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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON VAYECHI - 5772

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Different cultures tell different stories. The great novelists of the nineteenth century wrote fiction that is essentially ethical. Jane Austen and George Eliot explored the connection between character and happiness. There is a palpable continuity between their work and the book of Ruth. Dickens, more in the tradition of the prophets, wrote about society and its institutions, and the way in which they can fail to honour human dignity and justice.

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

There is, however, a form of story that is very rare indeed, of which Tenakh is the supreme example. It is the story without an ending which looks forward to an open future rather than reaching closure. It defies narrative convention. Normally we expect a story to create a tension that is resolved on the final page. That is what gives art a

sense of completion. We do not expect a sculpture to be incomplete, a poem to break off halfway, a novel to end in the middle. Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is the exception that proves the rule. Yet that is what the Bible repeatedly does. Consider the Chumash, the five Mosaic books. The Jewish story begins with a repeated promise to Abraham that he will inherit the land of Canaan. Yet by the time we reach the end of Deuteronomy, the Israelites have still not crossed the Jordan. The Chumash ends with the poignant scene of Moses on Mount Nebo (in present-day Jordan) seeing the land - to which he has journeyed for forty years but is destined not to enter - from afar.

Nevi'im, the second part of Tenakh, ends with Malachi foreseeing the distant future, understood by tradition to mean the messianic age: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

Is there some connection between this narrative form and the theme with which the Joseph story ends, namely forgiveness, about which I wrote in last week's study?

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

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

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover . . . Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

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

It was this revolutionary concept of time - based on human freedom - that Judaism contributed to the world. Many ancient cultures believed in cyclical time, in which all things return to their beginning. The Greeks developed a sense of tragic time, in which the ship of dreams is destined to founder on the hard rocks of reality. Europe of the Enlightenment introduced the idea of linear time, with its close cousin, progress. Judaism believes in covenantal time, well described by Harold Fisch: "The covenant is a condition of our existence in time . . . We cooperate with its purposes never quite knowing where it will take us, for 'the readiness is all.'" In a lovely phrase, he speaks of the Jewish imagination as shaped by "the unappeared memory of a future still to be fulfilled". Tragedy gives rise to pessimism. Cyclical time leads to acceptance. Linear time begets optimism. Covenantal time gives birth to hope. These are not just different emotions. They are radically different ways of relating to life and the universe. They are expressed in the different kinds of story people tell. Jewish time always faces an open future. The last chapter is not yet written. The messiah has not yet come. Until then, the story continues - and we, together with G-d, are its co-authors.

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THE TANACH STUDY CENTER [http://www.tanach.org]
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT VAYECHI

Blessings - we find so many of them in Sefer Breishit, particularly in Parshat Vayechi. What are they all about? In our shiur, we will first distinguish between three different types of blessings that we have encountered thus far in Sefer Breishit ('bechira', 'bechora' and 'bracha'). Based on these distinctions, we will then attempt to better understand what transpires when Yaakov blesses Yosef in the first chapter of Parshat Vayechi.

INTRODUCTION

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

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

In contrast, we used the more general term 'bracha' to classify a blessing of personal destiny bestowed by a father onto his son [or sons]. As examples, we cited Noah'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 Sanaan va-yevarech oti, va-yomer eilai, [and blessed me saying:] 'Hineni MAFRECHA ve-HIRBITICHA u-netaticha li-khal amim, ve- natati et ha-ARETZ ha-zot le-ZAR'ACHA acharecha achuzat olam'" (see 48:3-4).

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

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

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

[And God spoke to Yaakov saying] "ani KEL SHAKAI, PREH u-RVEH, goy u-khal amim yhiyeh 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 Eza 48:4-6!]

A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT TOLDOT

At this point in the narrative (i.e. after 48:7), we find an interesting transition. Now that Yaakov has completed bestowing the 'bechora' upon Yosef, the focus of his blessing now shifts to his grandchildren, 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, Yitzhak..." (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..." (49:6-7).

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'? Do the individual 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

Thanks to hamelaket@gmail.com for collecting the following items:

From Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein
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Subject Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Jerusalem Post :: Friday, January 6, 2012
THE CAUSES OF SILENCE :: Rabbi Berel Wein

The terrible controversy regarding social issues that has been aroused in Israeli society by the despicable behavior of a fringe group of the charedi community regarding social issues is very sad. It seems that it is always the extremists that drive the agenda in all conflicts, both national and internal.

In my opinion there is absolutely no excuse, justification or religious principle that justifies such behavior. It demeans the Torah and its adherents and is absolutely counterproductive to Torah values and to the strengthening of a truly religious Jewish society. This article is not to be construed in any measure as an apologia for the behavior of this wild and extreme group that has always lurked on the fringes of charedi society.

This article is about the response to this wicked behavior by most of religious society in Israel, especially in the charedi world. The response varies from complete silence to tepid disavowal of the behavior of the group. Mostly, it results in a counter attack pointing out the obvious and far more serious deficiencies of secular Israeli society and then portrays all of charedi society as being systematically victimized by the media, the courts, the government and the majority Israeli society generally.

As I mentioned earlier, I am not here to defend any particular point of view or to cast aspersions at the sides in this current struggle. It is part of a one hundred fifty year long kulturkampf that unfortunately has never yet run its course. However I feel that there must be an understanding of the root causes, in my opinion, of the continuing angst in the Jewish religious community in Israel and worldwide over all types of social and political issues.

The two seminal events of recent Jewish history are the Holocaust and the creation and establishment of the State of Israel. Both of these events, undeniable in their gravity and importance, have caused the religious Jewish world, individually and collectively, faith and theological problems. So to speak, what was the theological justification for either event?

To the non-believer for whom God never enters the equation, these two events are digested as being historical facts and little more. To the believing and observant Jew these events are very troubling. All attempts to square the circle, to "explain" the Holocaust have proven to be inadequate, logically or religiously. We are left only with faith in the God of Israel Whose Will is inscrutable. But that causes a certain amount of tension and frustration in our community of believers.

Because of the potential danger to faith that this issue poses, it is rarely discussed in our religious schools, its secular commemoration at the end of Nissan is shunned and it becomes the hidden elephant that is omnipresent in the room of our lives. The extremists in our midst even travel to Iran to support the current main Holocaust denier. And the general religious community, though abhorring such behavior, nevertheless again allows silence to be mainly its response since we are unable to explain, even to ourselves, why the Holocaust occurred.

What results is a subliminal rage within us that explodes periodically through the behavior of the extremists and the general community is silent because we are also consumed silently by that repressed rage. How could a Jewish state come into existence and have staying powers if its leaders and fashioners were opposed to all Jewish traditional belief and Torah practice? This was one of the basic reasons for the opposition to practical Zionism by most of the Orthodox world prior to World War II. Even after the state came into being many great rabbis predicted that it could not last. One of the great leaders of the charedi world of the time told his followers that the state would only survive for fifteen years or perhaps at the most fifty years. The charedi world has never felt that Israel is its state. Mainly it feels that we religious Jews are still in exile, this time an exile imposed upon us by our very fellow Jews. What follows from that thinking is that the anti-state activities, of the extremists, no matter how wrong, foolish and vicious, are greeted always with either silence or muted criticism that soon turns into accusatory rhetoric against the representatives of the state. The charedi community has bedecked itself with the comforting mantle of victimhood and is loath to remove that cloak from its shoulders. By not really being part of the state it avoids facing up to the fact that somehow, again, our inscrutable God has behaved not according to our logic and expectations and has somehow allowed our little state to exist and prosper well into its sixth decade. It will take a major change of mindset in the religious world before we are able to face down the extremists and not merely be silent in the face of such desecration of the Torah and God's holy name. Shabbat shalom.

From Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein
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Subject Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Weekly Parsha :: VAYECHI :: Rabbi Berel Wein

The conclusion of the book of Bereshith not only completes for us the picture of the founders of the Jewish people – our fathers and mothers – but to a great extent also concludes the purely narrative portion of the Torah. There are precious few commandments or laws and ritual that emanate from this first book of the Torah.

From now forward the Torah, while continuing to be a narrative of early Jewish existence and life, develops into a law book detailing the commandments of the Creator to the Jewish people. If so, then what is the purpose of this lengthy beginning narrative? This is really the essence of the question that Rashi quotes at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah: "Should not the Torah have begun from the commandment regarding the new moon?"

It is there that Rashi answers why it began with the story of creation but the question remains: Why does the Torah continue the narrative regarding the personal lives of our ancestors? To this question the rabbis responded by stating that the events that occurred to our ancestors are sign posts for the later events that would occur to their descendants.

Since this idea can only be validated in hindsight – only after the event occurs to later generations can it be glimpsed as having been foretold by events that occurred to our ancestors – it still begs the original question somewhat. It is important to know that otherwise inexplicable events somehow fit into a preexisting pattern. But what particular lessons can be learned from the detailed narrative of the lives of our great ancestors?

There are general lessons about Jewish life that can certainly be gleaned from the Torah narrative of Bereshith. And perhaps this idea of general lessons is one of the reasons why the Torah invests so many words and descriptions in this eternal book.

One lesson is that Jewish life is not an easy one. Being a small minority and yet preserving a unique identity is no easy task. The struggle of our ancestors to do so is therefore clearly delineated for us. Another life lesson is that there are no guarantees in life especially as regarding children. Yishmael and Esau are prime examples of this disturbing truth.

Another lesson is that in the absence of tolerance for the differences in personalities and outlooks that will always be part of Jewish life and society, terrible things can happen to the Jewish people as a whole. Witness the narrative regarding Yosef and his brothers. A further lesson is that others will always threaten Jewish survival, often by violence and murderous intent. Nimrod, Abimelech, Pharaoh, Lavan, Shechem, Esau are but a few that illustrate this point.

All of our ancestors were forced to face up to enmity, jealousy and the duplicity of others. Another teaching to us is the power of the individual and the power of an idea. Abraham and Sarah, practically alone, changed the world with their idea and teachings of monotheism. The Torah further informs us that "good" exiles such as Goshen Egypt can eventually turn out to be less good. All of these lessons are essential to Jewish life and its survival. The wise will ponder upon them and apply them well in one's own life and current society.

Shabat shalom.

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Subject Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Vayechi

Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Reuven and Shimon...

(48:5)

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

At best, Ephraim and Menashe are considered equal to Reuven and Shimon, two of the Shivtei Kah, Tribes. Fathers and mothers do not bless their children, "May you be like Reuven and Shimon." Why, then, do Ephraim and Menashe serve as paradigms for blessing? Surely, they were not better people than Reuven and Shimon. Sefas Emes explains the distinction of Ephraim and Menashe Although they were "second generation," thus at birth not on the same spiritual plateau as the Shevatim, they achieved their status by developing themselves to the point that they reached Shevatim status. In other words, while it is true that they did not have a higher status than the Shevatim, they developed themselves to equal them. Considering that Menashe and Ephraim started out light years behind Reuven and Shimon, achieving Shevatim - status was an exceptional feat. This is the blessing of spiritual growth which every parent gives his children: "May you be like Ephraim and Menashe; i.e., "May you grow spiritually from strength to strength."

The Sefas Emes is teaching us that we have "natural" strengths, physical attributes, with which we are born and upon which our natural potential is established. A human being born with these physical qualities is capable of achieving just so much. Then he has the spiritual ability to transcend this potential by pushing harder, working more, exerting himself so that he makes an impact. Hashem listens and grants him the ability, the strength, the wisdom to develop further, deeper, higher. This is the blessing of Yesimcha Elokim k'Ephraim u'k'Menashe. You should not be impeded by arbitrary boundaries. As Ephraim and Menashe superseded their physical capabilities and achieved Shevet -status, so will you. Just as they did it on their own through exceptional motivation and work, however, so must you. You do yours - Hashem will do the rest.

But as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died on me in the land of Canaan on the road... and I buried her there on the road to Efras. (48:7)

Earlier, Yaakov Avinu had asked to be buried in the Meoras Ha'Machpeilah. In all fairness, Yaakov was expecting Yosef to do something for him which he himself had not done for Yosef's mother, Rachel. Sensing that this might be bothering Yosef, the Patriarch explained his actions. It was not his choice to bury the Matriarch on the road, only a short distance from Bais Lechem. Hashem had commanded him to bury her there in preparation for the future, when she would be a source of solace to the Jewish People being led into captivity, following the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash. When the Jews passed by - hungry, tormented, filled with fear of what the future would bring - Rachel's neshamah, soul, came out of her grave and wept on their behalf. She entreated the Almighty to have mercy upon His children. The Navi Yirmiyahu 31:14 so movingly relates the "dialogue," Kol b'ramah nishma, "A voice is heard on high, the sound of lamentation... Rachel weeping for her children... (G-d replied to her) Withhold your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded, says Hashem... and your children will return to their border."

For generations, Rachel's tomb has been the location to which the Jewish People have turned to pray, to receive solace and hope. Whether the supplications are national or personal, the address of the "Mama Rachel" has eased and soothed the hearts of the aggrieved, the grief-stricken, the individuals seeking hope and encouragement. We wonder why. What attributes of Rachel's grave have engendered such popularity? While the graves of many tzaddikim, righteous persons, in Eretz Yisrael are considered holy sites, and, as such, are visited by thousands, something about Rachel's Tomb compels Jews of all stripes and beliefs to gravitate to this site.

I write this on the *yahrzeit* of Rachel Imeinu, and, after thinking about the question, I realize that the answer is in the pasuk in Yirmiyahu which was quoted above. Rachel mevakah al baneha, "Rachel cries for her children." It is the cries of a mother - a mother who is sensitive to the needs of all of her children. Let us face it, who were the first Jews to pass by Rachel's gravesite? They were not rabbonim, roshei yeshivah, bnei Torah, bnos Torah. They were not the spiritual elite - because then there were none - or very few. The Jews who were exiled from Eretz Yisrael, survivors of the destroyed Temple, were idol worshippers, thieves, malcontents who did not get along with one another - hardly Jewish/spiritual nobility. Yet, a mother is a mother to all of her children, regardless of their conduct and demeanor. On the contrary, the ones who are challenging usually receive a greater manifestation of love. Rachel wept for them - then - and she continues to do so today - whether they are roshei yeshivah, rebbetzins, or alienated Jews looking for a "return address" for their spiritual lives.

Yosef understood his father's message. As the one son who grew up away from home in the dungeons of Egypt, a country notorious for its decadence and moral turpitude, he was acutely aware of the importance of a common address for all people, a place where all can turn to pray, to seek a sense of comfort and hope. A mother's love transcends a child's most iniquitous needs and finds a place in her heart for his return. While all the Imahos, Matriarchs, have this title, it was Rachel who was buried on the side of the road, to be present one day for her children. Her self-abnegation and sensitivity to the feelings of her sister, Leah, primed her for her future role as "Mother Rachel," the address for all Jews.

Interestingly, many of us journey to Rachel's Tomb without realizing its true significance. The following story, which crossed my desk recently, is well worth sharing. One of the most distinguished personages of Yerushalayim's Old Yishuv, Jewish settlement, about one hundred years ago, was Horav David Biederman, zl. A scion of an illustrious rabbinic and chassidic family, he was a devout individual who was recognized as a tzaddik, righteous person, among

tzaddikim. His primary concern in life was living up to the expectations of his Creator.

One day, Rav David decided to undertake the long, arduous journey from Yerushalayim to Kever Rachel. While today this is not considered much of a trip, a century ago this trip took one complete day traveled by donkey. He set out early, following the vasikin, sunrise, minyan. On the way, his mind was set on contemplating the correct prayers to recite, and for whom. He was concerned lest he forget something. This was too difficult a journey to just return again if he had forgotten something.

When he finally arrived at the Tomb, he realized that he was not alone. A young woman with a number of children in tow had arrived earlier, and she was basically "setting up shop" there. She had spread out a blanket on the stone floor of the domed chamber, laying her youngest child down to sleep. She began to prepare dinner for her family.

Rav David was incredulous. Her actions were demeaning this holy site. Had she no respect? Did she fail to realize where she was? How could she involve herself in such mundane matters while at Kever Rachel? Rather than keep these questions pent-up within himself, the sage approached the woman, and, in a less-than-amicable tone, demanded an explanation.

The weary mother turned to the venerable sage and said, "I think that our Mama Rachel would be pleased that we are eating and resting here."

"Wow!" Rav David was floored. He suddenly felt faint and queasy as a result of the realization that he had for decades been making the journey to Rachel's Tomb and had not even begun to understand its significance. Here, this simple, unschooled woman had a deeper perception than he had of the true holiness of Rachel's Tomb. What had he been doing all these years? What had he been thinking? He now understood why, Rachel mevakah al banehah, "Rachel weeps for her children": Her desire is only that we have some relief, some comfort in life, some peace of mind, so that we can better serve Hashem. Well, is that not what every Jewish mother wants for her child?

From that day on, whenever Rav David made the trip to Rachel's Tomb, he brought along food to share with the others who were visiting their "mother," entreating her to intercede on their behalf. We have no dearth of inspirational "Jewish mother" stories. The following vignette, which has previously found its place on these pages, is a favorite. It was the time to elect a Chief Rabbi for Yerushalayim. The candidate who was being endorsed was Horav Chaim Yaakov Levine, an erudite scholar, whose father, Horav Aryeh, had achieved eminence as the Tzadik of Yerushalayim. The push was on to elect Rav Levine. The candidate, however, wanted to know who else had been nominated for the position. When he saw that Horav Betzalel Zolty was also a candidate, he demurred, asserting that under no circumstances would he run. A number of distinguished rabbanim attempted in vain to get him to recant. He absolutely refused. There was no way he would compete against Rav Zolty for the position of Chief Rabbi. It took some time, but he finally related his reason.

He had heard from his revered father, zl, who, once, while walking through the small alleyways of Old Yerushalayim, chanced upon a woman who was darned socks by the light of a small torch. In today's society, where nothing lasts and change is a way of life, mending socks is a strange way to earn a living, certainly not a profitable one. Usually, it was someone who was quite poor who would do this to "supplement" their income. "Why are you doing this," asked Rav Aryeh, "and especially with so little light?" "I am a poor widow," she replied, "and with the few coins that I make, I am able to pay a rebbe to learn Torah with my orphaned son." The woman continued her work, as tears rolled down her face onto the socks she was repairing.

"Do you know who this widow was?" Rav Chaim Yaakov asked. "She was the mother of Rav Betzalel Zolty! Is it possible to estimate

the value of that righteous woman's tears? Can you imagine the effect of those tears? There is no question in my mind. Rav Zolty should become Rav of Yerushalayim. His spiritual growth was catalyzed on a field irrigated with a widowed mother's tears."

But as for me - when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me...and I buried her there on the road to Efras. (48:7)

Yaakov Avinu explains to his son, Yosef, why he did not bury Rachel in the Meoras HaMachpelah. It was Hashem's decision that Yaakov bury Rachel on the side of the road, so that the exiled Jews on their way to Bavel would pass by the Matriarch's grave. Her neshamah, soul, would then rise up, weep and pray for their safe passage and eventual return. Her prayers effect a positive response from Hashem. We wonder why Rachel was selected for this mission. Clearly, she was virtuous and saintly, and, thus, her prayers would have great efficacy, but is that all? Is it simply Rachel's ability to pray from the heart, to weep with sincerity that makes the difference? Horav Dovid Budnick, zl, Rosh Yeshivah in pre-World War II Novarodok, suggests that Rachel's prayer was comprised of more than her prayer. It was Rachel herself, her character. A deep understanding of her life can catalyze within a person a sense of return, a desire to repent and embrace the life of a Jew. Geulah, redemption, will occur when we will perform teshuvah, repent/return to the Almighty. Rachel's life can generate that emotion, that striving to return.

The second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed due to sinaas chinam, unwarranted hatred, among Jews. They studied Torah, performed mitzvos, but they did not get along. They had no regard for one another. It was that reason - totally unwarranted, baseless hatred - that brought about the churban, destruction. Let us analyze the roots of hatred. Enmity does not grow in a vacuum. One does not just suddenly decide to hate his fellow. The precursor for hate is simple jealousy. We become envious of the fellow who "used" to be our "good" friend, and suddenly we begin to hate him. My "friend" receives an honor which makes me envious. The next step is denigrating him. He does not deserve it. Who is he to be so honored? Why him, and not me? This is how unwarranted, baseless, nothing to gain hatred begins. It begins with kinah, envy, and graduates to sinah, enmity. Rachel Imeinu withstood one of the greatest challenges that a human can confront. Yaakov wanted to marry her - and only her. It was her hand in marriage for which he worked seven long years. Out of his love for Rachel, the time went by quickly. This is all attested to by the Torah. Rachel was well aware of this and waited patiently, anticipating a life of matrimony with Yaakov. Suddenly, her father, Lavan the swindler, a man who was incapable of telling the truth, came up with a plan to swindle Yaakov and Rachel. He claimed he was doing it to preserve the custom of not giving the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Did he really care about Leah? No! He was a crook, and this is how a crook operates! Rachel, nebach, regrettably, was the innocent victim. She was humiliated by her father, and she would have to witness her sister wearing the wedding gown. She would marry Yaakov, for whom Rachel waited seven years. How easy it would have been for Rachel to blow the ruse wide open and expose it for what it really was. She did not, however, because it would have hurt her sister. She swallowed her pride, accepted the shame, and even gave Leah the predetermined signs. She went so far as to remain in hiding while Yaakov spoke with Leah, answering for her sister, allowing the ruse to work. She was willing to do all of this as long as her sister, Leah, would not be humiliated. This represents nobility of character at its zenith. This was unabashed goodness, a golden heart overflowing with kindness and sensitivity. Is there still a question concerning why Rachel was selected to be the Matriarch to intercede on behalf of her children? They had been victims of strife founded upon the seeds of envy, cultivated by baseless hatred. She would teach and inspire them about how brothers and sisters should act, how human beings should behave toward one another. Her inspiration would catalyze their introspection and eventual teshuvah which would bring about the

Geulah sheleimah, complete Redemption. It was not just Rachel's prayer. It was Rachel Imeinu as the hallmark of selflessness, love for a sister, empathy for a sister's pain, a willingness to sustain pain and humiliation, in order to spare another person. Rachel will help to catalyze the Geulah.

"So now, please forgive the spiteful deeds of the servants of your father's G-d." And Yosef wept when they spoke to him. (50:17)

Yaakov Avinu had passed from this world. Feeling a sense of foreboding, the brothers asked Yosef to forgive them for what they had done to him. They recalled the suffering which had resulted from his sale to a degenerate nation that relegated him to live in miserable dungeons with individuals of base character. From their choice of words (so now), intimating that from now on, since Yaakov's death, they were seeking Yosef's forgiveness. What does Yaakov's passing have to do with the need for forgiveness?

In his volume, A Vort From Rav Pam, Rabbi Shalom Smith quotes the Rosh Yeshivah's explanation. When a father passes from this world, the children are understandably left in flux. On the one hand, they have a sense of loss. The individual whom they revered, who was their mentor, their confidante, their friend, is gone. They must now fend for themselves. They must also seek ways to perpetuate his memory, through ways that will serve as an enduring legacy for them- and eternal merit for him. Clearly, this is not a time when one takes revenge against a brother. Indeed, this is why the brothers entreated Yosef to forgive them. Whatever unity existed within this fragile family unit would be dismantled if Yosef were to seek revenge. Additionally, this would cause great pain for Yaakov's neshamah in Olam Habba. Imagine the shame Yaakov would experience in The World of Truth when it became known that his sons had been fighting. This would be a sad commentary on the education he gave them. The neshamos would begin to talk. Yaakov would be blamed for not providing an appropriate education. Clearly, this hatred did not just happen. It must have been there for quite some time, simmering, waiting for an opportunity such as Yaakov's death. He was not here to prevent Yosef from openly hating them. What could be a greater disgrace for the memory of a parent than to "look down" and see bitter acrimony prevailing among his children. When Yosef heard the implication of their words, he broke down and wept, hurt that they would suspect him of such discriminatory behavior

The Rosh Yeshivah is not afraid to address a problem that plagues and ultimately destroys some families. As long as the parents are alive, appearances of unity and congeniality are maintained. A parent passes from the world and, suddenly, the children all seek avenues for perpetuating his/her name. L'ilui nishmas, to elevate the soul, is the catchword used by those who study Mishnayos, give charity, establish free-loan funds and simply perform manifold acts of chesed. All of these are wonderful expressions of kavod, honor, for a parent, but what one must never forget is that: the greatest respect one can give to a parent's memory is to live harmoniously with his / her siblings. This will be a clear indication and positive testament to their parent's education. People will see that these parents raised their children in the most positive manner, in such a manner that is expected of a Jew. What good is a son's Kaddish if he does not talk to his brother or sister? We understand now why Yosef wept, to think that his brothers would suspect him of such malevolence.

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Subject Rabbi Frand on Parsha

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas VaYeichi

We Try Harder When We Have Taken An Oath

The last request the patriarch Yaakov makes from Yosef is "Bury me in the Land of Israel." Yosef responds, "I will do according to your words". Yaakov requests that Yosef take an oath to that effect and Yosef swore accordingly.

The Ramba"n is bothered by a very obvious question. Did Yaakov Avinu not trust his beloved son Yosef? Why was it necessary for him to make Yosef take an oath? It seems insulting on Yaakov's part to have asked Yosef to swear when Yosef already told Yaakov that he would fulfill his last request.

The Ramba"n emphasizes that Yaakov did not request an oath to force Yosef's hand because he suspected that his trusted and beloved son would be negligent in carrying out his father's final request. The Ramba"n suggests that Yaakov insisted upon imposing the oath on Yosef to impress Pharaoh (Yosef's boss) of the gravity of the matter. Yaakov feared that Pharaoh would turn down Yosef's request for an exit visa and a leave of absence so that he Yosef would not be able to travel back to the Land of Canaan to bury his father. In fact, until Yosef mentioned to Pharaoh that he swore to his father that he would carry out this request, Pharaoh did not want to let him go. Yaakov had foresight into this matter.

However, the Ramba"n also throws out the following idea: "And Yosef as well would be more diligent in the matter because of the fact that he swore to it." According to this second explanation, Yosef himself, Yaakov felt, would do more than he would have done otherwise by virtue of the fact that he buttressed his initial acquiescence to Yaakov's request with an oath.

What does this mean? The Ramban is in effect saying that without the oath, Yosef haTzadik would do less for his father. As we asked originally, does Yosef need a Shavua [oat h] to do more?

The same question may be asked in parshas Chayei Sarah by the incident involving Eliezer, the trusted servant of Avraham Avinu. Avraham trusted Eliezer with all of his possessions and yet when he sent him on a mission to find a wife for his son Yitzchak he insisted "put your hand under my thigh and swear to me that you won't take a wife for my son Yitzchak from the Canaanite daughters in whose midst I dwell." Why did Avraham make Eliezer swear?

The answer again is as the Ramban indicates -- because of the oath under which he was operating he was obliged to make a more diligent effort than he would have otherwise have made. A shavua adds an element of intensity to the actions of even a most trusted and devoted son or servant. What exactly does a shavua add?

The Sefer Imrei Shefer addresses this issue. He suggests that if Reuven pledges to Shimon that he will do something for him, but then runs into difficulty carrying out his intended mission, there may come a point where Reuven says to himself: "I gave it my best effort, but circumstances beyond my control emerged. It is out of my control. (I'm an anus.)"

Had Yosef merely pledged to Yaakov that he would bring him to Canaan for burial and Pharaoh had objected, preventing Yosef from carrying out his promise to his father, Yosef could have rationalized: "I did my best. That's all my father could have expected of me."

However, when a person realizes that there is something greater at stake than merely his "word", then a person has the ability to dig down deeper and to tap strengths that he never even knew he had. This is the difference between Yosef's WORD and Yosef's SHAVUA. When something greater is at stake, one does not so readily bring forth the excuse "I tried!" The severity of the sin of violating one's oath brings fear and trembling to a person that far exceeds the emotions one feels he is not able to accomplish what he merely "promised" to accomplish. When we have taken an oath, we try harder because more is at stake.

Such is human nature. People make an effort but when it really counts, they dig down deeper and tap into unknown personality strengths. When speaking about such serious things, I am hesitant to bring in sports analogies but rightly or wrongly, we can all relate to this. We see this in the sports world. I am not that much of a football

fan because there was not an NFL team in my hometown when I grew up there so I was not infected with the "girs d'yankesa" [childhood lessons], but I do have a passing interest. We see a phenomenon that for three quarters of the game, they may accomplish nothing. Then in the fourth quarter, they wake up. Even more acutely - in the last two minutes. For 58 minutes, nothing happens. Then, all of a sudden, they come to life.

What is the meaning of this human dynamic? The interpretation is that in those last two minutes, they see what is on the line. They know that there is no tomorrow. Then they act and play in a way that they did not really know they could because there is more at stake.

For some people, that motivating factor is a game, a playoff, or a championship series. For us, it is something else. When Yosef realized that a shavua to G-d was at stake, it motivated him to act greater and to do things that he did not even know he could.

The lesson we should take away from this is that if we sometimes try to tell ourselves what is at stake, we act differently. When we truly appreciate the value of Tefillah B'Tzibur, we are motivated to make it to minyan even when we have many valid excuses for davening without a prayer quorum.

The glory of sports victory motivates those on the gridiron. To Eliezer and to Yosef, the awesome seriousness of an Oath to the Almighty motivated them to dig down into the deepest recesses of their personalities to uncover strengths that they would not otherwise demonstrate. We are all motivated by what is important in our lives. The challenge we all face is to contemplate what is truly important in life and to keep those priorities in our consciousness when we are tempted to make excuses and believe we have "done all we could". Once we recognize these priorities, we will be motivated to do the right thing and will find the inner resources to do so.

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD
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Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Weinreb's Torah Column, Parshat Vayechi

Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"h

A Blessed Goodbye

There is a statement in Jewish mystical literature to the effect that the end of every story is already implicit in its beginning, and that at least some elements of the story's beginning endure until its end.

I have certainly been witness to such stories. But I have also experienced stories in which the end could never have been foretold from the beginning. In these stories, characters and the circumstances become thoroughly transformed so that only a prophet could have predicted at the beginning what the end would be like.

The story that I have been relating in these weekly columns over the past few months is one whose end was unpredictable. Who would have thought that this group of novices to Jewish religious education would be consulting a variety of advanced reference works on their own?

The only required text was the translation of the Pentateuch, the Chumash, by the early 20th century British Rabbi, J.H. Hertz. Yet in the final session, which I am about to describe, each of the three students had an additional and unassigned textbook at the ready.

And who could have anticipated that the shy and bashful Simon would emerge, not only as the first to speak that evening, but also as the spokesman for the entire class?

"Beracha, blessing," he began. "That is a fundamental Jewish concept, one that we have encountered before in our study, and one which pervades this week's assigned readings."

The assignment for this, the last session of the course, was Genesis 47:28-50:26, the Torah portion of Vayechi. I could not argue Simon's

point. The parsha opens with Jacob's blessings to his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, continues with the poetic blessings that he bestows upon his own sons, and culminates with the verse, "All these were the tribes of Israel, 12 in number, and this is what their father said to them as he blessed them, addressing to each a parting blessing appropriate to them." (Genesis 49:28)

Richard, who in the early sessions of the class seemed to be the least serious of the three, confirmed Simon's observation, but he went on to report on some of his own research. "I was intrigued by the concept of beracha, and so consulted a dictionary to find out its derivation. I learned that some scholars find a connection to the word bereicha, which means a lake or reservoir of water. I take this to mean that the person who gives the blessing draws upon his inner wellsprings to quench the thirst, or water the garden, of the one being blessed."

Leon, whose attitude during the early weeks of the course would have best been described as skeptical, if not cynical, could not suppress his enthusiasm. "I found myself leafing through a Jewish prayer book, a siddur, and was reminded of something I was taught as a child in Hebrew school. I remember the blessings that we are to make over food and drink. In those blessings, we humans bless the Almighty. In our readings in Genesis, people bless people. Is it not presumptuous, indeed audacious, for us to bless God?"

As I recall these conversations of more than two decades ago, I find myself wishing that I could have responded with some of my more recent experiences. Leon would have been thrilled to hear that a question very similar to his was asked of me by, of all people, then-President George W. Bush.

The President had granted a meeting in the White House to a group of rabbis. The president asked us for a blessing. One of my colleagues responded by pronouncing the traditional blessing one makes for a sovereign: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God King of the universe, who has given of His glory to flesh and blood." The President was taken aback, looked at me, and exclaimed, "I asked the good Rabbi to bless me, but he just blessed the good Lord! How can we mortals bless God?"

I gave President Bush the same explanation I would have given Leon, had both Simon and Richard not interrupted. "It's a great question, Leon, no doubt about it. And there are many questions that we have found in the few commentaries we consulted about the concept of beracha. But we have a much more immediate concern that must be addressed. This is our last scheduled session. Where do we go from here?"

I was ready to wager that Leon would ignore the concern of his fellows and press for an answer to his question. But again, he surprised me. "You guys are right. But here is how I would frame the problem. All three of us enrolled in this class to learn some of the basic concepts of our Jewish faith. We learned some concepts; that's a fact. But what we really learned is how much more there is to learn. So now we have to decide what we will be doing to learn more."

I was ready for the class to suggest to me that we continue, perhaps studying Exodus next. I found myself thinking about my busy calendar and figuring out ways to juggle my schedule to allow for a sequel to this class. But that is not what happened.

Simon, this time in unison with Richard, spoke next. "Rabbi, give us a beracha. You know us now; maybe not as well as Jacob knew his sons, but quite a bit. Jacob was not a controlling father. He did not live his children's lives. He blessed them and encouraged them to achieve their maximum potential on their own. That is what we would like you to do. Bless us and release us!"

Nothing in any of the teacher training courses that I ever took prepared me for this. At the time, the only experience I had with blessing others was the custom of the Friday night benedictions that I gave to my own children when they were quite young. But I knew that I could not escape this unprecedented challenge to my pedagogical creativity.

I can no longer recall exactly what I said. But here is a rough approximation:

"Jacob was careful to recognize the individual differences among his children. He knew that, although they had a lot in common, they each had different talents and virtues. Each blessing he bestowed was tailored for the son who received it. The three of you also have a lot in common. You all were interested in learning about Judaism, which is why you signed up for the course. Now you're all thirsty for more learning.

"But you are three very different people, and I suspect that you will find that the method that one of you chooses to learn more Torah will be incompatible with the methods chosen by the others. My blessing to each of you is that you find your own distinct paths to greater knowledge about our Jewish faith. You know that this course was but the first step along that path."

They all received my blessing in silence. Only Leon could find the words to bring the class to its conclusion:

"Rabbi," he said, "we would like to give you a blessing. We cannot promise you that we will stay in touch with you. But we can pray that one day you will look back upon this class fondly. And we can hope that you find your experience with us meaningful enough so that one day you will write about our little story for an audience of thousands."

I never did hear from any of the three again. I have often looked back with fond memories of this remarkable teaching experience. And for the past three months, I have shared the story of Richard, Simon, and Leon with all of you. Thank you for being that audience of thousands.

From TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

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Yissachar and Zevulun

Rabbi Yonason Sacks

The TorahWeb Foundation

The Rashbatz interprets the Mishnah "Im Ain Ani Li Mi Li - if I am not for myself who will be for me", (Avos 1:14) as teaching that each person must earn merit for himself, and not be overly reliant on others, as it says in the Gemara (Yevamos 109b), a teacher whose students act laudably based on his teaching is not rewarded unless he himself acts. Similarly, the Gemara (Sotah 21a) relates the case of Hillel, who was occupied with Torah, and his brother Shevna, who was occupied with business. When Shevna suggested that they divide and share in each other's benefits, a Heavenly voice went out, quoting the possuk in Shir Hashirim (8:7), "im yiten ish es kol hone beiso b'ahava, boz yavozu lo - If a man give all the treasure of his house for love, he would be scorned", meaning, just as money can't buy love, it can't buy the merit accrued by learning Torah. But if he had proposed such an arrangement at the outset of Hillel's learning - as had Azariah to his brother Shimon, and the Nasi to R' Yochanan - there is no deed greater than that, and he would have shared equally in Hillel's reward. Likewise, the Rama (Yoreh Deah 246:1) cites this case and says that a person may make such a stipulation with his friend, provided that his friend had not already started his learning career. In a related vein, someone once asked the Maharam Alshakar (n.101) what he thought of arrangements people made to sell their merits to each other. He answered by citing Rav Hai Gaon's response to a similar query, that such behavior was absurd. How could one hope to receive the reward for another's good deeds? Just as a man cannot become responsible for his fellow's sins, he cannot acquire the reward for his mitzvos. Certainly, one who enables others to do mitzvos, to learn or to teach others, will be rewarded on his own. But that is a far cry from bringing cash to the marketplace to try and purchase the rewards for other people's mitzvos. Such rewards are not commodities to be traded or liquid assets to be disposed of, and one who tries to purchase them will properly be scorned, as was Shevna.

But such sharing arrangements as between Shimon and Azariah and between R' Yochanan and the Nasi are indeed legitimate.

The Beis Yosef (Teshuvos Avkas Rochel, n. 2) outlines the contours of such legitimate arrangements. The stipulation must be made at the beginning of the venture, and only with someone who doesn't earn enough to support himself and would have otherwise been forced to abandon his learning completely and go to work. A person so situated is permitted to give half of the reward for his learning to his friend, and to receive half of his friend's profits. He then becomes like someone who learns half the day and works half the day (as does his supporter). However, if the learner does already earn enough for his needs, he may not make such an arrangement, and one who does is considered as scorning the word of HaKadosh Baruch Hu (see Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah, 4:37).

Likewise, when Yaakov blessed Yissachar, he said (Bereishis 49:15) "vayehi l'mas oved - and he became an indentured worker". The Meshech Chochmah explains that this refers to the "tax" Yissachar gives to Zevulun from his labor in Torah [for the financial support that Zevulun provides Yisachar], as expounded by Chazal on the verse (Devorim 33:18), "semach Zevulun b'tzeitzecha v'Yissachar b'ohalecha - rejoice Zevulun in your goings out, and Yissachar in your tents."

R' Pinchas HaLevi Horowitz (Hafla'ah on Kesuvos, n. 43), however, holds that the agreement between Yissachar and Zevulun was not an actual partnership, and that Yissachar's reward was not diminished at all because of Zevulun's support. Moreover, no talmid chacham will ever lose any of his spiritual reward via such an arrangement. Though arrogant people may think they can buy part of a scholar's reward for his Torah just as they might transact any other business, they are entirely mistaken. It is unthinkable to R' Horowitz that spiritual reward for learning is transferable. Rather, Zevulun and all others who support Torah scholars receive their own reward from Hashem for enabling Torah study, without reducing at all the reward of the scholars. Just as a flame may kindle other flames without being reduced itself, so too the reward of Torah study may benefit multiple people, without diminishing the reward of the individual who actually learns.

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From Jeffrey Gross <jgross@torah.org>reply-To neustadt@torah.org, genesis@torah.org To weekly-halacha@torah.org Subject Weekly Halacha by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt (dneustadt@cordetroit.com) Yoshev Rosh - Vaad HaRabanim of Detroit

Weekly Halacha

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Bikur Cholim: Halachic Guidelines

There are several Biblical sources for the mitzvah of bikur cholim, visiting the sick.¹ Some of the details of this mitzvah are derived from the manner in which Yosef visited his ailing father, Yaakov.² Indeed, some Rishonim consider bikur cholim to be a Biblical mitzvah.³ According to the Rambam,⁴ this mitzvah is subsumed under the general commandment of "v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho—you should love your fellow as yourself."⁵ The following are some of the more common halachos concerning bikur cholim:

The Shelah⁶ divides the mitzvah of bikur cholim into three categories:

B'gufo, with one's body—by taking care of the patient's needs.

This includes actually visiting him and raising his spirits.

Often, the visit itself, particularly when the visitor is an important person, does wonders for the patient's medical condition.⁷ The Rambam⁸ writes that one who visits the sick should be prepared to tell cheerful stories or engage in idle talk so that the patient's mind will be temporarily distracted from his illness. The Rambam adds that

anyone who walks into a patient's room should do so happily, since a patient is sensitive to the mood of the people who visit him.

In our times, when patients lie in beds (and not on the floor), it is permissible to sit on a chair near the bed.⁹ It is preferable, however, not to sit near the patient's head.¹⁰

Some poskim maintain that the mitzvah of bikur cholim applies also to a man visiting a sick woman, or vice versa, as long as they are careful about yichud.¹¹ Other poskim disagree.¹² Rav S.Z. Auerbach writes:¹³ "In my opinion, just as nichum aveilim is permitted [across gender lines] so is it in regard to bikur cholim, but only to daven for the patient or to see to his/her needs, but not to have lengthy conversations."

B'memona, with one's money—by covering the sick person's expenses so that he has peace of mind.

B'nishmaso, with one's soul—by davening for the sick person. One who visits a sick person and does not daven for him has not performed the mitzvah of bikur cholim.¹⁴ One who is able to daven for a sick person and does not do so, is called a sinner.¹⁵

When one davens for the health of a parent or a Rebbe, he should not honor them with any titles or descriptions. He should simply say, "my father ploni" or "my Rebbe ploni".¹⁶

When davening for a sick person, one should daven only in lashon ha-kodesh. If he davens in the presence of the patient, he may daven in any language.¹⁷ It is best if the sick person can daven for himself.¹⁸

There is a dispute among the poskim concerning whether one is allowed to daven for the death of a patient who is suffering terribly and has no chance of recovery. Many allow it¹⁹ while some do not.²⁰

Contemporary poskim discuss the issue of fulfilling bikur cholim by means of the telephone. The consensus²¹ is that while certain aspects of the mitzvah can be performed over the telephone, other aspects cannot. They rule, therefore, that when a personal visit is impossible, a phone call should be made so that the mitzvah is at least partially fulfilled.

Question: May a kohen visit a patient in a hospital?

Discussion: In Eretz Yisrael, or in a hospital where the majority of the patients are Jewish, it is prohibited for a kohen to enter a hospital in order to visit a patient, except in the unlikely case where he knows for certain that there are no Jewish corpses anywhere in the hospital.²²

Outside of Eretz Yisrael, or in any place where the majority of patients are not Jewish, it is permitted—under extenuating circumstances, such as a man visiting his wife or another close relative—for a kohen to enter a hospital for the purpose of bikur cholim.²³ Obviously, if the kohen is aware that there is a Jewish corpse in the hospital, he may not enter the hospital.

1 See Nedarim 39b and Sotah 14a.

2 Rashi, Bereishis 47:31. See Shabbos 12b and Gilyon ha-Shas. See also Shitah Mekubetzes, Nedarim 40a.

3 This is the view of the Ba-Hag, Ramban and Rabbeinu Yonah; see Sedei Chemed (ma'areches Beis 116) and Tzitz Eliezer, Ramas Rachel 2.

4 Hilchos Avel 14:1. See also Meiri, Nedarim 39b.

5 Vayikra 19:18.

6 Shelah, vol. 2, Maseches Pesachim, pg. 24.

7 See Nedarim 40a where the Talmud quotes an episode with Rav Akiva concerning this.

8 Kuntres Hanhagas ha-Brius (quoted in Kol ha-Torah, vol. 40, pg. 72).

9 Rama, Y.D. 335:3.

10 Beis Hillel, Y.D. 353:3.

11 Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 335:11; Zekan Aharon 2:76.

12 Tzitz Eliezer, Ramas Rachel 16 quoting Va-ya'an Avraham, Y.D. 5.

13 Written responsum published in Nishmas Avraham, Y.D. 335:4.

14 Rama, Y.D. 335:4. Although one can daven for a patient without actually visiting him, still it is better to visit him and witness his condition. The feelings and emotions which are heightened by the visit will intensify the subsequent tefillah for the patient; Igros Moshe, Y.D. 1:223.

15 Berachos 12b.

16 Birkei Yosef, Y.D. 240:4; Rav Akiva Eiger, O.C. 119:1; Tzitz Eliezer Ramas Rachel 13.

17 Y.D. 335:5 and Taz 4; Mishnah Berurah 101:16.

18 Bereishis Rabbah 53:19.

19 Tiferes Yisrael (end of Yoma, Boaz 3); Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 335:3; Igros Moshe, C.M. 2:73-1; She'arim ha-Metzuyanim B'halachah 194:2. Their view is based on the Ran, Nedarim 40a.

20 Tzitz Eliezer, Ramas Rachel 5, who rules that in this situation one should not daven either way.

21 Igros Moshe, Y.D. 1:223; Kisvei Rav Henkin 2:88; Minchas Yitzchak 2:84; Chelkas Yaakov 2:128; Tzitz Eliezer, Ramas Rachel 8:6; Yechaveh Da'as 3:83.

22 Rav S.Z. Auerbach (written responsum published in Nishmas Avraham, Y.D. 335:4); Shevet ha-Levi, Y.D. 105.

23 Igros Moshe, Y.D. 2:166.

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