another dramatic incident that occurred around 10 years before the one just discussed.

"During wheat harvest," the Bible relates[9], "Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah (the commentators explain[10] that mandrakes were considered both an aphrodisiac and fertility drug). Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?' Rachel said, 'Therefore, he shall lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'" Indeed, Jacob spent the night with Leah instead of Rachel. Reuben, in other words, was the indirect cause for the relocation of his father's bed for one night.

#### The Sensitivity of a Child

What is fascinating about both of these tales is that they sketch a portrait of a remarkably sensitive and noble child. Reuben's heart goes out to his mother's plight. As the firstborn son of Leah, he seems to carry alone the burden of his mother's relative lack of appeal in Jacob's eyes. In fact, his very name, Reuben, meaning, "see, a son," was bestowed upon him by his mother, "because G-d has discerned my humiliation, for now, my husband will love me [11]".

In the earlier episode, Reuben, as a young lad out in the field, is thinking of his mother's anguish and hoping that, with the aid of the mandrakes, Leah will be able to win Jacob's complete affection. In the latter episode following Rachel's death, Reuben can't bear the pain caused to his mother by Jacob's placing his bed in Bilhah's tent.

It is, indeed, true that in both of these instances, Reuben's hastiness and impetuosity had negative consequences. In the incident with the mandrakes, had he waited until Rachel left Leah's tent, his gift to Leah might have prevented the bitter row that erupted between the two sisters, the only feud between them recorded in the Bible, and would have not created confusion in Jacob's sleeping arrangements. In the second instance, too, had Reuben broached the issue directly with his father or with Bilhah, instead of taking the matter into his own hands and moving his father's bed, the issue may have been resolved in a more dignified manner.

Still, it is clear that the motivation -- in contrast to the end result -- of both of these actions was pure and reflected profound moral concern. Why did he deserve to forfeit the priesthood and royalty?

#### Judah the King

Our dilemma becomes more disturbing upon considering who, of the 11 other sons of Jacob, received the gift of royalty in lieu of Reuben. It was the fourth son, Judah.

Here are Jacob's final words to Judah[12]:

"A lion cub is Judah; from the prey, my son, you elevated yourself. He [Judah] crouches, lies down like a lion, like an awesome lion, who will dare rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah...Nations will submit to him until the final tranquility comes."

The message is clear. Just as the lion is the "king of the jungle[13]," Judah is destined to be the king of the civilized world. Indeed, Judah became the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David. Since David, royalty among the Jewish people belonged to Judah's tribe[14]. The messiah himself, we are told, will be a descendent of Judah[15]. Even our very name, "Jews" or, in Hebrew Yehudim, or in Yiddish, Yidden, is derived from the name Judah, or Yehudah. It was Judah who conferred his identity on the people[16].

Why Judah? Jacob presents the reason in eight words: "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Judah was potentially a man of prey, a lion, a devourer; yet he succeeded in elevating himself from this terrible characteristic. Judah transformed himself. Why did Jacob view Judah as a potential man of prey? Rashi, quoting the midrashic tradition, focuses our attention on two rather unforgettable incidents about Judah that transpired nearly four decades earlier[17].

#### The Joseph Drama

The first, of course, is the moment when Joseph, on the instruction of his father, pays a visit to his brothers, who are shepherding Jacob's flock in the city of Shechem (Nablus).

The brothers, who despised Joseph deeply, see him approaching from afar. They realize that with no one to see them, they can kill Joseph and concoct a tale that will be impossible to refute. Only Reuben protests.

The biblical text states[18]: "Reuben heard and saved him [Joseph] from their hands. He said, 'Let's not take his life'. Reuben said to them: 'Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him' -- intending to rescue Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to his father."

It is interesting to note that the Torah rarely described people's inner drives. In this instance, however, the Torah makes an exception, revealing to us Reuben's true motivations: He wished to save Joseph.

As the story continues, the brothers agree to Reuben's suggestion. They throw Joseph into an empty well and they sit down to eat a meal. In the midst of the meal, they see an Arab caravan traveling to Egypt. Here, for the first time, we encounter Judah's voice[19]:

"Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands. After all -- he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'" The brothers' consent. Joseph is sold and brought to Egypt as a slave, where, 13 years later, he will rise to become the viceroy of Egypt.

#### Reuben's Fasting

Reuben was not present during the sale. "When Reuben returned to the cistern," the Torah relates[20], "and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! And I, where can I go?'" The brothers dipped Joseph's tunic in blood, and presented the tunic to Jacob, who exclaimed: "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph has surely been torn to bits!"

Where was Reuben during the sale of Joseph? The text is obscure, but it does offer a glimpse: The brothers sold Joseph while in the midst of a meal. The Torah, perhaps, shared with us this irrelevant detail in order to hint to us the reason for Reuben's absence. Reuben left the scene because he could not eat with his brothers. Why?

Rashi, again quoting the midrashic tradition, says[21] that Reuben had been dressing himself in sackcloth and fasting ever since he rearranged his father's beds after Rachel's death. Although the incident with the bed occurred nine years earlier, Reuben was still seeking ways to repent. Therefore, he did not join his brothers in their meal and was not present during Joseph's sale.

#### A Tale of Two Personas

Now, we come to understand Jacob's final words to Judah: "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Rashi explains, that when Jacob stated, upon discovering Joseph's blood-drenched tunic decades earlier, "A savage beast devoured him [Joseph]," Jacob was hinting to Judah that on his deathbed he would compare him to a lion." Jacob suspected that Joseph fell prey to Judah's hands. When Jacob learned the truth, that instead of letting Joseph die in the well Judah actually persuaded his brothers to sell him into slavery, Jacob, in appreciation, conferred upon Judah the crown of royalty, assuming the position taken from Reuben.

This is a deeply disturbing comment. Reuben is the only older brother of Joseph who attempts to save him and return him to his father. The Torah, as mentioned above, is unusually clear about Reuben's virtuous intentions. "His plan," states the Torah, "was to rescue Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to his father." Judah, in stark contrast, merely substitutes Joseph's death from starvation with a life sentence of slavery. Judah does not even consider liberating Joseph!

The powerful moral contrast between Reuben and Judah is even more striking when we reflect on the wording employed by Judah to persuade his brothers to sell Joseph. "Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands. After all -- he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'"

This, let's face it, is a speech of apparent monstrous callousness. There is no word about the evil of murder, merely pragmatic calculation ("what will we gain"). At the very moment he calls Joseph "our own flesh and blood" he is proposing selling him as a slave!

The moral paradox embodied by Jacob in his final moments, as he moves the gift of kingship from Reuben to Judah, is nothing less than astonishing. In the very episode for which Judah is rewarded with the gift of royalty (because he "elevated himself from prey"), Reuben stands

head and shoulders above Judah in his nobility, compassion, and sensitivity. Yet it is Reuben who loses the crown to Judah!

#### The Tamar Drama

As we recall, in addition to the Joseph drama, the midrash and Rashi[17] present a second meaning in Jacob's final words to Judah, "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." According to this interpretation, Jacob was alluding to the event that took place between Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar.

Tamar, we recall[22], had married Judah's two elder sons, both of whom had died, leaving her a childless widow. Judah, fearing that his third son would share their fate, withheld him from her, thus leaving her unable to remarry and have children, since the levirate laws of marriage at the time held that when a husband died and left a childless widow, she was bound in marriage to either her brother-in-law or her father-in-law[23].

Once she understands her situation, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute. Judah encounters her and they are intimate with each other. She becomes pregnant. Judah, unaware of the disguise, concludes that she must have had a forbidden relationship and orders her to be put to death by burning. At this point, Tamar, who, while disguised, had taken Judah's seal, cord, and staff as a pledge, sends them to Judah with a message: "The father of my child is the man to whom these belong." Judah now understands the whole story. Not only has he placed Tamar in an impossible situation of living widowhood, and not only is he the father of her child, but he also realizes that she has behaved with extraordinary discretion in revealing the truth without shaming him. (It is from this act of Tamar's that we derive the rule[24] that "one should rather throw oneself into a fiery furnace than shame someone else in public.")

Judah admits he was wrong. "She is right!" he exclaims. "It is from me [that she has become pregnant]." Tamar's life, of course, is spared. She soon gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerach, the former becoming the ancestor of King David.

This, then, explains the meaning behind Jacob's words, "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Judah was a "man of prey" who sentenced Tamar to death. Yet at the last moment, he confessed his guilt and rescued Tamar and her fetuses from death. Because of this, he was conferred with the power of kingship.

#### One Moment Vs. Nine Years

This interpretation, too, is disturbing. Both Reuben and Judah commit serious wrongdoings. Reuben intervenes in his father's intimacy; Judah sentences an innocent pregnant woman to death. Both confess their guilt and take full responsibility for their wrong actions. But in this instance again, it is Reuben who surpasses Judah on two counts.

Firstly, Judah almost caused three innocent lives to die, while Reuben merely relocated intimate furniture. Secondly, Judah admitted his guilt and that was it. Reuben, on the other hand, for at least nine years after his sin, was fasting every day in repentance!

We encounter here what appears as cruel cynicism at its finest. The act for which Judah receives the endowment of royalty -- his readiness to confront his wrongdoing and acknowledge his guilt -- is performed by his brother Reuben with far more depth and diligence. Yet it is Reuben who loses his potential greatness to Judah.

Furthermore, if Reuben has been fasting and repenting all this time for his mistake in tampering with his father's bed, why did this not suffice in having the royalty restored to his bosom?

#### Jacob's Response

There is one more vignette in Genesis which allows us a glimpse into the above riddle. Genesis chapters 42-43 finds Joseph, now the Prime Minister of Egypt, treating his brothers (who have come to buy grain in Egypt) very harshly. He accuses them of espionage, imprisons one of his brothers (the Rabbis identify him as Shimon), and stipulates his release with the other nine brothers bringing his youngest brother Benjamin down to Egypt. When Jacob hears of this condition, he is terribly distressed. He has lost two sons, Joseph and Shimon, and now he might lose Benjamin. Jacob refuses to let them take Benjamin, the last surviving child of his beloved wife Rachel.

It is here where Reuben steps in. "And Reuben spoke to his father, saying, 'You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring him (Benjamin) to you. Put him into my hand[s] and I will return him to you.'"

But Jacob refuses. "My son shall not go down with you, because his brother is dead, and he alone is left, and if misfortune befalls him on the way you are going, you will bring down my gray head in sorrow to the grave."

Yet the famine lingered and the starvation persisted. It is Judah who steps up to the plate. He tells his father these words: "Send the lad with me, and we will get up and go, and we will live and not die, both we and you and also our young children. I will guarantee him; from my hand, you can demand him. If I do not bring him to you and stand him up before you, I will have sinned against you forever."

Jacob relents. He sends Benjamin with the brothers. It is during this visit that Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and the first Jewish family is reunited. Jacob relocates to Egypt and meets his son Joseph after a 22-year separation.

Here we wonder yet once again, why did Jacob refuse Reuben's promise and embrace Judah's pledge? They both promised to return Benjamin to Jacob. Reuben, we have discovered, seemed to be far more virtuous than Judah. Yet Jacob would respond only to Judah. The unfairness seems to repeat itself. The sincere Reuben who is ready to sacrifice both of his children is repelled.

#### Reuben's Profile

Upon deeper reflection, it is precisely in this entire complex tale that we may encounter Judaism's perspective on the function and meaning of the crown of royalty and the art of leadership.

Reuben, throughout Genesis, displays moral dignity, sensitivity, and gracefulness that surpass Judah. Reuben, obviously, is a person who works on himself. He challenges his instincts, habits, and emotions. He seems to possess a frail ego. We do not notice a tinge of pomposness or arrogance in this person. He is always thinking about somebody else. When he is in the field, his thoughts are with his mother and her plight. When Rachel dies, his thoughts, again, are with his mother. When Joseph is kidnapped, his heart is with his younger brother and father. Finally, for nine years he fasts and dons sackcloth in order to cleanse his ego, his sins, his faults.

Yet, Reuben's greatness is also his flaw.

If we examine every single episode recorded about Reuben we discover an astonishing commonality: In each of them, his noble intentions come across in delightful splendor; his sensitivity to injustice is nothing short of remarkable; his willingness to work on himself and his faults is legendary. Yet in all of them, the other person -- the outsider, the victim -- never ends up actually benefitting from Reuben's kind intentions.

Leah, instead of enjoying her mandrakes, ends up in a bitter row with her sister. In the story with Jacob's bed, instead of creating a more affectionate ambiance between Jacob and Leah, Reuben ends up offending his father deeply and not helping his mother's situation in the slightest. In the Joseph story, Reuben's actions have Joseph placed in an empty well, where he can easily die from starvation or venomous serpents.

The astonishing pattern continues: Reuben's fasting and repenting for nine years is what actually causes him to be absent while his brothers sell Joseph into Egyptian slavery. While Joseph lay helpless in a well, Reuben went off to pray, meditate and repent. Had he remained, he might have actually rescued Joseph before he was sold.

In promising to return Benjamin to Jacob, Reuben talks first about how forfeiting on his pledge will affect him and only afterward about the necessary action itself. "And Reuben spoke to his father, saying, 'You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring him (Benjamin) to you. Put him into my hand[s] and I will return him to you.' What is more, Reuben gives a condition that is purely fanciful. What would Jacob gain by killing Reuben's two sons if Benjamin were not to return? After all, they are his own grandchildren!

#### The Contrast

At last, a pattern emerges. Reuben is consumed with his personal daily battle for moral truth and spiritual transcendence. Reuben is a great man, but he is not a leader. He is a spiritual giant, but he is not a Rebbe, a king, or a shepherd to his people. Reuben ought to remain the firstborn son, with all the status involved, since he might be morally superior to his brothers. But he has not proven worthy of becoming a genuine leader.

Now, let us draw the contrast to Judah's profile.

In both episodes -- the sale of Joseph and the relationship with Tamar -- Judah does not display the dignity or sincerity of his brother Reuben. Judah's actions leave him wanting, but they produce concrete and tangible benefits to the victims in need of help. As a result of Judah's words to his brothers, Joseph is not allowed to die in the well and is left to live as a slave. As a consequence of Judah's confession, Tamar and her fetuses are saved from death. Judah does not reside in the richness of his own inner space; he is present in the flames of the outsider. Reuben's intentions were greater, but Judah made a real impact on people's lives. Finally, let us note the words Judah employs to persuade his father Jacob that he can send Benjamin with him. "I will guarantee him; from my hand, you can demand him. If I do not bring him to you and stand him up before you, I will have sinned against you forever." Unlike Reuben, he begins by articulating definitely the necessary action and does it in unwavering terms. "I will guarantee him." Unlike Reuben, he does not make a completely impractical condition that Jacob may kill his sons; rather he states, "I will have sinned against you forever." These are words of a born leader.

Of course, Judah must learn from his errors and grow to become a deeper and finer human being, which he does. Years later, when Joseph's younger brother Benjamin is about to be taken as a slave, Judah offers himself instead. "And now if I come to your servant, my father, and the lad [Benjamin] is not with us, and his soul is so bound up with his soul, when he will see that the lad is gone, he will die. And your servants will have brought down the hoariness of your servant our father in sorrow to the grave. Because your servant [Judah] took responsibility for the lad [Benjamin] from my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him to you, then I will have sinned to my father, for all time.' Now, please let your servant [Judah] remain in the place of the lad as a servant to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers..."

Twenty-two years earlier, the same Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother [Joseph] and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands." Now, when Joseph's younger brother Benjamin is about to be taken as a slave, Judah offers himself instead. A metamorphosis has occurred. Judah is a changed man.

Reuben too learns from his errors, making amends, and discovering greater horizons of truth. But at the end of the equation, Reuben is a great, moral spirit; Judah is a king. The difference? Reuben sees his spiritual work as the epicenter of his universe; Judah knows that the bottom line of life is not who you are, but how your decisions and behavior affect the fate of other people. For Reuben, even at his highest moments, the zenith of life consists of man's confrontation with his own tension and darkness. Judah, in contrast, even at his lowest moments, knows that life in its ultimate expression is about touching and embracing the pulse of the other.

And that is what it means to be a leader.

(This essay is based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, presented on Shabbas Parshas Vayechi 5730, December 27, 1969 [25]).

[1] Genesis chapter 49. [2] Rashi to Genesis 49:3-4. [3] Midrash Tanchumah (Buber edition) Vayeizei 13; Agadas Bereishis section 48. Cf. Rashi to Genesis 35:23; 29:32. This does not contradict Chronicles 1 5:1, see Rashi ibid. and Likkutei Sichos vol. 15 p. 444 and references noted there. Other sources are of the opinion that Reuben also forfeited his firstborn status, see Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:4; 99:6; Tanchumah Vayechi 9; Targum Einkelus, Targum Yonason and Targum Yonoson Ben Uziel to Genesis 49:3-4; Agads Bereishis section 82. [4] Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:4. [5] Rachel died when Jacob was approximately

100 years old (see Seder Hadoros year 2008 for the exact calculations). At this point, Jacob was 147 years of age. [6] Genesis 35:19-22. [7] Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, or Rashi, was the outstanding Biblical commentator of the Middle Ages. He was born in Troyes, France, and lived from 1040 to 1105, surviving the massacres of the First Crusade through Europe. His impact on Jewish scholarship and learning remains singularly unique. 11th-century French Jewish sage, is considered the greatest biblical commentator. [8] Talmud Shabbas 55b. [9] Genesis 30: 14-16. [10] See The Living Torah (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan) in footnote to Genesis 30:14 for a detailed commentary and references on the subject. [11] Genesis 29:32. [12] Genesis 49: 9-10. [13] Talmud Chagigah 13b. [14] See Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:1; Hilchos Melchahim 1:7-8. Cf. Ramban's fascinating commentary to Genesis ibid. [15] Rambam Hilchos Melachim 11:4. [16] See Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:6. [17] Rashi to Genesis ibid. from Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:7. [18] Genesis 37:21-22. [19] Ibid. 26:27. [20] Ibid. 29-33. [21] Ibid. 29, from Midrash Rabah ibid. 84:19. [22] Genesis chapter 38. [23] See Ramban to Genesis ibid. 38:8. [24] Talmud Sotah 10b; quoted in Rashi to Genesis 38: 25. [25] Published in Sichos Kodesh 5730 vol. 1 pp. 322-332; Likkutei Sichos vol. 15 pp. 439-446. A number of the ideas and rendition of biblical narratives presented in this essay were culled from Covenant and Conversation, Vayigash 5763 and Vayeishev 5764, by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ([www.chiefrabbi.com](http://www.chiefrabbi.com)).

### Rabbi Yissocher Frand

#### Parshas Vayechi

##### Did Yosef Need to be Warned After Yaakov Died?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1363 – Lesser of Two Evils: Being Buried in Non-Jewish Cemetery vs. Cremation – Which Is It? Good Shabbos!

The pasuk says "Yosef returned to Egypt – he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father – after he buried his father. And Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, and they said, 'Perhaps Yosef will nurse hatred against us and then he will surely repay us all the evil that we did him.'" (Bereshis 50:14-15). The brothers returned from the burial of Yaakov in Eretz Canaan and suddenly panicked because maybe now that their father is dead, Yosef will take his just revenge upon them. Therefore, they send a message to Yosef: "They commanded that Yosef be told, 'Your father commanded before his death saying: Thus, shall you say to Yosef 'Please forgive the spiteful deed of your brothers and their sin for they have done you evil'; so now, please forgive the spiteful deed of the servants of your father's G-d.'" And Yosef wept when they spoke to him." (Bereshis 50:16-17)

Rashi comments that the messengers who the brothers sent to deliver this message were none other than the bnei (sons of Bilhah), who were accustomed to interacting with Yosef. We know from Parshas Vayeshev that as a young boy, Yosef used to interact with the bnei Bilhah. The sons of the handmaidens (Bilhah and Zilpah) were the "second-class citizens" of the family. They were mistreated by Leah's sons and for that reason, Yosef befriended them. Therefore, now, after Yaakov's burial, the brothers figured these would be the best family representatives to make the appeal to Yosef on behalf of all of the brothers.

Yosef responded to them: "Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good: in order to accomplish – it is as clear as this day – that a vast people be kept alive." (Bereshis 50:19-20). The simple reading of these pesukim is that Yosef is saying "You may have had evil thoughts against me, but look at the Divine will that emerged from your actions. He had good thoughts regarding the matter for it led to the saving of a vast people."

A fascinating Targum Yonosan ben Uziel, however, adds significant content to these pesukim to fill in the details of what was happening over here. Previously, they already had this emotional embrace. They kissed and made up long ago. Now, when they get back from their father's levaya, they are suddenly worried that Yosef will begin to mistreat them. What prompted that?

Targum Yonosan ben Uziel explains what prompted the brothers to think that now Yosef was suddenly going to treat them badly and take revenge against them. He explains that their concern did not materialize out of thin air. They had good reason to believe that Yosef had it in for them. Based on a Medrash, Targum Yonosan ben Uziel writes that up until now, throughout the 17 years that Yaakov was alive in Mitzraim, Yosef ate together with the family. Now that Yaakov died, guess what? Lunch is over! No more lunches together!

If you have been eating together with someone for seventeen years and suddenly the invitation is withdrawn, it is certainly raglayim l'davar (circumstantial evidence) to believe "Hey! Something has happened over here." That is what prompted the brothers to think that Yosef was about to take revenge on them, now that their father was out of the picture. This was not paranoia. This was a very legitimate suspicion based on the facts they encountered.

Targum Yonosan ben Uziel further analyzes: Why in fact did Yosef stop inviting them? It was because Yosef had a dilemma. He did not want to sit at the head of the table. His father had proclaimed that Yehuda would be the melech (king). Furthermore, Reuven was the firstborn of the family. Yosef could not see himself sitting at the head of the family table. However, Yaakov – during his lifetime – insisted: Yosef, you must sit at the head of the table. You are the equivalent of the king of Mitzrayim – the "Mishneh L'melech." Therefore, you need to sit at the head of the table. For 17 years, as long as Yaakov was alive, Yosef sat there, in discomfort, at the head of the family table.

Now that Yaakov was no longer here, now that Yaakov was no longer telling Yosef "You need to sit there," Yosef faced a dilemma: What am I going to do? Do I keep on inviting them and keep on sitting at the head of the table? I don't want to do that. To avoid that situation, Yosef decided "There will be no more joint lunches." That is how the Targum Yonosan ben Uziel translates this pasuk: Yosef said "Do not fear, for am I under Elokim? You thought evil about me." In other words, you thought the reason I stopped inviting you for lunch is because I have it in for you. "Elokim chashava l'tova" – The Ribono shel Olam knew what my real intention was. It was for the best! My intention was that I didn't want to insult Yehudah or Reuven. When our father was alive, I had to do that, but now that he is no longer here, I am sorry but I am just not going to do that anymore.

This is the context of what is happening in these pesukim, according to Targum Yonosan ben Uziel.

I saw a very interesting observation from Rav Elya Svei: After 17 years, a person can get used to anything. For 17 years, Yosef had been sitting at the head of the table. Maybe he was uncomfortable for the first week. Maybe for the first month. Maybe he was uncomfortable for the first year. But after 17 years, he was still uncomfortable? Could it be that so many years later he was still thinking "I really don't belong here. This is Yehuda's rightful place?" Come on! People get used to kavod!

The way this hits me personally is as follows: When I first became a Rabbi in Ner Yisrael, I did not initially change my seat in the Beis Medrash. I did not sit by the mizrah vant (eastern wall). After several years of being a Rabbi, the Rosh Yeshiva told me that I should be sitting with the other faculty members by the mizrah vant. When I first moved my seat there, I must admit, I was extremely uncomfortable. I was extremely self-conscious. These feelings of "not being in the right place" persisted for perhaps six months or a year at most. Now, after sitting on the mizrah vant for over forty years, I don't give it a second thought. This is my place! So what if Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky is sitting next to me on the mizrah vant and he is old enough to be my father and he is the gadol hador. This is my place so I don't think about it. You can get used to anything.

However, after 17 years, Yosef is still thinking "I really don't belong here." He takes advantage of his first opportunity to get out of the situation, "Sorry, no more lunch because I refuse to continue insulting Yehudah or Reuven." This speaks to the incredible sensitivity of Yosef Hatzadik and the Shivtei Kah.

When we learn these parshios at the end of Sefer Bereshis and we learn about jealousy and sibling rivalry, we think "Yeah. Typical human

emotions, just like you and me.” However, these people were not just in a different league from us. They were on a different planet. After 17 years, who of us thinks “What am I still doing here?”

#### “I Remember the Kindness of Your Youth”

I saw the following insight from the current Tolna Rebbe of Yerushalayim (Rabbi Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg). He asks a very interesting question:

Earlier, I mentioned the Rashi that the brothers sent the bnei Bilhah (who interacted with Yosef in their youth) as their delegation to Yosef. The question is the following: Who out of all the brothers would be the best candidate to go into Yosef to plead the brothers’ case? Out of all the other brothers, the most logical candidate would be Reuven. Reuven did not participate in the sale of Yosef. Yehudah might be a second choice because he argued that Yosef should not be killed, but only sold instead. But the bnei Bilhah participated in the sale. The language of the Medrash is that when the brothers were about the throw Yosef into the pit and then to sell him, Yosef begged by the feet of each of his brothers. He got down on his knees and begged each and every brother: “Please, don’t do this!” The bnei Bilhah told him “Sorry. You are not such a tzadik! You went and tattled on us to our father!” Clearly the bnei Bilhah are as guilty as anyone else in the crimes committed against Yosef.

And yet, the brothers picked the bnei Bilhah to plead their case. Why was that?

The Tolner Rebbe cites an interesting insight from Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt”l (1906-1980), about a totally unrelated matter. Rav Hutner once said that the first masechta he ever learned was Bava Kamma. He stated that he remembers Bava Kamma better than any other masechta. It was his “girsa d’yanesa” (knowledge acquired in youth) because it was the first masechta he ever learned as a young boy! Rav Hutner was quick to add that his ‘havannah’ (understanding) of Bava Kamma was “a kindereshe havana” (a childish understanding). It was superficial comprehension, but nothing stuck to his bones like Maseches Bava Kamma, because that was his first exposure to Talmud.

Rav Hutner, k’darko b’kodesh, said that this is why Chazal say that when a child first begins to speak, his father should teach him “Torah and Krias Shma.” The reason that as soon as a child can speak the father teaches him to say “Shma Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad” is that we want this testimony of the unity of Hashem to be in the marrow of his bones. Rav Hutner continues: The child asks his father “Daddy, what do these words mean?” The father answers, “It means that Hashem is one.” The father doesn’t explain to his child about the deep philosophical nature of Hashem’s existence. One is one. Therefore, when the child grows up and goes through life, he knows one thing: One is one. I don’t need any of the writings of the Jewish philosophers: There is one G-d and that’s it! That is the way we want it. This is part of his basic identity as a Jew because that is what he heard in the crib. We want that emunah peshuta (simple faith). No sophistication or philosophy are necessary or even desirable. Hashem echad. This is a childish grasp but that is good, at least for Shma Yisrael.

What is the upshot of all this? The upshot is that what we absorb as children sticks with us. There was a lot of water under the bridge since the days that Yosef and the bnei Bilhah played together, but they played together as kids. Granted, there was much ill feeling in the interim years. Yes, Yosef did tattle on them and yes Yosef did beg for forgiveness and they said no. But, “I remember you when we played together.” That love from those initial years remains. It may be covered with layers of who knows what, but it is still there.

We see that in families. Sometimes families get into terrible fights. Sometimes it is years before they talk. But they still remember – we played baseball together. And when that bully came and started beating me up, you came to my rescue. That never leaves a person.

Therefore, when the brothers needed someone to convince Yosef “please forgive the sins of your brethren,” they didn’t send any of the other brothers. They sent the sandbox mates, the kids Yosef used to build sand castles with. That love of the early years remains with people for the rest

of their lives and therefore the appeal was sent to Yosef Hatzadik through them.

#### What Pushing In Your Chair Says About You

##### By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

My children know one of my little pet peeves is not a big offence, not something worthy of public rebuke, but a small thing I see everywhere: when a person gets up from a table and does not push the chair back in. You see it in shul and a beis medrash, around the Shabbos table, in a boardroom or a restaurant. Just a chair left askew. It is easy to dismiss it as trivial, and yet it represents something more.

We often underestimate the power of small acts. Throughout shas, our rabbis refer to the head of the Jewish community as Reish Sidra, the head of order. He attains that position specifically because he is attentive to the importance of small acts. He knows that seder, order, is the scaffolding of a disciplined life.

In his Daas Torah, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz zt”l writes about how the Alter of Kelm was famed for his rigorous emphasis on seder, mussar, and disciplined excellence. He writes, “I was educated in Kelm, a place where they were extremely meticulous about order. The Alter of Kelm, of blessed memory, would become upset if someone did not put their chair back precisely in its place, as though they had committed an act equivalent to desecrating Shabbos.”

The Alter did not view order as an aesthetic. He saw it as a religious imperative. Put another way, chaos is spiritual drift and order is spiritual anchoring.

The Alter taught that seder is like the string in a pearl necklace. The pearls are what we treasure, the Torah, mitzvos, kindness, family, community. But without the string, the pearls scatter, beautiful yet valueless. Rav Yeruchem inherited a garment the Alter wore for 30 years and it was taken care of so meticulously, it was left after his death as if it was brand new. It was not because the Alter was particular for its own sake, but because care and respect for the world around him were reflections of inner order. When he put on his hat, it was not tilted to the right or left or sitting casually on the back of his head. It was perfectly aligned. This was not compulsive behavior. This was a deeply felt spiritual discipline.

And now, what Torah always knew, science is beginning to affirm. A recent study reports that people who push their chair in tend to exhibit what researchers call social mindfulness and self-control. These acts reflect awareness of others, consideration, discipline, and responsibility even when no one is watching.

The article explains that a person who pushes in their chair is:

- Attentive to their surroundings.
- Conscious of how their actions affect others.
- Habitually considerate, acting with kindness without needing to think about it.
- Naturally disciplined, showing care through consistent small behaviors.
- Respectful, recognizing shared spaces and the people who use them.
- Unselfish, leaving things better for the next person.
- Mindful, living with awareness rather than carelessness.

In other words, this tiny gesture reflects a broader pattern of character. The way a person treats a chair is often how they treat the world.

A simple pause before leaving a table, placing the chair neatly, says: I see the world as something sacred, worthy of care. It reveals a person who thinks not just about self but about others who will come after.

And here is the deeper lesson: discipline begets freedom. A person who masters small actions gains mastery over larger ones. When you manage your time with order, you find you have more time. When you manage money with discipline, you find you have more resources. When you bring seder to your Torah learning and mitzvah observance, you unlock deeper growth and fulfillment.

This is not about perfectionism. It is about intentionality. The discipline to sit down and learn consistently. The discipline to serve Hashem when it is hard. The discipline to be reliable and present for another human being.

This is why I often tell my children that when they begin to think about dating and building a life with someone, they should not only look at grand gestures, eloquent words, or impressive résumés. They should watch the small things. Does this person say thank you? Do they notice when someone is uncomfortable? Do they treat waiters, teachers, siblings, and strangers with quiet respect? And yes — do they push in their chair. Not because the chair matters, but because *derech eretz* matters. Because the way a person handles the unimportant is often the truest window into how they will handle what is important. A home is not built on dramatic moments alone; it is built on thousands of tiny acts of consideration, patience, and care. Choosing a life partner is ultimately choosing the character you want to live with, grow with, and be shaped by. And character is most honestly revealed not in what is proclaimed, but in what is practiced when no one is watching.

So the next time you rise from the table, do not rush out. Pause for just a second. Turn back. Push your chair in. Let that act be a microcosm of your life: careful, considerate, and connected to something greater than yourself.

### Rav Kook Torah

#### Vayechi: When Great Souls Err

Shortly before his death, Jacob blessed his sons. Some of these blessings, however, were more like reprimands:

“Reuben, you are my firstborn... first in rank and first in power. [But since you were] unstable as water, you will no longer be first, for you moved your father’s beds.” (Gen. 49:3-4)

According to some opinions, Reuben did not actually interfere with his father’s sleeping arrangements.[1] He intended to do so, indignant at what he saw as a slight to his mother’s honor and her position in the household. But at the last minute, Reuben restrained himself.

How did Reuben succeed in overcoming his intense feelings of injustice and dishonor?

#### Reuben’s Fear of Punishment

One scholar inferred the method Reuben used to master his anger by reversing the letters of the word פָחָה (“unstable”) to חָפָח and reading it as an acronym:

חָפָח — You reminded yourself of the punishment for this act;

פָחָה — you made yourself ill over it; and

חָפָח — you avoided sin” (Shabbat 55b).

This explanation is surprising. Was Reuben motivated by the lowest form of *yirat Shamayim* (awe of Heaven) — the fear of punishment? Was this the only way the tzaddik could prevent himself from wrongdoing? Could such a great individual not take advantage of more lofty incentives, evoking his natural love and awe of God in order to avoid sin?

### The Achilles’ Heel of Great Souls

Some people are blessed with such nobility of soul that their traits are naturally virtuous and good. Yet even these tzaddikim need to recognize their limitations as fallible human beings. They too may be misguided. Precisely because they rely so heavily on their innate integrity, they may more easily fall into the trap of deluding themselves and making terrible mistakes, inflicting great harm on themselves and those around them.

Truly great souls will avoid this mistake. They carefully examine the source of their moral outrage. Further examination may indeed reveal that their zealous response comes from a sense of true injustice. But if they have any doubts as to the source for their powerful emotions, they can adopt a different approach. Instead of examining the matter in terms of ideals and lofty visions of the future, they will take into account more commonplace moral considerations. Such unpretentious calculations are sometimes more effective than nobler considerations.

Reuben reminded himself that he would be held accountable for disrupting the delicate balance in the family and temporarily usurping his father’s position. The simple reminder of the personal price to be paid helped Reuben clear his mind. He was then able to analyze more accurately his true motivations and arrive at the correct moral decision. The resulting inner turmoil was tremendous. Reuben was accustomed to following the dictates of his innate integrity. The conflict between his sense of injustice and his awareness of the correct response was so great that he felt ill — emotionally, and even physically: “You made yourself ill over it.”

This too indicates greatness of soul: the ability to acquiesce to moral imperatives. Truly great individuals are able, like Reuben, to rein in all of the soul’s powers when necessary. They recognize the absolute justice of the Eternal Judge, before Whom there are no excuses and no exceptions. They follow the dictum that even if the entire world — your entire inner world — tells you that you are righteous, still consider yourself fallible (see *Niddah* 30b).

Much good can result from recalling the punishment for wrongdoing, even if this motivation may appear beneath one’s spiritual stature. This simple reminder can overcome all the sophisticated calculations — calculations which may mislead even the noblest souls. In this fashion, Reuben succeeded in avoiding sin and retained his moral integrity.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. IV, pp. 48-49)

[1] After Rachel’s death, Jacob moved his bed to the tent of Rachel’s handmaid. Reuben, deeply disturbed by what he saw as an affront to his mother’s honor, moved his father’s bed to Leah’s tent (Shabbat 55a).

שלום יהודה הלוי בן חננה חדוה  
לע"נ

יוחנן בן יקוטיאל יודא ע"ה  
שרה מאה בת ר' עקיבא אליעזר ע"ה  
בִּילָא בָת (אֲרִיה) לִיב ע"ה  
אנא מלכה בת ישראל

## 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 Sodom), his courageous self-sacrifice (saving Lot from captivity), and other lessons too detailed to sacrifice to synopsis. We also examined the rejection of Yishmael for his vicious, cynical sniggering.

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

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

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

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

#### **YEHUDA AND YOSEF:**

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

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

#### **TAKE IT PERSONALLY:**

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

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

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

Parashat Va-Yhi is just such a transition. *Sefer Bereishit* follows the relationship between Hashem and humanity from its

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

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

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

Sefer Bereishit follows a pattern of selection and rejection of sons: Yitzhak is chosen and Yishmael rejected, Ya'akov is chosen and Eisav rejected. In contrast, Parashat Va-Yhi confirms all of Ya'akov's sons as members of the future nation, participants in the destiny promised to Yisrael by E-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-Yeishev, Mikkeitz, and Va-Yigash have shown that the sons of Ya'akov are highly diverse people. Re'uvein, Yehuda, and Yosef, for example, are all leaders, but their personalities and leadership styles are clearly divergent. The centerpiece of this week's parasha -- Ya'akov's blessings to his sons -- confirms and deepens this observation. Each of Ya'akov's sons faces different challenges and brings different strengths to bear on them. The fact that no one is rejected from participating in creating the Jewish nation indicates that all of these different strengths are necessary. Besides combining the legacies of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, the nation needs the internal diversity of different perspectives in order to adequately achieve its mission.

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

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

#### **NATIONAL THEMES:**

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

- 1) Specific mention of the future nation or national institutions such as laws and tribes.

2) Mention of the eventual return to Eretz Cana'an (after the Egyptian exile), or restatement of the family's / nation's significant connections to Eretz Cana'an.

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

Parashat Va-Yhi is not only where familiar national themes ("I will make you into a great nation") begin to reappear in the text, it is also the place where some national themes appear for the first time. When Ya'akov repeats to Yosef the blessing he received from E-I Shad-dai, he is repeating a theme we know well:

BEREISHIT 48:3-4 --

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

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

BEREISHIT 49:5-7 --

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 48:21 --

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

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

BEREISHIT 49:10 --

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

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

## TRIBES:

One other very important term which appears for the first time in our parasha is the term "shevet" -- literally, "staff." In fact, this term appears only three times in all of Sefer Bereishit -- all three in our parasha: 49:10 with regard to Yehuda's authority, 49:16 with regard to Dan, and 49:28 with regard to all of the sons of Ya'akov. Note that this word is used here in different ways, since "staff" can symbolize a number of things. With regard to Yehuda, "shevet" refers specifically to leadership (the leader carries a special staff, similar to a scepter, as we see later in the case of Moshe); with regard to Dan, "shevet" seems to mean something very similar to "shofet," "judge"; and when used to refer to all of the sons, "shevet" means what we mean when we refer to the "Twelve tribes" -- each tribal leader carries a staff ("shevet") representing his authority and separate identity from the other tribes, and this term is borrowed to refer to the entire tribe itself.

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

## A LOOK BACK AT THE LAND:

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 49:29-32 --

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

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

BEREISHIT 50:13 --

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

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

If Ya'akov's only intention is to give his sons directions to the field and cave, it should hardly be necessary to list the current occupants of the cave, or who originally owned it and who bought it, or to mention "field" and "cave" so many

times. Why such formality, detail, and repetition in describing this piece of real estate? And why does the Torah repeat some of these details in narrating Ya'akov's burial?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 1) "The Field": Our connection to the Land as our living homeland, our place to live our lives, serve Hashem, raise our families.

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

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

This may explain why Ya'akov is so insistent on being buried in Eretz Cana'an and why Yosef later displays the same desire. Besides his own personal desire to be buried with his wife, parents, and grandparents, Ya'akov also knows that for his sons, bringing his body back to Cana'an for burial will also be a powerful experience which will renew their connection to the land and refresh their desire to return to it. The procession to Cana'an is not merely a funeral, it is also a pilgrimage to the family home.

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

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#### **PREPARATION FOR SEFER SHEMOT:**

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

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

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

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

As you cruise through the text at high speed:

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

Shabbat shalom

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## **PARSHAT VAYECHI**

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

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

### **INTRODUCTION**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Textual parallels are highlighted by CAPS.]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT TOLDOT

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

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

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

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

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

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

"ha-mal'ach ha-goel oti mi-kol ra - yevarech et ha-nearim"

[God's angel who protected me (Yaakov) from all those who wanted to harm me, He should bless these children (to help them 'blend in')],

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

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

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

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

#### A TIME WILL COME...

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

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

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

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

Yaakov concludes this blessing with one last 'cryptic' statement to Yosef (that obviously requires some explanation):

"And I am granting you one - SHCHEM - over your brothers, that I [will] have taken from the Amorites with my sword and bow" (see 48:22).

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

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

#### THE BLESSINGS OF PERSONAL DESTINY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## UNITY OR HARMONY

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

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

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

## FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

## B. HA-TCHAT ELOKIM ANI?

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

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

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

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

## C. "PAKOD YIFKOD" AND SEFER SHMOT

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

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

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

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

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

## D. Between Reuven and Yosef

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

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

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

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

### I. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### II. FLASHBACK: YITZCHAK'S BLESSING

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

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

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

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

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

- 8) To paraphrase Esav's question (27:38), did Yitzchak have only one blessing to bestow? Why couldn't their father have repeated the same blessing - or given one of equal worth - to Esav?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Double inheritance,

Political control over the family and

Representation of the family at sacrificial rites.

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

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

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

I'd like to propose another way of understanding Ya'akov's family. Just as Avraham and Yitzchak's job was to raise one son to follow in their respective footsteps, similarly Ya'akov had the responsibility to raise twelve sons to build upon the tradition he received. In other words, he was not raising one family - with the eldest occupying the conventional position of b'khor;

he was raising twelve families, each of which would have their own b'khor. [Although Re'even 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'foro (B'resheet 48:18), in explaining the importance of the right hand in Ya'akov's blessing, states:

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **VI. THREE TYPES OF B'RAKHOT**

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

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

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

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

Rivkah was aware that Ya'akov had purchased the b'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'foro'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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