

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

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

Hersh ben Perel Chana, cousin of very close friends of ours, has been confirmed as one of approximately 240 initial hostages to Hamas in Gaza. The Wall St. Journal featured Hersh and his family in a front page article on October 16. Chabad, OU, and many synagogues recommend psalms (Tehillim) to recite daily for the safety of our people. May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully – with the help of Hashem.

What happens when Jews have no other country to welcome them in case of attacks from an Anti-Semitic country? Study the story of Greek Jews under Nazi attack during World War II. Dr, Michael Matsas has spent much of his adult lifetime documenting this story. For the horrifying story, go to <https://illusionofsafetygreece.com/> and read his absorbing story. For a more complete presentation, read *The Illusion of Safety: The Story of the Greek Jews During the Second World War*, available from [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Greece during World War II is one example of why we Jews and the world need a safe Israel.

Sefer Bereishis focuses on family. When God creates a world for humans, various generations of families must work out ways to interact. Kayen kills his brother Hevel. Noach's son Ham attacks his father in some vicious way. Avraham must reject and send away Yishmael and all his sons from Keturah. Yitzhak's son Esav does not deserve to remain in B'Nai Yisrael. At least Yishmael and Esav, as adults, learn to live in peace with their brothers. (Unfortunately their descendants have always caused problems for B'Nai Yisrael.)

In Vayechi, Yaakov calls his family together for his dying message. Yaakov first adopts Menashe and Ephraim as children (thus giving Yosef the firstborn status of a double portion). After blessing his grandsons, Yaakov turns to his natural sons. Although the brachot for Reuven, Shimon, and Levi include rebukes as well as brachot, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, observes that we have the first instance in history where a father gives deathbed brachot to all his sons at the same time in the same room. After many generations of difficult relations among children in a family, we have the first instance where all sons deserve to be part of B'Nai Yisrael and all find a way to live together in peace. Rabbi Sacks presents the Torah's important message. Family comes prior to everything else and is the most important consideration – more important than land, nation, politics, economics, power, or wealth. For example, Yosef's immense power as second only to Paro in Egypt evaporates after his death. Paro (the same Paro with changed heart or a new Paro) quickly enslaves the Jews.

Rabbi David Fohrman observes that Yosef and his brothers show us that the only way to heal family disputes and to grow is to realize that relationships and families are not a zero sum game. Moreover, humans may not decide what is good or evil. Only God may determine what is good and what is evil in the world that He created for us. Our job is to follow Hashem's moral guidelines and to be a positive force to improve the world.

Jews account for approximately 0.2 percent of the world population. Rabbi Marc Angel observes that no matter what we Jews do, we and Israel become targets for anti-Semites. Only Jews cannot take the right to live for granted. Our enemies are always at our gates – yet Hashem's miracle is that Jews have survived as a separate nation for 3700 years. As much as Amalek, Hitler, and Hamas seek to destroy all the Jews, we are still here and always shall be here – that is a promise from Hashem.

Would any of us have predicted three months ago that anti-Semitism would explode all over the world the way it has since October 7? Hate rallies in many European countries have also spread to Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, and many of the highest regarded universities. More young people in our country side with Hamas than with Israel. As Rabbi Angel asks, why is it fair for Hamas to attack Israel, take hostages, and rape many of the women and men – but evil for Israel to try to destroy Hamas (and to warn civilians in Gaza to move away from areas of coming attacks)? Why do too many Jews, as well as a majority of college students, consider Israel evil and Hamas justified? Why cannot I understand their thinking?

Many of the authors whose works I have reprinted focus on family as the main issue of Sefer Bereishis. We Jews all have common ancestors – Yaakov, Yitzhak, and Avraham. All Jews are family, and we can only be strong if we realize that all Jews are our relatives. With so many people and countries in the world united against Jews and Israel, we must support each other. We must remember a critical lesson from 75 years ago. Without Israel, in case of real emergency, we Jews may again have no other place to go should our current country abandon us. In the 1930s and 1940s, virtually no other country would accept Jews who had to emigrate or be killed. Remember the ships full of Jews who tried numerous countries unsuccessfully and finally had to return to Europe to die in concentration camps. If Germany, the country with the greatest cultural history of the time, could round up and murder Jews – without protest from other countries – the same could happen again. We see the start of a repeat nightmare with Hamas attacking and most of the world applauding.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, was a youth during World War II. He lived through some of the years of violent anti-Semitism during the Nazi nightmare years. He was a Navy chaplain for many years when the United States was the strongest country in the world. He visited Israel frequently and had family there. He saw anti-Semitism up close in many parts of the country, including Potomac, Maryland. My son saw experienced anti-Semitism directed toward him during his Air Force training and a troubling anti-Black incident when he was on deployment. Both Rabbi Cahan and my son would have related to my words this week.

I hate to be so negative. For the weekly Haftorah, chazal chose to end each reading with an optimistic statement. Sorry, I cannot do the same. I pray that our Israeli heroes will prevail, that Iran's thug groups will hold back, that the United States government will continue to support Israel, and that the coming secular year will bring better news.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Eliezer Tzvi ben Etta (Givati infantry brigade, lead IDF force in Gaza); Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, 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.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Vayechi: A Nation of that Notion

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5768

Then Yaakov called for his sons and said, "Assemble yourselves and I will tell you what will befall you in "The End of Days." Gather yourselves and listen, O sons of Yaakov, and listen to Israel your father." (Breishis 49:1)

When they had assembled they thought they would hear a litany of blessings and consolations. Yaakov our father answered and said to them, "Avraham my father's father had blemished children that came out from him, Yishmael and all the children of Ketura. From my father Yitzchok issued, my brother Eisav who was disqualified. I am afraid that that there might be amongst you a person whose heart is divided from his brothers and goes to serve other gods." All twelve tribes responded simultaneously and said, "Listen (our father) Israel HASHEM is OUR G-D. HASHEM is the ONE and ONLY." At that moment Jacob our father answered, "Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity!" (Talmud-Yerushalmi)

What was Yaakov's big fear in the waning moments of his life here in this world? How had his children consoled him? Every normal and decent parent wants to be surrounded by his beloved family and to see them together in the end. How was Yaakov any different? He was not content to have everyone rally around and make overtures of allegiance. He wanted something more, a specified commitment! What exactly did Yaakov want that they were able to successfully satisfy his dying wish?

Years ago I was blindsided by a statement. A presenter was telling a group of "minority" students we were guiding through a museum, "To know where you are going in life, you have to know where you come from!" Referring to me he emphatically declared, "He's a son of Abraham," looking at me, "right!?"

After a few awkward moments and after realizing that nothing pejorative had been implied I simply said, "That's right!" Having agreed publicly to such a thing the words owned me. I rushed home and took hold of the old dusty Bible I had received from the sisterhood on the occasion of my bar-mitzvah.

I started to read about Abraham. Amazed to find a portrait of my ancient relative I felt like someone who had dusted off a box in the attic uncovering an amazing family tree dense with pictures and rich with history.

For weeks I obsessed with the idea that I know who my great-great-great- grandfather is going back 3700 years. I researched whether anyone else had any credible information about relatives going that far back down the highway of

history. I felt uniquely proud as a Jew and saw myself in a much larger context. Next my mind shifted from the perspective of the present looking backward to a view from the past projecting forward. I wondered what Abraham had done that now his children's children 3700 hundred years hence would not only know of him but hold him in such high esteem. I wondered what I would have to do or be that my children should care or know who I was and what I lived for?

Attempting to mine out and discover an answer, I recorded some thoughts in a personal diary. I imagined a small stone entering a still glass-like surface of a lake, sending out ever widening co-centric circles till the stone settles and the water becomes quiet and smooth again. I penned, *"Pebbles in ponds are our ponderings, but boulders in oceans were our fathers' notions whose waves still rock the sea, whose waves still rock the sea!"*

Now I imagined a giant stone hitting the earth thousands of years ago and settling to the bottom of the ocean. We don't know the velocity with which it hit or the mass of the object but we can only begin to estimate the awesome size by the fact that the ocean is still ebbing and flowing strongly thousands of years later from its impact.

What became clear to me was that Avraham's longevity was not due to his military might or political connections but rather it was because of his clarity about a certain profound idea. I wanted to know what that idea was and that launched me on a journey that has not and shall never cease. Yaakov, I believe wanted to be certain his children would be a nation of that notion.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5775-vayechi/>

Vayechi -The Rosh Yeshiva Responds – May Medical Procedures be Performed on a Corpse?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

"And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father: and the physicians embalmed Israel." (Breishit 50:2)

QUESTION – New York, NY

A soon-to-be practical question: New York State requires that when hospital patients die with COVID-19 or influenza as a cause of death, the hospital must provide documentation of a nasopharyngeal swab from within the previous 14 days. If no qualifying test took place and there isn't a swab collected before the patient died that can have additional testing done, the clinical team is instructed to swab the body. Am I remembering correctly that this presents a halakhic problem? Should the family prevent this if they are able?

ANSWER

While there is a general halakhic concern of nivul ha'met, disgraceful treatment or desecration of the body, this would not apply here, as we are dealing with routine procedures regularly done to people when they are alive. Rav Moshe Feinstein, in dealing with a similar case, permits the drawing of fluid or blood from a dead body if it is necessary to make a determination about their illness. He writes:

It appears in my opinion that if they do not cut one of the limbs and do not remove any part of the neck or belly, just that they want to insert a needle to take some fluid from it in order to determine certain matters relating to the illness, this is not to be considered a desecration of the body. Because this is done frequently in our days even to the living, one can certainly be lenient. So too to remove a little blood and the like by a needle is also not a desecration and is permitted. Even if I have not found it explicitly it appears to me to be clear.

A postmortem nasal swab would be no different and is totally permissible.

* Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, New York.

<https://library.yct Torah.org/2023/12/ryrvayechi/>

[Note: The following three timely essays are important enough to the situation that we Jews face on college campuses and elsewhere in life that I decided to reprint them again this week.]

Fighting antisemitism on our campuses

by Rav Avi Weiss * for NY Daily News

Imagine if the presidents of Harvard, Penn, and MIT were asked in a congressional hearing, “Would you consider a call for genocide against Blacks or Asians or Latinos to run counter to your university’s code of conduct? Would you consider a call for genocide against the LGBTQ community to run counter to your university’s code of conduct?”

The answer, of course, would be an unequivocal yes. If these universities micromanage — police, even — the improper use of students’ preferred pronouns, they will undoubtedly go to all ends, as they should, to forcefully confront calls for violence by such unabashed haters.

Then why, when asked the very same question about Jews during a congressional hearing last week, did they resort to the feeble refrain, ‘It depends’? It was profoundly disappointing to see the presidents of these universities evade directly answering whether calls for genocide against Jews violate their university policies by arguing that it depends on whether it leads to violence, whether the threat is against a specific Jew, or on the context.

While Penn’s president, Liz Magill, has now resigned, the problem remains. Don’t these leaders realize that words make a difference? Words can lead to fatal deeds. Smart and ethical leaders stop hate at its inception rather than wait for it to harm, injure, and kill.

And of course, calling for genocide against any group is a call to kill every person in that group. All Jews are explicitly endangered.

When threats against Jews are not denounced as antisemitic, but threats against others are properly deemed as racist and bigoted — that’s a double standard. Viewing Jews differently than others is antisemitism.

So why did these presidents dismally fail in their responses about Jews? It is critical to trace whether their respective schools are funded or seek to be funded by antisemitic, terror-supporting countries. Qatar, for example, has given at least \$4.7 billion dollars to American universities since 2001.

Another contributing factor relates to the various ideologies and academic frameworks that have permeated campuses in recent decades — intersectionality, “decolonization,” two of the most odious canards.

Whatever the reasons may be, one thing is certain: Presidents of universities are supposed to serve as model leaders, chosen because of their achievements and leadership qualities. A hallmark of any true leader is the ability to stand up for what is right with conviction, and fortitude, especially when the choice is difficult. History has taught us, however, that the intelligentsia can be void of moral conscience and flaccid in standing up against the voices of those who support anti-human rights positions.

It's easy to accept money, especially massive sums of money, from wherever it comes. But it is the courageous thing, to know when to say no. Just as philanthropists develop an "ethics of giving," meaning cultivating a sense of when, where, and how much to give, so, too, should there be an "ethics of receiving." Universities would never accept money from violent thugs, from sexual offenders or murderers; and they should similarly reject contributions from sources that support terror — the murder of Americans and Israelis and innocent people all over the world.

When presidents do not set the correct example for their students, tragically, the forces of evil triumph. The prophet Isaiah states that young people are the ones who lead the way. And so, today, what is vitally necessary are Jewish students and non-Jewish students of moral conscience who are not afraid to speak truth to power — much like the brave Jewish students who spoke on the Hill last week. If students cower to fear and run from the challenge of standing up to antisemitism, they hand victory to the enemy.

Now is the time for all students on campus, not only Jews, to wear skullcaps, to wear Star of David necklaces, to light Chanukah candles and hang Israeli flags in the windows of their dorm rooms for all to see. Now is the time for them to send a powerful message to their university leaders, that racism, bigotry, and antisemitism are two sides of the same coin.

As these people of good will of all faith traditions oppose bigotry and antisemitism they will be educating all Americans — starting with university presidents who have shirked their responsibilities by shamefully condoning antisemitism — that what they are fighting for is, in fact, the ultimate message of American freedom and democracy.

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<https://yct Torah.org/2023/12/fighting-antisemitism-on-our-campus/> Original, published December 12, 2023, available at <https://www.nydailynews.com/2023/12/11/fighting-antisemitism-on-our-campus/> On line access to the original requires a subscription to the Daily News.

Explaining the First Amendment to University Presidents

by Nathan Lewin *

(December 7, 2023 / JNS)

In the wake of the astounding testimony before Congress by the presidents of Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, three important questions must be asked:

1) Why are the presidents of leading American universities abysmally ignorant of Supreme Court rulings on the limits of protected speech under the First Amendment?

The presidents claimed in their testimony that anti-Israel and antisemitic "protesters" on their campuses are only exercising their constitutionally protected right to free speech when they call for an "intifada" and chant Hamas's battle cry "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" — both clear calls for violence against Israelis and Jews.

Harvard's president Claudine Gay repeatedly declared that her university will act only "when speech crosses into conduct." She might be surprised to learn that not a single Supreme Court justice agrees with her.

Indeed, it is unlikely that the three presidents have bothered to read the most recent definition of First Amendment speech guarantees as expressed by all nine Supreme Court Justices, albeit in various opinions. Not one of the justices believes that threats and incitement have blanket constitutional protection and cannot be punished unless they "cross into conduct."

On June 27, the Supreme Court decided a case titled *Counterman v. Colorado*, which dealt with harassment on the social media site Facebook. The case generated much discussion precisely because it dealt with the issue of what limits can be placed on speech protections. All of the justices agreed that the Bill of Rights does not guarantee any right to send threats over social media. Nor did they hold that the First Amendment entitles a speaker to say anything so long as it does not “cross into conduct.” The justices differed only over how relevant the speaker’s intention might be to the question of criminal penalties.

A majority of the Court, speaking through Justice Elena Kagan, said that expressing a threat would be a crime if the speaker uttered it with “reckless disregard” for how it would be understood by a listener. Four justices differed only in part. All the justices agreed that freedom of speech does not protect a speaker who makes a threat with reckless disregard for the listener’s fear of violence.

The campus protesters in question are obviously guilty of “reckless disregard” for the fears of their Jewish fellow students. Under the most recent Supreme Court rulings, they can be charged with crimes and punished accordingly. That the presidents of Harvard, MIT and Penn are ignorant of this is shocking.

2) Why are major donors to these universities only terminating future grants rather than demanding that billions of dollars in past donations be refunded?

Benefactors who have given huge donations to Harvard and other universities with enormous endowments have announced publicly that they will not continue to contribute to these institutions because they promote and fail to control antisemitism.

It is possible that this may influence the public declarations of university administrators who are unhappy that the flow of funds has been interrupted. But given the vast resources of these institutions and the contributions likely to come from antisemitic and anti-Israel sources, it will only have a modest impact.

A far more powerful response would be for major donors to file lawsuits seeking to recover the billions of dollars they have donated in the past. They could do so on the grounds that these donations were secured by false representations that claimed the universities were providing proper meaningful education to their students.

For example, Harvard’s original charter of 1650 stated that its students will be taught “knowledge and godlynes.” Contributors have now discovered that Harvard does not abide by this charter. Instead, it egregiously violates it by nurturing hate and violence against Jews. As such, donors are legally entitled to recover the funds they were convinced by Harvard’s false representations to provide.

3) Why are no federal grand juries investigating the probable violations of American anti-terrorist laws committed by the organizers of and participants in pro-Hamas public protests?

In 1996, Congress enacted the “Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act” (18 U.S.C. 2339B), which makes it a criminal offense to provide “material support to foreign terrorist organizations.” Violating this law can be punished with a long prison sentence.

The Supreme Court, with Chief Justice John Roberts writing for a six-person majority, upheld the law in 2010 and rejected claims that its restriction of “material support” for terrorism violated First Amendment rights of free speech and free association (*Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, 561 U.S. 1 (2010)).

Advocating for a terrorist organization and supporting its activities, even if they constitute otherwise lawful protest, violates this provision of the Federal Criminal Code. Organized protests supporting Hamas accompanied by costly printed signs, customized uniforms and caps, and Palestinian flags, assuredly qualify as “material support” for Hamas.

Why has the Department of Justice under Attorney General Merrick Garland, a descendant of Holocaust survivors, failed to initiate a federal investigation into these probable violations of America's anti-terrorism laws? Why has no U.S. attorney impaneled a federal grand jury and subpoenaed witnesses?

These are just some of the questions that an American lawyer must ask in these turbulent times.

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<https://www.jns.org/explaining-the-first-amendment-to-university-presidents/>

End DEI

by Bari Weiss * (November 9, 2023)

[Editor's note: While not a Dvar Torah, this opinion piece fits in with material above relating to anti-Semitism during the period when our ancestors lived in Egypt.]

Twenty years ago, when I was a college student, I started writing about a then-nameless, niche ideology that seemed to contradict everything I had been taught since I was a child.

It is possible I would not have perceived the nature of this ideology — or rather I would have been able to avoid seeing its true nature — had I not been a Jew. But I was. I am. And in noticing the way I had been written out of the equation, I started to notice that it wasn't just me, but that the whole system rested on an illusion.

What I saw was a worldview that replaced basic ideas of good and evil with a new rubric: the powerless (good) and the powerful (bad). It replaced lots of things. Color blindness with race obsession. Ideas with identity. Debate with denunciation. Persuasion with public shaming. The rule of law with the fury of the mob.

People were to be given authority in this new order not in recognition of their gifts, hard work, accomplishments, or contributions to society, but in inverse proportion to the disadvantages their group had suffered, as defined by radical ideologues. According to them, as James Kirchick concisely put it: "Muslim > gay, black > female, and everybody > the Jews."

I was an undergraduate back then, but you didn't need a PhD to see where this could go. And so I watched, in horror, sounding alarms as loudly as I could.

I was told by most Jewish leaders that, yes, it wasn't great, but not to be so hysterical. Campuses were always hotbeds of radicalism, they said. This ideology, they promised, would surely dissipate as young people made their way in the world.

It did not.

Over the past two decades I saw this inverted worldview swallow all of the crucial sense-making institutions of American life. It started with the universities. Then it moved on to cultural institutions — including some I knew well, like The New York Times — as well as every major museum, philanthropy, and media company. Then on to our medical schools and our law schools. It's taken root at nearly every major corporation. It's inside our high schools and even our elementary schools. The takeover is so comprehensive that it's now almost hard to notice it — because it is everywhere.

Including in the Jewish community.

Some of the most important Jewish communal organizations transformed themselves in order to prop up this ideology. Or at the very least, they contorted themselves to signal that they could be good allies in the fight for equal rights — even as those rights are no longer presumed inalienable or equal and are handed out rather than protected.

For Jews there are obvious and glaring dangers in a worldview that measures fairness by equality of outcome rather than opportunity. If underrepresentation is the inevitable outcome of systemic bias, then overrepresentation — and Jews are two percent of the American population — suggests not talent or hard work, but unearned privilege. This conspiratorial conclusion is not that far removed from the hateful portrait of a small group of Jews divvying up the ill-gotten spoils of an exploited world.

It isn't only Jews who suffer from the suggestion that merit and excellence are dirty words. It is strivers of every race, ethnicity, and class. That is why Asian American success, for example, is suspicious. The percentages are off. The scores are too high. Who did you steal all that success from?

Of course, this new ideology doesn't come right out and say all that. It doesn't even like to be named. Some call it wokeness or anti-racism or progressivism or safetyism or Critical Social Justice or identity Marxism. But whatever term you use, what's clear is that it has gained power in a conceptual instrument called "diversity, equity, and inclusion," or DEI.

In theory, all three of these words represent noble causes. They are, in fact, all causes to which American Jews in particular have long been devoted, both individually and collectively. But in reality, these words are now metaphors for an ideological movement bent on recategorizing every American not as an individual, but as an avatar of an identity group, his or her behavior prejudged accordingly, setting all of us up in a kind of zero-sum game.

We have been seeing for several years now the damage this ideology has done: DEI, and its cadres of enforcers, undermine the central missions of the institutions that adopt it. But nothing has made the dangers of DEI clearer than what's happening these days on our college campuses — the places where our future leaders are nurtured.

It is there that professors are compelled to pledge fidelity to DEI in order to get hired, promoted, or tenured. (For more on this, please read John Sailer's Free Press piece: *How DEI Is Supplanting Truth as the Mission of American Universities*.) And it is there that the hideousness of this worldview has been on full display over the past few weeks: we see students and professors immersed not in facts, knowledge, and history, but in a dehumanizing ideology that has led them to celebrate or justify terrorism.

Jews, who understand that being made in the image of God bestows inviolate sanctity on every human life, must not stand by as that principle, so central to the promise of this country and its hard-won freedoms, is erased.

What we must do is reverse this.

The answer is not for the Jewish community to plead its cause before the intersectional coalition or beg for a higher ranking in the new ladder of victimhood. That is a losing strategy — not just for Jewish dignity, but for the values we hold as Jews and as Americans.

The Jewish commitment to justice — and the Jewish American community's powerful and historic opposition to racism — is a source of tremendous pride. That should never waver. Nor should our commitment to stand by our friends, especially when they need our support as we now need theirs.

But DEI is not about the words it uses as camouflage. DEI is about arrogating power.

And the movement that is gathering all this power does not like America or liberalism. It does not believe that America is a good country — at least no better than China or Iran. It calls itself progressive, but it does not believe in progress; it is explicitly anti-growth. It claims to promote “equity,” but its answer to the challenge of teaching math or reading to disadvantaged children is to eliminate math and reading tests. It demonizes hard work, merit, family, and the dignity of the individual.

An ideology that pathologizes these fundamental human virtues is one that seeks to undermine what makes America exceptional.

It is time to end DEI for good. No more standing by as people are encouraged to segregate themselves. No more forced declarations that you will prioritize identity over excellence. No more compelled speech. No more going along with little lies for the sake of being polite.

The Jewish people have outlived every single regime and ideology that has sought our elimination. We will persist, one way or another. But DEI is undermining America, and that for which it stands—including the principles that have made it a place of unparalleled opportunity, safety, and freedom for so many. Fighting it is the least we owe this country.

* Bari Weiss is the founder and Editor of The Free Press, thefp.com, an on line publication. She is also author of *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (2019) and was formerly op-ed editor and writer for the Wall Street Journal and an editor and writer for the New York Times.

https://www.thefp.com/p/end-dei-woke-capture?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

Kindness & Faith

By Rabbi Ezra Seligsohn*

When thinking about the types of kindness in our world, we may be drawn to the little things: holding open a door for the next person, giving a few coins or bills for Tzedakah, making eye-contact and offering a genuine “thank you.” Or perhaps what rises for us are higher-effort tasks: bringing food to someone homebound, visiting a sick neighbor in the hospital, raising money for an important cause. Maybe, we arrive at what is coined as the ultimate kindness – the act of burial. Tending to the needs of the departed, showing up and accompanying them to their final resting place: tasks described in our community as a *chesed shel emet* – a true kindness.

This phrase, *chesed shel emet* is in fact drawn from this week’s Torah portion, Vayechi, when Ya’akov initially requests of Yosef to not bury him in Egypt, but rather return him back to Eretz Canaan where he will lay beside his ancestors. He combines these two words, *chesed* and *emet* (Genesis 47):

Yisrael’s time to die drew near, and he called for his son, for Yosef, and said to him, “If I have found favor in your eyes, please place your hand under my thigh, and deal with me with true kindness. Please, do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me from Egypt and bury me in their grave.” He said, “I will do as you have spoken.”

The medieval commentator Rashi picks up on the language and explains:

“Kindness that is done for the dead is a true kindness, as one does not expect anything in return.”

At first, Rashi’s explanation offers an inspiring view of the great kindness of burial, of being present for the departed. As a community, we show up for members of our family, community, and Am Yisrael at funerals, burials, and shivas – and this is truly a beautiful, and one-directional act. There is no expectation of anything in return.

And yet, Rashi's comments imply a somewhat bleak, utilitarian understanding of most kindness – I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. If I am nice to you today, perhaps you'll return the favor tomorrow. Ya'akov, knowing that this is the way of the world, reinforces his monumental request with the simple language – a true kindness, one that transcends the possibility of repayment, one that breaks the typical pattern of giving and receiving.

Rav Shmuel David Luzatto, (19th century Italian scholar known as שד"ל – "Shadal") offers an alternative possibility, one that allows us to see general acts of kindness as altruistic. He says:

"Kindness and Truth: An act of love and faith. And the faith is that you should keep your kindness for me, even after I die."

Shadal suggests that the "truth" here is not a qualitative descriptor of the kindness, but rather recognizing how much faith is required when Ya'akov makes this ask of Yosef. This faith is necessary, as Ya'akov will of course never know if his request is fulfilled. Emet here implies a type of integrity, of commitment, of following through on what he agrees to.

This idea resonates with the bravery required for every act of kindness. Each time we are good to someone, and allow ourselves to receive from others, it is a deep act of commitment and faith, of trust (rather than truth!).

And yet, the truth is, that this is not the first time Ya'akov has used this phrase. Back in Parashat Vayishlach, in the hours before encountering his brother Esav, Ya'akov offers this prayer (Genesis 32):

"I am too small for all the kindness and all the truth faithfulness that you did for your servant."

Ya'akov recognizes that all the good he has received from God was in essence an act of trust. A faithful follow-through of God's early commitments to Ya'akov – that he is worthy of carrying the responsibilities and receiving the blessings of his ancestors. And when Ya'akov asks Yosef to treat him with a trusting kindness — he is asking Yosef to be Godlike, to act with integrity and commitment after he dies.

Ya'akov's word choice reminds us that the act of showing up and being kind, for both the dead and the living, is a bold, Godly behavior. One that requires belief and trust for both the giver and the receiver: the underpinnings of an honest relationship.

In these dark days, when we are surrounded by the death and destruction of so many loved ones, neighbors of friends, friends of neighbors, and the peoples in our holy land – we must dig deep into our tradition and into our hearts to uncover and perform that Godly faith in one another.

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Surprised by Anti-Semitism? Yes and No.

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Although Jews have faced anti-Semitism from time immemorial, it always comes upon us as something new. It surprises us. We don't understand it.

We strive to be good people, good citizens; we are kind hearted and generous. We devote ourselves to the education of our children, to the betterment of society, to justice and compassion. We have our share of faults along with all other human beings; but by and large, we are a good, responsible, hard-working community.

And yet, no matter what we do, people hate us! They don't see us as individual human beings but as a vast stereotype. They don't care if we are religious or not religious; if we are liberals or conservatives. If we are Jewish, they are against us and want to hurt us.

It was once thought that the establishment of the State of Israel would bring anti-Semitism to an end. After all, Jews would then have a feeling of security in the world, a safe haven where no one would bother us.

But the Jewish State has simply become a new target for the anti-Semites. They now couch Jew-hatred for hatred of *"the Zionists."* Anti-Semites don't have a problem with Hamas firing thousands of missiles at civilian centers in Israel; but when Israel responds by bombing the enemy, Israel is immediately condemned and vilified by the haters. For the anti-Semites, Israel is always wrong regardless of what it does or doesn't do.

Happily, there are many millions of people who feel warmly toward Jews and the Jewish State. Happily, many millions of people admire the accomplishments of the State of Israel in the face of so many obstacles; they respect Israel's right — and obligation — to defend its citizens.

But when we see outbreaks of blatant anti-Jewish violence, anti-Jewish rhetoric, anti-Israel demonization — it surprises and pains us! In spite of thousands of years dealing with anti-Jewish hatred and persecution, we still are not used to it. We somehow think that humanity will improve, will judge us fairly. We grow optimistic at any sign of peace and understanding, mutual cooperation and solidarity.

We keep telling ourselves that most people are good and that reason will ultimately prevail. The haters will eventually overcome malice and violence; they will realize the value of peaceful and respectful cooperation. In a world of over seven billion human beings, surely there must be room for the infinitesimal presence of 15 million Jews. In a world with so many countries, surely there must be room for one tiny Jewish State that wants nothing more than to be able to live in peace and security.

But the anti-Semites and anti-Zionists don't really care. They don't want to be reasoned with; they don't want to listen. They have their agenda of hate.

Saul Bellow, the American novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, wrote in his book *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account*:

"...There is one fact of Jewish life unchanged by the creation of a Jewish state: you cannot take your right to live for granted. Others can; you cannot. This is not to say that everyone else is living pleasantly and well under a decent regime. No, it means only that the Jews, because they are Jews, have never been able to take the right to live as a natural right....This right is still clearly not granted them, not even in the liberal West."

Bellow's complaint is not new. Jews throughout the generations have had to face the same stark reality: Jews, because they are Jews, cannot take the right to live as a natural right.

That's the sad part of the story.

But that's not the end of the story. Even if there has long been hatred and violence directed against Jews...we are still here! We continue to live, to thrive, to hope.

The late Jewish thinker, Simon Rawidowicz, wrote an essay about *"Israel: the Ever-Dying People."* He noted that Jews have often felt that theirs was the last Jewish generation. Jewish survival seemed hopeless. But although we were "ever-dying," we were in fact ever-living! We often felt despair; but hope and persistence prevailed. Jews found ways to overcome all who would decimate us.

Although current manifestations of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are ugly and painful, we must take the long view of things. This isn't the first period of Jewish history where Jews faced viciousness and violence. It likely won't be the last period either. But long experience has taught us to stay strong, stay confident, stay positive. The challenge to our generation is to stand tall as Jews, to stand strong on behalf of Israel.

And we do look forward to a time when humanity will overcome the disease of anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, we recall the words of Rav Nahman of Bratslav: *"All the world is a narrow bridge; the essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all."*

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please share this Shabbat column with your family and friends, and please visit our website jewishideas.org for many articles that foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its year end fund raising period. Thank you.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/surprised-anti-semitism-yes-and-no>

Reaching for Greatness: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

This week's Torah reading brings us to the end of the book of Bereishith. During the past months, we have read the magnificent account of the creation of the universe; we learned about Noah and his times. We then were introduced to the lives of individuals who revolutionized human civilization: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his siblings.

These remarkable people laid the foundations not only for the people of Israel but for much of human civilization. The Torah describes these heroes of faith with their strengths and weaknesses, their victories and failures. They are not presented as having super-human talents or genius; rather, they appear to be very fallible human beings striving to fulfill their human potentialities. They are shepherds and seekers of God; they are parents and moral guides; they are courageous and wise...but not always.

These pillars of civilization were, to a great extent, loners. As Abraham himself said, he was a "stranger and a resident" among the people. A stranger — he was not at home within the pagan society in which he lived. A resident — he was a constructive and helpful member of the community. Our spiritual fathers and mothers, while being cooperative and sociable, were not at home in general society. They had different dreams and aspirations. They heard God's voice. They were striving for something beyond their own time and place. They were not afraid to stand alone, to be different, to defy the popular norms.

Human greatness often entails loneliness and alienation. It is nurtured by successes and failures, by trials and errors. It is fostered in an environment of quiet thoughtfulness. The greatest people often are the most humble and self-effacing.

Dr. Fred Hoyle, a famous English astronomer of the 20th century, made an astute observation:

"It seems to be characteristic of all great work, in every field, that it arises spontaneously and unpretentiously, and that its creators wear a cloak of imprecision...The man who voyages strange

seas must of necessity be a little unsure of himself. It is the man with the flashy air of knowing everything, who is always on the ball, always with it, that we should beware of. ("Of Men and Galaxies," Prometheus Books, NY, 2005, p. 28)

Dr. Hoyle expresses concern for the over-specialization characteristic of modern society. To be a "success," one must increasingly be seen as an "expert," a member of the in-crowd, a popular team-player. *"More and more, the professions will cross over into the entertainment field. Those of us who are not employed directly in industry will come to realize that what we are really in is 'show biz.'"* (p. 52)

What is increasingly valued in our world is entertainment, putting on a show for others, image-making.

Because of this cultural and spiritual degradation, the environment to produce real greatness is diminished. *"It is a mistake to imagine that potentially great men are rare. It is the conditions that permit the promise of greatness to be fulfilled that are rare."* (p. 25)

As we read the stories of our Biblical ancestors, we are given a unique opportunity to delve into their world. We can re-focus on spiritual striving, and free ourselves of the glitz and show biz that pervade our lives. We can seek to develop our own personal greatness, even as we are fully conscious of our many weaknesses and failings. Most of all, we can shake off the artificiality and superficiality that attempt to choke our spirits; we can reclaim our own souls, our own essential selves.

Our Biblical ancestors were not flashy know-it-alls with a glib word for everyone. They were not show-people or seekers of popularity. They were able to stand alone, to strive for God and Godliness, to attain human greatness. These are qualities that can transform lives and change the world.

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

<https://www.jewishideas.org/reaching-greatness-thoughts-parashat-vayhi>

Vayechi: Beyond the Tunnels – Awaiting Redemption

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

As Yosef prepared for his passing, he assured the brothers that Hashem would eventually redeem them from Mitzrayim. In sharing this, Yosef was sharing a tradition, based on prophecy, which their father, Yakov, had shared with him)48:21(. Yosef declared)50:24,25(, *"Hashem will remember you and take you up from this land to the land that he promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov."*

Interestingly, the Medrash explains, Yosef identified the precise words that the authorized messenger of Hashem would use to announce redemption: *"Pokod Yifkod"* He will remember you. Indeed, when Moshe presented himself, he used those precise words which were known to the Jewish people)Shemos 3:16, 4:31,13:19(. What is fascinating is that Moshe had burned his lips as a child and would normally have trouble articulating the letters which required dexterity in the lips. Thus, when Moshe came and was able to produce these words with precision, the Jewish people saw in him not only a Divine message of redemption but also the miraculous partnership of Moshe and Hashem which would later be described as *"The Shechina spoke through Moshe's throat."*

The concept that Jews in exile are instructed to believe and yearn for redemption is not limited to the exile in Mitzrayim. The prophet)Chavakuk 2:3(instructs us, *"If he tarries, await! Because he will come."* In fact, one of the principles of Jewish faith)#12(is in the coming of Moshiach. This means that there will one day be a descendent of Dovid's who will bring about redemption, world peace, universal knowledge of Hashem, and the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash, as he rules over the Jewish people with integrity.

The Mesilas Yesharim)19(explains that even if Moshiach does not come in a particular generation, the very waiting is the Mitzva. This explains why in the text of the Ani Maamin, this is the only one that describes the challenge. For example, it says, *"I believe that Hashem rewards and punishes,"* and does not say, *"...even though it sometimes seems that good people suffer."* In the Ani Maamin of redemption it states, *"Even though he tarries, I still wait,"* because that is an essential part of the Mitzva.

When we consider redemption in the Torah perspective, it is important to realize that we do not view redemption with tunnel vision, as a moment in time that we yearn for, and until that there is nothing. Much of our Tefilla is based on the awareness that just as we believe in national redemption, we believe in personal redemption and an ongoing Divine providence and redemption. In fact, Rabbi Yakov Emden declared, *"When I consider the continuity of the Jewish people through the history of exile, I consider it a greater miracle than the redemption."*

Indeed, the structure of the Siddur guides us to link the redemption from Mitzrayim to the needs that we currently have and ask for. *"Join the redemption to your requests,"* which is what we do before the Shemoneh Esrei of Shacharis and Maariv, by first describing the glorious redemption and then proceeding to ask our needs. In fact, the Talmud)Brachos 9b(celebrates the Talmudic scholar, Rav Bruna, who once linked the two with such heartfelt devotion and clarity that Hashem rescued us in the past and still provides, that he was joyous the entire day about this accomplishment.

In our time, even as we await the coming of Moshiach, we need redemption of many times. On a personal level families and individuals need Hashem's benevolent intervention. On a national level we are in great need. Even in Eretz Yisroel which contains the echoes of redemption, we remain in a state of Golus, in significant need of Hashem's benevolence.

The words of our rich history can give us strength, fortitude, and confidence. The words of Yosef, of Moshe, of the Talmud, and of Gedolim throughout the ages such as the Ramchal, and Rabbi Yakov Emden, keep us on track recognizing the yearning both for personal and national redemption.

Meanwhile, the words of Dovid in Tehillim)63(can be especially heartening as the Jewish people deal with the seemingly recent challenge of enemy tunnels. *"They seek to bring upon me a holocaust; they come in the depths of the earth)tunnels(. May they be rebuffed in war; may the portion of foxes)short lived proponents of propaganda(be their lot...when the mouth of liars will be stopped."*

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

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

Vayechi -- 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 Ephraim. He explains to Yosef that both children will be great. However, he had seen through prophecy that Ephraim's descendants will be greater. Therefore, the greater strength of the blessing should be given to Ephraim.

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 Ephraim was to be given the greater part of the blessing, he chose to divert his right hand to Ephraim. 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 Ephraim 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 Ephraim's future descendants against the fact the Menashe was older and decided to choose Ephraim, 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.

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

Vayechi

by Rabbi Herzl Hefter *

]Rabbi Hefter did not send a new Dvar Torah for Miketz. Watch this space for further insights from Rabbi Hefter in future weeks.["

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

Vayechi

By R. Haim Ovadia

[I do not have a new Dvar Torah from Rabbi Ovadia. Watch this space for his insights on most weeks.]

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

Fake Smiles, Chemical Doubt, and Why Swearing)Oath-Making(is Useful

by Rabbi Moshe Rube* © 5782

]The Auckland)NZ(Hebrew Congregation is closed for three weeks for summer vacation. During this period, I am running archived Devrei Torah by Rabbi Rube from his tenure as Rabbi of Kneseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL[

Can you tell the difference between a smile that has sincerity versus one that lacks it? Or between a smile that assures you the person making it truly feels joy about the situation versus one who has hidden doubts and is only giving a smile to keep up appearances?

Test yourself. See the picture on the top and determine which one looks more "sincere" to you.]sorry, photos not included here[

There is no right/wrong answer, but I would wager that most of us would choose the picture on the right as more sincere.]note: I picked the photo on the right[It doesn't matter if we can explain why. Some type of process happens within us where we recognize that the smile on the left has reservations behind it.

Can you spot the physical differences between the 2 pictures? It might help if you try to smile now. Unless you happen to be feeling full of joy at this moment, you will most likely experience a forced quality in the smile. What did you feel in your face? Can you compare it to memories of a real smile you experienced? What muscle memory comes to mind? Do you see more clues in the picture now?

You may have noticed when you "force-smiled" that your lips did most of the moving while the rest of your face stayed still. Whereas in a "real" smile, your cheeks, facial muscles, and corners of the eyes move back towards the back of your head, they do not move as much in a forced smile and can even produce a feeling of strain. Do you see the wider expression of the eyes and the elasticity of the cheeks in the picture on the right? In this smile, there's less doubt inhibiting the intended action so the muscles become free to move.

)You may also notice that your abdomen constricts during a force smile. A less-inhibited smile will produce a feeling of fullness in the abdomen.(

By showing you this, I wish to prove to you that our intentions, desires, doubts and feelings do not just exist in our heads, but also have a physiological basis. We can feel them as sensations. The tension of contradictory intentions or doubts when we're debating on issues such as whether to take on a new responsibility or the proper attire to wear during the day are observable facts of life. We can even measure it quantitatively in a laboratory.)See the postscript for an example.(It's a mind-blowing idea that blows up the imaginary wall between our mind and body.

This extends not just to muscle movement but all the way down to the chemical level.

Dr. Eric Kandel)A Jewish neuroscientist who escaped from Vienna right before the Holocaust(details in his half-science half-autobiographical book *In Search of Memory* about the interplay between the excitatory neurotransmitter glutamate and the inhibitory transmitter GABA)gamma-aminobutyric acid(.

Glutamate's job is to change the resting potential of the end of a motor neuron)post-synaptic cell(from -70 millivolts to -55 millivolts so the action potential or electrical signal can stimulate the next motor neuron. Eventually, this leads to an action like lifting our arms or smiling.

GABA has the opposite job. It changes the resting potential from -70 millivolts to -75. This is useful when we want to stop ourselves from doing something and/or relax. Alcohol can give a calming effect because it binds to GABA receptors.

Chemical "doubt" exists when both GABA and glutamate are in the presynaptic neuron. So usually our neurons will go according to the majority. If there's more glutamate, the action potential will fire. If there is more GABA, it will not. Of course this is only one part in a much larger process, but it is an important marker.

Our desires and intentions can conflict. Let's go back to smiling. Say an intention arises within you to smile perhaps due to a social situation, but also an intention not to smile because personally you don't see anything to smile about. So you now have both inhibitory and excitatory tendencies. Such a conflict will lead to the "forced smile" experience where some muscles engage but not all of them and even then only partially. You can compare this again to a smile with no conflicting intentions where all the muscles engage more readily or to a relaxed, calm, expressionless expression where you have a clear intention to have minimal muscular activity on your face.)After all, it would be uncomfortable to smile 24-7.(

Such knowledge I'm sure can be useful, so feel free to do with it what you will. For now, I will use it to shed some light on our Torah portion of Vayechi.

Yaakov is about to die and had Yosef take an oath that he should bury him in Israel. Why did Yaakov make Yosef swear? Did he not trust Joseph to keep his word? When's the last time you made your child, friend, or co-worker swear to do something?

It seems that Yaakov knew that our inner workings are complex and full of conflicts. Yes, Yosef would surely want to honor his father's wishes. But Yosef had other factors to consider. As Rashi points out, Yosef answered to Pharaoh who may not have liked for Yosef to show such an honor to the Land of Israel by making a whole trip there and burying his noble father. There were political and social factors to take into account. Due to these cross motivations, maybe Yosef would have felt a need to compromise. Or maybe he would bury Yaakov in Israel but do it with a half-smile and a half-heart. Perhaps Yosef would have done it undercover of night and not with great pride. What would that show the Jews as far as their connection to the Land of Israel?

So Yaakov made him swear. Yosef would have done the action, but perhaps more GABA than necessary would circulate in his system from the wisps of conflicting intention that surround a man in politics. But now these would be quieted by the force of an oath. When we make an oath we know we can't go back on it. All conflicts melt away in the face of the power of our words. We have to do what we swear to do no matter what.

Is there another way besides oath taking you can think of to clear out the conflicts in our intentions and do more of what we want without inhibition? What do we want anyway? What intention arises within you with minimal conflict? If we get closer to finding that out, maybe we'll enjoy our smiles more.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Moshe Rube

P.S. I loosely took the smiling example from the words of renowned Jewish mentalist and expert on body language Marc Salem)aka Moshe Potwinick(.

P.S. Suggestions for Further Reading: Konrad Lorenz in his book *On Aggression* analyzes the facial expressions and movement of different animals when their intentions conflict. There's a fascinating photo on p. 92 where he analyzes quantitatively the face of a wolf as it goes from a completely calm expression all the way to a fully aggressive expression with the middle being the most conflicted. I have taken a photo of it below if you want to look.]photo not included here[

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Kneseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah **Vayechi: Jacob's Superior Blessing**

Before his death, Jacob blessed each of his sons. He blessed his beloved son Joseph, saying:

"Blessings of heaven above, blessings of the abyss lying beneath; blessings of plenty and children. The blessings of your father are superior to those of my parents, until the desired hills of eternity.")Gen. 49:25-26(

Why did Jacob claim that his blessings were superior to those of his parents?

What did he mean by the phrase "until the desired hills of eternity"?

Blessings from Above

The blessings of Abraham and Sarah were realized in miracles that God performed for them: a son born to them at an advanced age; and God's protection when Sarah was kidnapped. Isaac and Rebecca were similarly blessed with miraculous intervention in their interaction with the Philistine king Abimelech.

Jacob prayed that his son would similarly be blessed with Divine protection when needed. This is what he meant by *"blessings of heaven above."*

Blessings in the World Below

However, Jacob added that his blessings should also be manifested within the realm of the physical world. He emphasized that they should be *"blessings of the abyss lying beneath."*

This is truly an amazing blessing, one reflecting a higher level of spiritual influence. Unlike miracles that disrupt the world's natural order, Jacob prayed that Joseph would merit a life where the physical world is elevated, and God's blessings are evident in the natural world.

In fact, Jacob's blessing is a vision of the World to Come. He foresaw a world beyond simple miracles, a world whose material boundaries continually expand. Thus Jacob described his blessing as one of unending heights: *"until the desired hills of eternity."*

This blessing is a vision of a future world: a universe characterized by eternal ascent, able to accept infinite light.

)Adapted from *Olat Re'iyah* vol. II, p. 203.
<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAYEHI58.htm>

Family, Faith and Freedom (5780)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The family is where love brings new life into the world. That in itself makes it the most spiritual of all institutions. It is also where we have our most important and lasting moral education. To quote Harvard political scientist, the late James Q. Wilson, the family is “an arena in which conflicts occur and must be managed.” People within the family “love and quarrel, share and sulk, please and disappoint.” Families, he says, “are the world in which we shape and manage our emotions.”]1[

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James Q. Wilson put it beautifully:

"We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former's affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter's tests, judgements, and demands."^{6]} James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, Free Press, 1993, p. 163.

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

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

FOOTNOTES:

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

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

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

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

[5] *Democracy in America*, 340.

Around the Sabbath Table:

[1] What important lessons can we learn from our families and family tensions?

[2] Why does the Torah spend a whole book on Abraham and his family?

[3] Why do you think family is such a central value in Judaism?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/family-faith-and-freedom/>

Don't Write the Obituary Just Yet!

By Yossi Goldman * © Chabad 2023

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

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

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

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

"Sir, the Paper does not make mistakes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The driver smiled.

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

"Of course," replied my friend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 49:33.

2. Taanit 5b.

* Founding Rabbi of the first Chabad in South Africa)1976(. Now Rabbi Emeritus for life of the Sydenham Shul.

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

Vayechi: Our Essence Remains Intact

by Rabbi Moshe Wisniewsky *

Our Essence Remains Intact

Joseph bound the sons of Israel by an oath, saying "G-d will deliver you, and you must take up my bones from here.")Gen. 50:25(

The word for "bones")עצמות(in Hebrew also means "essence")עצמות(.

Allegorically, placing Joseph's bones safely in a coffin, where they will remain intact throughout the Egyptian exile, alludes to how our Divine essence always remains intact, impervious to any corruption or dilution that might conceivably result from our prolonged stay in exile.

Our incorruptible Divine essence is, first of all, our promise that, like Joseph, we will ultimately leave exile and proceed to the Promised Land. But moreover, it is our inspiration to resist the enticements of materiality in order to remain true to our true selves, thereby hastening our own personal redemption as well as that of the entire world.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3

May G-d grant a swift, miraculous and complete victory over our enemies.

Gut Shabbos and a bright and joyous Chanukah,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

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5784 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

On not Predicting the Future

Jacob was on his death-bed. He summoned his children. He wanted to bless them before he died. But the text begins with a strange semi-repetition: "Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel." Gen. 49:1-2

This seems to be saying the same thing twice, with one difference. In the first sentence, there is a reference to "what will happen to you in the days to come" (literally, "at the end of days"). This is missing from the second sentence.

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

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

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

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

Astonishingly, given the many centuries of Jewish suffering, biblical Hebrew has no word for tragedy. The word *ason* means "a mishap, a

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

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

There is a classic example of this in Tanach. "In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The Prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, 'This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.' Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 'Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: 'Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people: This is what the Lord, God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you.'" 2 Kings 20:1-5; Isaiah 38:1-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

We are free because we are not merely objects. We are subjects. We respond not just to physical events but to the way we perceive those events. We have minds, not just brains. We have thoughts, not just sensations. We react

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but we can also choose not to react. There is something about us that is irreducible to material, physical causes and effects.

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

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

The proof is the Jewish people itself. The first reference to Israel outside the Bible is engraved on the Merneptah stele, inscribed around 1225 BCE by Pharaoh Merneptah IV, Ramses II’s successor. It reads: “Israel is laid waste, her seed is no more.”

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

That is why, when Jacob wanted to tell his children what would happen to them in the future, the Divine Spirit was taken away from him. Our children continue to surprise us, as we continue to surprise others. Made in the image of God, we are free. Sustained by the blessings of God, we can become greater than anyone, even ourselves, could foresee. [5776] 1] Rashi to Gen. 49:1; Pesachim 56a; Bereishit Rabbah 99:5. [2] Brachot 10a.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

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

The petty rivalries have been laid aside, the storm and drang of exiles, wars, famines and inter-sibling savagery unto death have seemingly been forgotten; a divided family torn asunder by jealousies and ambitions is turning into a nascent nation, united—if only during this brief period—by their aged Patriarch, whose last words are presenting the

blueprint for the Divine destiny set aside for the purveyors of the Abrahamic blessing, that all the families on earth will be blessed with peace because of this unique nation.

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

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

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

Now that it’s Jacob’s turn to bestow material blessings and Messianic birthright, I would have thought that he, of all people, based on his own experience, would have given both gifts to the same favored and beloved wise son of his old age, to the son of his most beloved Rachel, to Joseph. But no, Jacob does what his father Isaac had thought to do initially: He creates a division between the physical blessings and the spiritual birthright. He bequeaths the blessings of heavenly rain and earthly produce, innumerable seed and a double tribal portion of land, and even the mighty bow of vanquishing warfare upon the financially adept Grand Vizier, Joseph (Gen. 48:22- 49:26) and he awards dominion over the family, the majestic and spiritual birthright of King Messiah, the recipient of fraternal fealty as well as peaceful homage from the ingathering of all of the nations, to the ba’al

Likutei Divrei Torah

teshuva (penitent) Judah. Why does Jacob revert to the concept of Isaac rather than to that of Rebekah, the mother who so adored him? You will remember that the victory of Rebekah over Isaac may have been short-lived. Jacob was plagued by his deception of his father until his dying day. Almost from the moment he left his father’s house for Laban-land, his mother’s brother substituted his elder daughter for her younger sister under the marriage canopy with the prescient words, “It is not the practice in our place to give the younger before the elder,” and not only his ten sons but even his beloved Joseph deceived him—the ten brothers with the bloody coat and Joseph with his garb of Grand Vizier.

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

Moreover, when the head of a family must decide upon who is to be the real continuator of his legacy, he must choose the individual child who most represents the major ideals and goals to which the family is dedicated.

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

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

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Shechina Is Not Only Present at the Kosel

Chazal say that the reason Yaakov Avinu bowed towards the head of the bed (Bereshit 47:31) is because the Shechina (Divine Presence) is present above the head of a sick person. For that reason, despite the fact that he was sick and weak, Yaakov Avinu turned around and bowed towards the head of his bed.

I saw an interesting observation in a sefer called Tiv haTorah: Why is it that the Shechinah is on the top of the bed of a sick

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

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

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

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

Never Forgetting to be Appreciative

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

However, it is striking to realize that this is occurring seventeen years after Yaakov Avinu was reunited with Yosef, upon his arrival in Mitzrayim! Yet seventeen years later, Yaakov Avinu is still commenting to Yosef that he never expected to see him. In Parshas VaYigash, Yaakov tells Pharaoh he is 130

years old (Bereshis 47:9). Yaakov is now 147. So why is Yaakov suddenly saying here "I did not even expect to see you, Hashem has been so good to me that He has shown me also your children"? That is old news! Why does he mention it now?

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

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

The pasuk is saying that for Yaakov Avinu, despite the fact that this happened seventeen years ago, he was in constant thanksgiving mode to the Ribono shel Olam every single day. He is still thanking Hashem for what happened when he first came to Egypt. It was constantly on his mind!

Understanding Yaakov's Bracha to Yosef

The following is an observation I heard in the name of Rav Shmuel Berenbaum, z"l, the Rosh Yeshiva in the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn, NY.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Of all communal organisations, which are the most sacred? In Parshat Vayechi, we read how Yaakov was preparing for his death. He told Yosef his son, "Ve'asita imadi chessed v'emet." – "Please practise kindness and truth with me when I have passed away." (Bereishit 47:29)

Now, what did Yaakov mean? Chessed, lovingkindness, infers going the extra mile in order to engage in acts of compassion. Emet, truth, means that you must do what is right, and that is all. So, on the one hand he's saying, 'do the right thing,' while on the other hand he's saying, 'go the extra mile.'

Sefer Panim Yafot explains beautifully. Yaakov was saying to Yosef that he should do what is right, the emet: in this case, as a child, he would have a responsibility to bury his father. In addition to that, Yaakov was saying, "I would love you to engage in chessed." – I would love you to go the extra mile in order to take my remains back to the Holy Land so that I can be buried together with my ancestors.

This term, 'chedsed v'emet' is the slogan of every single Chevra Kadisha organisation in the world. Indeed it is the Chevra Kadisha (translated as Sacred Society) which, to my mind, is definitely the most precious of all of our communal organisations: simply

extraordinary men and women who in their separate divisions look after people once they have physically passed away.

Within our communities, we are blessed to have their 'chedsed v'emet.' First of all, they do what is right, to guarantee that every person will have a burial, and in addition, the chessed that they apply, their acts of lovingkindness, going the extra mile with such devotion to those who have passed away and to their families, is always something very remarkable for us to witness. Their kindness is of the ultimate form because the person to whom they are showing kindness will not be able to repay it in any way. It's absolutely sincere – it comes from the heart and it is in the finest tradition and spirit of our faith.

You probably don't even know who the members of your Chevra Kadisha are. That's the spirit in which they are operating. They don't do it for any thanks, but let's ensure, as communities, that we do always express our full gratitude to these most wonderful people.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Yaakov's Blessing to Shimon and Levi Rabbi David Basok

In every community or group, there often exists some form of disparity or division of sorts between the leadership and the public. The same goes for rabbis and their congregations. When it comes to emissary work abroad, this disparity may seem all the greater, leaving the emissary with a sense of loneliness and incompetence. In smaller communities in particular, where most of the congregants do not live a Torah life, the emissary-rabbi and his family often feel like they are the only ones who keep the flame of Jewish tradition burning. Even if the emissary-couple doesn't say it out loud, their children will often walk around with the feeling that their family is "the crazy one". Such thoughts may evoke questions like: Are we not too extreme? Do we belong here? Why are we doing this? At such moments, I look to Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's beautiful commentary on the portion of Vayechi, and the way in which it highlights the importance of emissary work.

Towards the end of his days, Yaakov gathers all his sons around him and blesses them. Each one of the sons receives a unique and personal blessing: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is it that their father spoke unto them and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them" (Bereishit 49:28).

However, hiding between the lines of blessings are some very harsh words. In fact, some of the sons seem to have received curses from their own father. The exegetes offer different commentaries on the words of Yaakov to Reuven, Shimon and Levi. "Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Yaakov, and

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scatter them in Israel!" (ibid. verse 7). Are these words of rebuke? Perhaps they speak of reward and punishment? Or is there a blessing hiding somewhere in between the words of reprimand?

According to many of the commentaries (Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Sforno and Rashbam), Yaakov is indeed angry with his sons for their conduct with Shechem, and punishes them by dispersing them throughout Israel and by not giving them an inheritance of their own, unlike the other tribes. The tribe of Levi was scattered across 48 different cities, and the tribe of Shimon received his portion within the portion of Yehuda and was not considered a tribe unto itself.

Rashi explains that the fact that the sons of the tribe of Shimon were tasked with the education of the people, and thus became teachers, was part of their punishment – their vocation forcing them to wander from place to place. Similarly, the Levites had to wander from field to field to collect their tithes.

However, some of the exegetes viewed this "dispersion" in a positive light. The Ohr HaChayim, for instance, explains that the very fact that Yaakov criticizes his sons is a blessing, for it would lead them to mend their ways and merit future blessing. Rabeinu Bachya explains that "their dispersal among the People of Israel and the fact that they instructed the people was of great benefit to the nation." In other words, the fact that the sons of Shimon taught young children was a blessing rather than a curse. The same is true of the fact that there was Levite presence in the cities of all the tribes.

The Kli Yakar writes at great length about an important educational principle. The actions of Shimon and Levi were severe and negative and warranted Yaakov's denunciation. That said, the values which triggered their actions also have a rightful place in this world. When impertinence and obstinacy come together in high quantities, they become dangerous and negative. However, when these traits are present in good measure, they have a positive dimension.

Sometimes one needs that daring and impertinence (for instance, "Make yourself as courageously strong as a leopard" – Pirkei Avot). In other instances, stubbornness is the trait that saves the day ("let God walk in our midst for it is a stiff-necked people"). Hence, these qualities should be distributed among the People of Israel. This dissemination is not a punishment; rather – it is a rectification. According to this interpretation, Yaakov did, in fact, bless his sons. Sometimes the blessing is simply pointing a person in the direction of the path which would best help him fulfill his calling, or teaching him how to go about realizing his full potential in the optimal way.

This educational message is further developed by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, as he discusses the powerful notion of shlichut, its essence and the role of emissaries in every generation wherever they may be. He goes on to explain that zealotry and radicalism are dangerous when exercised by a strong and unified nation; however, in the Diaspora, the situation is different. When Jews are in exile, the hardships they encounter prevent spiritual upliftment which may lead to a loss of Jewish identity. A Jew living in the Diaspora requires a certain measure of pride and fervor in order to preserve some measure of national pride.

"It was therefore essential to 'divide them in Yaakov'. It was an act of kindness and justice to the People of Israel to disperse the tribes of Shimon and Levi among the other Tribes of Israel. For the natural consequence of this was that even after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and its devastating downfall, and even throughout the numerous exiles that followed suit, the sons of Shimon and Levi were always present and never disappeared. They were there to teach and stimulate the Jewish mind; they were there to infuse courage in the Jewish heart; instill daring, enthusiasm and encourage the Jewish genius. Because of their actions, the Jewish spirit never ceased to exist, even when the Kingdom of Israel no longer existed."

Even in our times, when we are fortunate enough to have a vibrant Jewish State, we still need a spirit that will infuse us with strength and courage, enthusiasm and perseverance. These qualities may sometimes appear like madness, and yet we know they are able to impact an entire community. Yaakov sends out Shimon and Levi to live among the entire People of Israel. These enthusiasts become the teachers and the rabbis of each and every community. These are the people that pull communities upwards.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky Guided by Our Essence

Yaakov gathers his children around him and tells them, "Gather around and I will tell you what is going to happen to you at the end of days". Rashi explains that Yaakov wanted to tell them about moshiah's coming, but the Divine Presence left him and therefore he started saying "other things". This is baffling. First of all, why did Yaakov want to tell them when moshiah will come? What would be gained by them knowing? Secondly, was gathering them around and giving them a blessing just a "consolation prize" of some sort?

Let us try to understand what it is that Yaakov wishes to accomplish by having them know when moshiah is coming. Yaakov is dying, and his children are taking over; they are embarking on a journey towards some goal. The goal of Israel's journey is to bring everything to its final tikkun, i.e. to recreate the world in the mode of perfection that it was

before Adam ruined it with his sin. When a person is heading out on a journey, it is imperative that he know his destination. It is precarious to embark on a journey when one does not know where one is going; only once we know the destination do we know how to direct ourselves. So too, before Israel is departing on that great journey towards changing the world and bringing it back to its pristine state, Yaakov wants to establish the point of destination. So now the question is: why, indeed, did Hashem stop him? How will they know how to proceed?

The Torah then says that Yaakov blessed them, "with the blessing that each one received". Rashi explains that he blessed them "with the blessing that each one is going to get". What does that mean? Of course, he blessed them with the blessing that they will receive! The answer is that Yaakov looked into the essence of each one of the shevatim and divined what his personal destination would be, based on his particular talents, abilities, and personality. In other words, Yaakov was taking a second approach to how one finds a destination. If a person needs to go to a specific place, then the only way he can get there is by asking where exactly to go. But imagine a person has been sent off on a mysterious military mission. He examines the equipment and provisions he was given, and, if he's astute, he can deduce the destination from that alone. For instance, if he was given heavy fur clothing then he can surmise that he is going someplace cold, while if he was giving swimming gear, he can surmise that he is going to some seaside, and so on.

HKB"H sent us out on a journey and He gave us the equipment that we need to get our destination. Each tribe had their own particular talents, abilities, and assets, and by looking deeply into them, Yaakov could figure out where they were going and how to get there. There is a similar concept that is spoken about in the sifrei Kabbalah which is expressed in two terms. One expression is that, "the end is attached to the beginning". That means that the end of the journey is a return to its very [conceptual] beginning. Thus, a person first thinks or visualizes a place that he would like to go to, and then embarks on the journey. The place one arrived at the end was really in his mind at the very beginning. Thus, seeing with what we are living and what's deep inside us, we will get to know where we're meant to end up.

We express a similar idea on Shabbos when we daven kabbalas shabbas. In Lecha Dodi we say "sof maaseh b'machashava techilla", i.e. the end of the action was really rooted in the beginning of the thought. This means that despite the fact that Shabbos is at the end of creation - or rather because of that - it was the first thing that Hashem thought of. Shabbos is the reason for creation, while the weekdays are the way in which we move forward toward Shabbos. When we've come

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to Shabbos at the end of the week, we've really come home to that which Hashem had in mind before He started the creation.

This is really a most important perspective on the concept of moshiah. The Rambam has two fascinating observations about the era of moshiah: he writes that there are many midrashim about what it will look like, and he tells us not to delve into them, because we really won't understand them and we don't gain anything by doing so. That would seem to indicate that we have no idea of where we're headed which, in turn, makes it difficult to strive for geula and moshiah, since we seemingly don't know what we're striving for. But the Rambam starts the halachos relating to moshiah with the fact that moshiah is a king who will return the monarchy of David to Israel, along with the Beis Hamikdash, the Sanhedrin, etc. If we wish to know what is it that moshiah will bring to us at the end of days, we need to reflect on what it is that we had at the beginning of days, and understand that this is what's going to be actualized.

This is something that is applicable to all of our strivings. Yaakov was taught, and teaches us, that to get to the destination one has to know where one is going to. But we know where we're going, not because of some revelation or some flash of light and dazzlement. Rather, we search deeply into ourselves and into the roots of Klal Yisroel, and understand that from there we will draw out what it takes to get to our destination. Digging deeply into ourselves and into the Torah that we got at Sinai will guide us to our destination - the times of moshiah.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

A Work in Progress

A charming son is Yosef, a son charming to the eye; [of the] women, [each one] strode along to see him. They heaped bitterness upon him and became quarrelsome; yea, archers despised him. (Breishis 49:22-23)

a son charming to the eye: His charm attracts the eye that beholds him... of the] women, [each one] strode along to see him: The women of Egypt strode out on the wall to gaze upon his beauty... and became quarrelsome: His brothers became his antagonists... Rashi

One thing is abundantly clear from even a superficial review of Birchas Yaakov, Yaakov's Blessing to his children immediately before his death. A Brocho, a blessing is not a general fantasy wish for another person, like, "I hope you find a winning lottery ticket in the parking lot!"

After many years I am convinced that the greatest gift that you can give another person is not to import something from the outside but to show them the importance of what's on the inside, to show someone the power of their potential and to help them begin to mine out

their latent talents. That way they can develop themselves and be a blessing to others, and that may just be the biggest blessing.

Yosef is hit with two contrasting descriptions in the first two out of three lines of father's "Brocho". On the one hand he is recognized as a literal rockstar. There's no other way to describe the charisma and natural energy that Yosef generated wherever he went. He was charming and beautiful and electric. Women struggled just to get a glimpse of him. He was awesomeness on display and naturally so.

On the other hand, he is told in the very next verse that his brothers hated him. What's that about? It's like a "good news bad news joke".

What is he to do with this combination of information that his father is feeding him in the last moments of his life? Yes, Yosef was both a rockstar and he was hated. What's the message for Yosef and for us?

Years back we had the Great honor and privilege to do a Rosh Hashanah program for three years in a row with Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski. I remember him telling us at that time that he did not write some fifty books, he wrote one book fifty different ways. All of the books were about one subject, "self-esteem". I asked him, "What's self-esteem?" He answered in a heartbeat, "Healthy self-esteem means seeing your good points and bad points simultaneously."

I realized that the operative word is "simultaneously". If somebody only sees their good points then they are at risk of becoming haughty, perhaps a narcissistic personality. If they only see their bad points, then they will tend to be depressed and give up and fail before even trying. If one sees their good points and then their bad points alternately, then they are manic, taking off for flight and then crashing and burning again and again. But if somebody sees their bad points and they're good points simultaneously then they never get too low because they always know that they have something special to offer and they never get too high because they understand that they have faults and foibles. I saw a phrase that caught my eye and stayed with me. It goes like this, "I can be both a masterpiece and a work in progress at the same time!"

The Maharal explains that water is the model of Chomer – Materialism. It takes on the shape of whatever vessel holds it. It has no form of its own. People with lower self-esteem are fluid and are easily influenced by their surroundings. They care too much about what other people think about them.

Someone with a healthy self-image gives shape to the environment around him because they have their own positive sense of self. Perhaps that was Yosef's source of finding favor in the eyes of so many people. In spite of the fact that people hated him he remained

himself. Now, in order to preserve that healthy sense of self he also needed to hear that people hated him. It was a large serving of humble pie, and a helpful reminder that he and we are both a masterpiece and a work in progress.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perz

Speaking to the Heart

There is something that Yosef (Joseph) does at the end of the parasha (and the Book of Bereishit) that our Sages see as a tremendous example of kindness and sensitivity – an example par excellence of how all of us should behave.

There is a concept of being concerned and sensitive to the needs and views of others. Look how sensitive Yosef is: Yosef and his brothers are returning from the burial of Ya'akov (Jacob) their father, and the brothers were concerned that now their father had died it would perhaps be a time that Yosef would get even with them, or even G-d forbid kill them, for the terrible sin of selling Yosef. It seems that they believed that as long as their father was alive Yosef wouldn't do it but that after he passed away perhaps he would.

Our Sages ask what brought on the brothers to think this now, after all these years with Yosef, 17 years since they arrived in Egypt, that now he would exact revenge. They give a number of answers, and one given in the Midrash Tanchuma is that the brothers saw Yosef stopping at the pit that they had thrown him in, where he offered a prayer, reflecting (actually saying a beracha) that Hashem had saved him in this place.

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

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

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

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

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We are not allowed to remind a person of their prior bad deeds, to conjure up images which will make them feel bad. Yosef does more than that. He goes out of his way to lay their minds to rest, to assure them that he has completely forgiven them, even though it was still gnawing at them decades later. What kindness and sensitivity!

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

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's

Derashot Ledorot

Struggle and Triumph; A Study in Jewish Character

Throughout the life of Jacob, Joseph was the undisputed favorite amongst his sons. And in today's portion, when we read of Jacob about to close his eyes forever, Joseph still seems to be the favorite recipient of Jacob's paternal love and affection. With all his sons gathered about him to bid him a final farewell, Jacob has only the most generous sentiments to offer to Joseph. "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain." He offers his beloved son the blessings of the God of his father, the blessing of heaven above and "blessings of the deep that couches beneath." He tells him that "the blessings of thy father are mighty beyond the blessings of my ancestors unto the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills; they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the prince amongst his brethren." And yet despite all this unquestioned and unquestioning love, the careful student of the Torah notices something strange. And that is, that the greatest prize that Jacob had to offer, the most significant reward that he had to bestow upon one of his children, was given not to Joseph but to another of his sons. The prize of Malkhut, of kingdom or leadership, that of being the chief of the brothers, went to Judah.

Why is this? Why, despite all the genuine love that the father felt for Joseph, did he give the gift of royalty to Judah?

Allow me to share with you this morning an answer given by one of the distinguished Jewish thinkers of our generation, my own revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

Joseph and Judah are two archetypes, they represent two totally different character types. Joseph is, as our rabbis called him, Yosef ha-Tzaddik--Joseph the pious, the righteous. He is a man who from his earliest childhood had in him ingrained virtue, inherent piety, naturally good habits. His moral and ethical goals and code were evident to him from his earliest infancy. And he had no doubt but that he would follow them.

Judah presents quite another picture. His way in life, especially his moral life, was not so smooth. He found that he had to struggle with

himself, that he was constantly and unceasingly engaged in an inner battle. He realized that innately and naturally he was possessed of certain destructive tendencies and that only by warring against these original inclinations could he ultimately triumph over them and arrive at a state of decency and honorableness.

Just compare them. When Joseph finally meets his brothers, seeing them for the first time after their treachery towards him, there is no feeling of vengeance within his heart. On the contrary--he ultimately acts towards them in a fatherly manner. Yet how did Judah act towards Joseph when Joseph was in dire straits and at the mercy of his brothers? True, Judah did not favor the murder of Joseph. But neither did he plead for his liberation. Instead he said, Mah betza ki naharog et achinu--what profit will it be for us if we will kill our brother; better, let us sell him. So incensed were the sages of Israel at this crass materialistic attitude of Judah that they applied to him the words of David: Botzeia berekh, nietz hashem--whoever praises this profit-seeker or compromiser, blasphemes the Lord.

Or compare their moral characters. Joseph, despite his youth and despite his distance from his father, finds that in this strange land when he is seduced by the wife of Potiphar, he can easily resist the temptation. He is a model of good behavior and decency even if it costs him his freedom. And yet how disturbed are we every year when in the same portion that we read of Joseph's moral heroism, we read of Judah's moral failure. Judah has no compunctions about consorting with a harlot who he later discovers to be his daughter-in-law, Tamar. It is a revelation to us of an inherently immoral streak in the character of Judah.

And yet, ultimately, despite the great differences in innate character, Judah rises very high indeed. On both counts that we have mentioned, he pleads guilty. He freely confesses, and offers to make amends to the best of his ability. He thus transcends his original limitations. Judah struggles--and triumphs! And at long last, after a long episode of inner struggle, he arrives at the Tzidkut of Joseph, the level of righteousness with which his younger brother was born.

And it is just because of this reason that Judah receives from his father the gift of Malkhut, of leadership. The ability to lead men and guide them through their daily toils and prosaic woes, through the labyrinthian channels of ordinary experience, is usually the possession of one who has himself experienced failure, who has learned to wrestle with his natural limitations and to overcome them, who has learned how to struggle and triumph. One who, like Joseph, is born a Tzaddik, a saint, who is from the beginning perfection itself--that kind of person may fail to appreciate the heroism required of his more human followers. And if he cannot appreciate the effort that he demands of them, then he is incapable of true leadership.

It is Maimonides in the seventh chapter of "The Laws of Repentance" who has formulated this principle as a part of our Halacha: Amru Chachamim: Makom she-baalei teshuva omdim ein tzadikim gemurim yekholim la'amod bo--mipnei she-hem kovshim et yitzram yoter me-hem. "Our sages said: The repentant individual stands on a higher level than one who is completely righteous from the beginning--for the repentant one has had to apply a greater degree of control and suppression of his initial evil inclinations." What God wants is not only the final good deed, but also the dynamic process of achieving the good deed by having the Yetzer ha-Tov, the inclination towards good, engage the Yetzer ha-Ra, the evil inclination, in a life and death struggle--and ultimately triumph over it.

And perhaps we might even find that these two different basic character types of Joseph and Judah come to them by heredity from their respectful mothers. Joseph is the son of Rachel, of whom it is written that she was Yefat toar vi-yefat mareh-- beautiful of figure and beautiful of appearance. She easily and quickly won the heart of her husband. She found that she had to exert no effort but that from the very beginning she was able to gain the love of Jacob. Whereas Judah is the son of Leah, of whom it is written: V'einei Leah rakkot--the eyes of Leah were red. And as the Targum explained, they were red from weeping. She cried in protest of her bitter fate. She had to undergo an excruciatingly long struggle to win her husband's heart. With every child she bore him she gave the child a name which in some measure reflected her conscious or unconscious frustration and hope. She had to overcome her initial plainness of appearance and lack of brilliant charm, that her sister did have, in order to arrive at a state of happiness.

And if we now analyze the character of the Jewish people, we will find that our people have been more the descendants of Judah than of Joseph. We Jews have never maintained a feeling of radical superiority, that we are born perfect and remain perfect. Just read through all the writings of our prophets and you will see emphasized again and again a constant reproach against our people for their stubbornness and stiff-neckedness, for their tendency to backslide and slip once again into the clutches of paganism. We are very, very far from perfect. But that is precisely why we have a Torah: to train and guide and teach us, to be a weapon in our struggle with our more base nature. The Torah has been the historic character building program of the Jewish people. No wonder the Talmud says, in a surprising turn of phrase, that Lamah nitnah Torah le-yisrael, mipnei she-hem azzin she-b'umot-- "Why was the Torah given only to Israel and not to other nations?--because Israel is the most impudent of all peoples." God wanted to teach the world the value of Torah. So he gave Torah to an impudent people, a people whose basic nature was coarse, to show that Torah can ultimately retrain, reguide and transform this character into something noble

Likutei Divrei Torah

and something elevating. It is because of Torah that we have developed eventually a kind of collective character that will not permit us to perform the kind of genocide that other people have proven capable of. It is because of Torah that our people are so committed to racial equality. It is because of Torah that our people are such impassioned champions of social justice. It is not because we always were so--but because Torah has trained us how to struggle and how, ultimately, to triumph.

How important that idea is for each and every one of us here today. Who knows, perhaps there is someone here who in some ways is like Joseph: a Tzaddik, one who is naturally predisposed to the right way, the decent action, the honorable course. I dare say, however, that most of us are normal human beings, endowed with normal failings and natural human inadequacies. And yet--we are descended from Leah and Judah, we are the people of Torah. We must learn to struggle, to triumph, to overcome, and to build our characters.

Perhaps there is someone here who naturally is indolent--let us call it by its usual name: lazy. To him or to her the Sedrah says: By sheer will power you can overcome that native aspect of your character.

Perhaps there is someone here who is given to the sharp word, the razor-edged phrase, the biting rejoinder. To him Torah says: You can learn the art of being gentle and soft.

Perhaps there is someone who is given to an uncontrolled temper, to falling into a rage. Our Sedrah tells him this morning: There is no excuse for temper. With training, you can learn how to control it.

This indeed is one of the most significant and effective techniques yet developed in our Jewish ethical literature, especially that of Hasidism. R. Elimelech of Lizensk has taught the principle of Shevirat ha-ratzon; the breaking of one's own will. The only way to transform one's character, to elevate one's own inner nature, is by going on a conscious and concerted campaign against it. For indolence, Rabbi Elimelech suggests a campaign for forty days in which one rises an hour earlier than usual, reads half an hour longer than his normal span, and gets himself to perform more and more of the tasks that he ordinarily neglected. If one starts like Judah, but also wants to conclude like Judah, the way is: Shevirat ha-ratzon. The man of biting sarcasm must undertake consciously a generous attitude and generous word. The man of temper must expose himself to provocative situations and still retain his equanimity. Shevirat ha-ratzon is the way for an imperfect Judah--it is not needed by the already perfect Joseph. What Judah teaches us, and what every true leader must understand, appreciate, and have experienced himself, is--that wilful, purposive improvement of character is possible; that it is not impossible to transform one's initial personality and change it for the better. It is not only not impossible--it is absolutely mandatory.

And how encouraging to know that not only Leah and Judah, but throughout history this

streak of character of Judah has been uppermost in the life of our people. Just look at David, who achieved Malkhut by virtue of his descent from Judah. Here was a man who had raging within himself almost uncontrollable passion. The immoral and the saintly were engaged in a life and death struggle. And despite initial imperfections and later failures, what ultimately triumphed was the soul of the sweet singer of Israel.

As a matter of fact, many sources in our traditional Jewish literature speak not of one Messiah in the future, but of two. They are: Messiah Ben Joseph--the Messiah who will be descended from the tribe of Joseph, and Messiah Ben David--the Messiah descended from David and the tribe of Judah. Messiah Ben Joseph, our tradition tells us, will come first--but he will soon be killed by the enemy in the great struggle preceding the Messianic Age. Messiah Ben David will come later, lead his people in the great battle, and ultimately triumph and survive. Messiah Ben Joseph, representing the pure, the noble and the perfect, will find that despite all the loftiness for which he stands, he cannot survive in the battles of real life. Messiah Ben David, descended from David and from Judah--two people who began life as failure and learned to overcome their inner limitations--he, with this kind of experience in his blood and in his genes, will learn how to lead his tired and weary people to great historic victories which will usher in the Utopia of all history.

Jewish character has always been formed, not found; molded, not inherited. Jewish virtue is something you must build, not expect to be born with. Persistence and perseverance have been our own way to make up for initial imperfection.

Yehudah, ata yodukha achekha--O, Jew, you who follows the footsteps of father Judah: Only by the same way of Shevirat ha-ratzon, of breaking your own original will for evil, of rising above original infirmities, of struggle and triumph, will you earn the gratitude of a world of men and women who will have learned from you how to transcend the weakness of soul and how to attain moral, ethical and spiritual greatness.

For this is the secret and the goal of Jewish Malkhut, Jewish leadership in the world of men.

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Weekly Parsha VAYECHI Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The conclusion of the book of Bereshith reaches its climax this week with the recording for us of the death of our father Yaakov and of Yosef. The era of the founders of our people ended in relative tranquility and contentment, albeit on foreign soil. It will be a long and arduous journey for the descendants of Yaakov to return home to the Land of Israel.

A dark and forbidding era is about to begin but, though still in the future, it was foretold already many years earlier to our father Avraham. From the simple meaning of the words of the Torah, it is apparent that the family of Yaakov found themselves comfortable and well settled in their home in Goshen.

The promise of Yosef that the Lord would take them forth from Egypt was certainly remembered and passed on from one generation to the next. Nevertheless there was no sense of immediacy regarding this promise and its fulfillment, and the Jews would view Egypt as their home rather than the Land of Israel for a long time.

They hastened to return home after burying Yaakov in the Cave of Machpela, seeing Egypt as their home and the Land of Israel as a far distant goal and dream that would somehow eventually be realized but that had no immediate bearing on their day-to-day living.

This attitude remained constant throughout the long history of the Jewish people and of its various exiles, in Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, Europe and today the entire world, outposts that have hosted and still host the Jewish people in our far-flung diaspora. The Jewish people were never in a hurry to leave any of these places and to return to the Land of Israel. This still seems to be the case in our time as well.

It is difficult to understand why the holy family of Yaakov seems so passive and unresponsive in relation to the Land of Israel. There are commentators who state that they were aware of the heavenly decree that they would have to be strangers in a strange land for many centuries and that they accepted their lot and decided to make the best of it under the circumstances.

However, as Maimonides points out regarding the Egyptian enslavement of the Jewish people, Egypt was not preordained to be the oppressor and enslaver of Israel. And, it was also apparently not preordained that those early generations of Jews living in Egypt were to fulfill the vision of Avraham to be strangers and slaves in a land that did not belong to them. Apparently according to Maimonides the Egyptians had a choice as to whether to enslave the Jews, and the Jews before their enslavement occurred had an equal choice of leaving Egypt and returning to their ancestral home in the Land of Israel.

However we will deal with this baffling issue, there is no question that this represents a template for all later Jewish exiles and for Diaspora Jewry in all times and places. Apparently only tragedy moves the Jewish people...and throughout our history tragedies abound. Let us hope that somehow history does not repeat itself in our time as well.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Grandparents VAYECHI Rabbi Jonathan Sachs

Every Friday night we re-enact one of the most moving scenes in the book of Bereishit. Jacob, reunited with Joseph, is ill. Joseph comes to visit him, bring bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob, with deep emotion, says:

"I never expected to see you again, and now God has shown me your children as well."

Gen. 48:11 He blesses Joseph. Then he places his hands on the heads of the two boys.

He blessed them that day and said, "[In the time to come] Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

Gen. 48:20 So we do to this day, with these very words. Why this blessing above all others? One commentator (Yalkut Yehudah) says it is because Ephraim and Manasseh were the first two Jewish children born in exile. So Jewish parents bless their children asking God to help them keep their identity intact despite all the temptations and distractions of Diaspora life.

I heard however a most lovely explanation, based on the Zohar, from my revered predecessor Lord Jakobovits of blessed memory. He said that though there are many instances in Torah and Tanach in which parents bless their children, this is the only example of a grandparent blessing grandchildren.

Between parents and children, he said, there are often tensions. Parents worry about their children. Children sometimes rebel against their parents. The relationship is not always smooth.

Not so with grandchildren. There the relationship is one of love untroubled by tension or anxiety. When a grandparent blesses a grandchild they do so with a full heart. That is why this blessing by Jacob to his grandchildren became the model of blessing across the generations. Anyone who has had the privilege of having grandchildren will immediately understand the truth and depth of this explanation.

Grandparents bless their grandchildren and are blessed by them. This phenomenon is the subject of a fascinating difference of opinion between the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud Yerushalmi. The Babylonian Talmud says the following:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "Whoever teaches their grandchildren Torah is regarded as if they had received the Torah from Mount Sinai, as it is said, 'Teach your children and your children's children.'"

Deut. 4:10-11; Kiddushin 30a The Talmud Yerushalmi puts it differently. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi used to listen, every Friday, to his grandson reciting the weekly parsha. One week he entered the bathhouse, and after he had begun bathing he remembered that he had not yet heard the weekly parsha from his grandson. So he immediately got up to leave the bathhouse... They asked him why he was leaving in the middle of his bathing, since the Mishnah teaches that once you have begun bathing on a Friday afternoon, you should not interrupt the process. He replied, "Is this such a small thing in your eyes? For whoever hears the parsha from his grandchild is as if he heard it directly from Mount Sinai" (Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:2).

According to the Talmud Bavli, it is a great privilege to teach your grandchildren Torah. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, the greatest privilege is to have your grandchildren teach Torah to you. This is one argument about which no grandparent will have the slightest difficulty saying that both are true.

My late father, of blessed memory, had to leave school at the age of 14 to begin working to support his family, and as a result he never had the full Jewish or secular education that he would have wanted. I remember from my childhood that – as we walked home from shul on a Shabbat morning – I would be full of questions. "Dad, why do we do this?" "Why did we do that?" My father always gave me the same answer, and that was the answer that changed my life. He said, "Jonathan, I didn't have a Jewish education, so I can't answer your questions. But one day, you will have the education that I didn't have. And when that happens, you will teach me the answers to those questions."

The greatest gift you can give a child or a grandchild is what you empower and allow them to teach you. As parents, we strive to give our children everything. There's one thing we sometimes forget to give them which is the chance for them to give something to us. And that, frankly, is the most important thing there is.

Give your children and your grandchildren the space to give to you. Let them become your teachers and let them be your inspiration. In doing so you will help them become the people that they were destined to be, and you will help create the blessings God wants them to become.

With an exquisite sense of symmetry, just as we begin Shabbat with a grandparent's blessing so we end it, in Maariv, with the words:

May you live to see your children's children – peace be on Israel.

The Holy Ones and Their Families Revivim

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Anyone killed defending the nation and the Land is called holy * Thanks to them, life in this world continues and intensifies * A soldier killed by friendly fire is also considered holy to the same degree * Enlisting in the army is one of the most important and fundamental commandments in the Torah * The holy ones who sacrificed their lives, represent the highest level of loving God, and are in a world that is all good * The soldiers who sacrificed themselves to build Zion and Jerusalem, are themselves the consolation

When our holy soldiers are endangering their lives to defend the nation and the Land, with some dying in this effort, it is incumbent upon us to once again study and emphasize the supreme holiness of those killed sanctifying God's name. Through this, we can understand the supreme greatness of all soldiers who endanger their lives to defend the nation and the Land.

On the Holiness of Soldiers Who Gave Their Lives Those killed defending the nation and Land merit the highest possible level in the World of Truth, because through their death sanctifying God's name, they transcended their individual realm that every person dwells in, connected to the communal level of Israel's holiness, bonded with God, and became sanctified in His holiness. Therefore, even though their lives were cut short in this world, they live fully in the eternal world of the World to Come, to the degree that "no person can one can stand in their enclosure" (Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 10b). Thanks to them, life in this world continues and intensifies, because from their lives in this world, they merited supreme sanctification, revealing the supreme point of holiness in this world.

A soldier killed by friendly fire or a training accident during war is considered equally holy, because that is the nature of an army and war. No army can function without such incidents, and without an army, there is no possibility of sustaining the Jewish people. Therefore, anyone killed in a war defending the nation and Land, is called kadosh (holy).

The Two Forms of Mesirut Nefesh that Sustain Israel Forever In the merit of their mesirut nefesh (self-sacrifice), Israel's existence is sustained. The basis for fulfilling commandments with mesirut nefesh is rooted in Akeidat Yitzchak (the 'Binding of Isaac'), which revealed Israel's segulah (uniqueness) – that through the willingness to sacrifice their lives, Israel is bonded to eternity.

There are two forms of mesirut nefesh in the Torah: The first form is the willingness to enlist in the army for the sake of the nation and the Land, when Israel fights for its independence in its Land. The second form of mesirut nefesh is one of a bedi'avad (less than ideal) situation, during times of decrees and exile, when the wicked coerce Jews to transgress one of the three severe transgressions, or abandon their religion. That is, when we do not merit fulfilling mesirut nefesh through military service in the IDF, Jews are forced to sacrifice their lives for loyalty to the Jewish faith.

The Great Value of the Commandment to Enlist in the Military Some Torah students do not pay attention to the tremendous commandment fulfilled by soldiers. They mistakenly think that Torah is separate from Israeli nationalism, as if the Haredim uphold Torah values and commandments, while soldiers uphold national values not found in the Torah. However, the truth is that enlisting in the army is one of the most important and fundamental commandments of the Torah, encompassing two commandments upon which everything stands: saving the life of the nation, and settling the Land of Israel. More accurately, the categorization is as follows: some observe more of the private commandments; some observe more of the general commandments; and some are privileged to fulfill all the commandments of the Torah.

The great importance of serving in the army can be gleaned from the other name for Sefer Bamidbar ('Book of Numbers'), also called Sefer Ha-Pikudim ('Book of Counting'). Sefer Bamidbar tells the story of Israel's journey through the desert to prepare for conquering and settling the Land. Someone who does not understand the importance of serving

in the army wrongly thinks that the census in Sefer Ha-Pikudim counted all of Israel. However, if such a person were to re-examine, he will find that the commandment was to count the army recruits over twenty years old. That is, to prepare all of Israel, each man by his own camp and each man by his division, in advance of conquering the Land. Based on this, we can understand the severity of the Sin of the Spies recounted in Sefer Bamidbar which caused the decree of death for all in the desert, delaying Israel's entry to the Land for forty years. Because in the Sin of the Spies, they transgressed against the most important commandment that generation was meant to fulfill. Thus, from then until the Holocaust, when we did not merit fulfilling the commandment to settle the Land, which includes establishing an army to defend the nation and Land, many more Jews died.

Through Mesirut Nefesh the Values of Eternity Are Fulfilled Within Us The holy ones in Israel and exile, who endangered their lives for sanctifying God's name and sustaining His nation, maintain Israel and its faith in the world, embodying Israel's ultimate self-sacrifice and holiness expressed in the 'Binding of Isaac'. Therefore, during the shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah, together with remembering the 'Binding of Isaac', all the holy martyrs who sacrificed their lives sanctifying God's name, arise in our memory.

Life's True Existence is Sustained through the Martyrs By nature, human societies tend to sink into the routine of the present, and forget the great vision of redeeming the world. This leads to crises and disasters, because the soul always yearns for more. When positive outlets for this yearning are lacking, destructive outlets emerge, leading society to wickedness and destruction. A situation emerges where righteous people sticking to true values face severe and terrifying trials. When they withstand the trial and sacrifice their lives sanctifying God's name, they connect present life to eternal values, reminding Israel of the great vision. Thanks to this, the world continues and progresses towards redemption.

The Holy Ones Express Loving God to Completion The kedoshim (holy ones) express loving God at the highest level, as our Sages said: "For love is as strong as death" – the love with which that persecuted (shmad) generation loved God, as it says: 'Because for Your sake we are killed all day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter' (Psalms 44:23)" (Song of Songs Rabbah 8:4).

Some Jews have not yet learned to call in God's name, but they are connected to the divine values manifested in truth, goodness, and Israeli nationalism. They may have heard negative things about observant Jews, but the Jewish/Israeli values they love and are willing to sacrifice their lives for, are divine values. Truly, they too sacrifice their lives out of loving God. As the Torah says: "You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him and cleave to Him" (Deuteronomy 13:5). Our Sages asked: "Is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn't it already been stated: 'For the Lord your God is a devouring fire!' (ibid. 4:24)? Rather, the meaning is that one should follow His attributes: just as He clothes the naked... so shall you; just as the Holy One visited the sick... so shall you; just as He comforted mourners... so shall you; just as He buried the dead... so shall you" (Sotah 14a). Thus, one who cleaves to God's nation walks in God's ways, for God loves His nation, and watches over it always.

God Comforts Those Killed Sanctifying His Name Our Sages said that although the death of those killed sanctifying His name is terribly painful, God said they have not lost a thing, and their blood is more precious to Him than any offerings (Midrash Socher Tov Tehillim 16:4), because they are the foundation of the world's existence. They embody the absolute connection between the created, and the Source of Life.

Our Sages said that so greatly does their Kiddush Hashem sanctify God, that it is as if at the time of their death, the vengeance that God will exact upon the wicked killers, is already determined and occurring – as if they are already standing to be revived at Techiyat ha-Meytim (Resurrection of the Dead) (Sifra, Acharei Mot 8:13). They further said that in the Upper Worlds, there is an appointed angel over all the Jews killed by non-Jews, who records their names on God's garments. They

will remain recorded there until God avenges their blood, when Mashiach is revealed to comfort them. Angels of light and joy descend with Him to delight them, clothing them in garments of honor (Zohar vol. 1 39a, 41a).

Comfort for the Families of the Holy Ones The fallen soldiers are in a world that is all good, having already attained the highest level of sanctity of all of Israel, enjoying the radiance of the Divine Presence, with all the righteous heroes. Even in this world, everyone recognizes their mighty heroism and wondrous personality. However, the greatest anguish is that of the soldiers' families, suffering, with a gaping void in their hearts. Who can restore their terrible loss? Therefore, the mitzvah to comfort them is so important.

The Comfort of Zion and Jerusalem We comfort all mourners with the prayer that God will comfort them together with the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. That is, the comfort stems from recognizing that all of life is for the sake of building Zion and Jerusalem. Therefore, any grief, even over a Jew who lived in exile yet maintained his identity, is a stage in the process of redemption towards building Zion and Jerusalem. If so, the soldiers who literally sacrificed themselves for building Zion and Jerusalem are themselves, the very comfort. For until death is finally consumed forever all people will eventually die, and we should console them, for their lives too were a stage on the way to building Zion and Jerusalem. Whereas those killed sanctifying God's name for the realization of Zion and Jerusalem, through their death sanctifying His name, there is already great comfort.

The comfort does not nullify the awful distress, but rather gives it meaning and direction for carrying on with life. From now on, the mourners will know that everything built here in the State of Israel, is built thanks to the power of their holy loved one. The children that will be born, the settlements that will continue thriving, the immigration that will persist, the Torah learning that will proliferate, the charitable and just deeds that will intensify, every flower that will bloom, and every joy that will emerge from each home – all in their merit. The moral Jewish society that we wish to establish here as the prophets' vision – belongs to them. Out of such remembrance we will be able to continue vigilantly in their path, the path of self-sacrifice for the Jewish people.

And if thanks to remembering one of the holy ones, we are stirred to add more good deeds, more Torah learning, more volunteering for settlement and immigration efforts, and perhaps even to marry and bear more children – it is fitting to share this with the bereaved families, so that they know just how much their dear one beneficially impacted his acquaintances – thus, strengthening their comfort.

Parshat Vayechi: The Beginning of the End Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, so the whole age of Jacob was one hundred and forty-seven years. And the days of Jacob drew near to die...” [Genesis 47:28, 29]

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

Yet according to Rashi, this very next verse, the opening of Vayechi, sends us in the exact opposite direction, a 180-degree turn for the worse, informing us that the Egyptian bondage was then beginning! Interestingly, Rashi's interpretation is not based on the words of the verse itself [Gen. 47:28], but rather on the almost hidden or interior meaning of the Torah embedded in the white space – or lack of white space – between the final verse of Vayigash and the opening verse of Vayechi. The portion of Vayechi opens without a parchment hint that a new chapter is beginning, or that a new story is being told. There are no paragraphs or indications of chapters in the text of the Torah scrolls. Rather, a white space – anywhere from a minimum of nine letters wide to the end of the entire line – is the Torah's way of indicating that a

pause or separation of some kind exists between the previous verse and the following section.

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

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

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

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

“And when the days of mourning for Jacob were over, Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh saying, ‘If now I have found favor in your eyes, speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, my father made me swear, and he declared: I am dying. In my grave which I have dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me...’” [Gen. 50:4–5] Does this request sound like the words spoken by the Grand Vizier of Egypt? Does the number two figure at a Fortune 500 company, who undoubtedly confers with the president on a daily basis, need an appointment to see him, forced to go through the usual hierarchy of secretaries that junior staff have to go through? Why not a simple knock on the door on the part of Joseph? Why does the Torah even go to the trouble of reporting the process by which Joseph presents a petition – through intermediaries – to have his father buried? And Joseph doesn't even go through a secretary; he begs (‘if I have found favor in your eyes’) the ‘house of Pharaoh’, which generally refers to the household staff, the servants of Pharaoh. The Grand Vizier asks a maid or butler to whisper his need to bury his father in Pharaoh's ear. Is this the level to which a second- in-command must stoop in order to get time off for a parent's funeral? Seforno explains that in this particular instance, court etiquette prevented Joseph from making his request personally of Pharaoh because he was dressed in mourning clothes (and was presumably in need of a haircut and shave). However, Jewish law dictates that whatever one has to do in order to properly bury one's dead is permissible. Joseph certainly could have made himself presentable had his external appearance been the major problem. *Maskil l'David* maintains that a careful reading of the verse indicates a change in Joseph's status. His sudden loss of ‘access’ could well be a warning of new palace tremors which would eventually erupt into the enslavement of his descendants. Joseph had been demoted in position.

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

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

Ordinarily a person wants to be buried in his own homeland where his body will become part of the earth to which he feels most deeply

connected. Indeed, in the ancient world the most critical right of citizenship was the right of burial. The wise Jacob understands that Pharaoh expected Joseph to completely identify with Egypt, to bring up generations of faithful and committed Egyptians after all that his adopted country has given to him. But this was impossible for Jacob – and the patriarch hoped that it would also be impossible for his children and grandchildren as well. They were in Egypt but not of Egypt. They might contribute to Egyptian society and economy, but they could never become Egyptians. Jacob understood that his burial in Canaan would be the greatest test of Joseph's career, and would define the character of his descendants forever. Hence, he makes his beloved son solemnly swear not to bury him in Egypt.

Joseph, too, understood that Pharaoh would be shocked at the request, a petition expressing the Hebrew rejection of the most powerful and civilized nation on earth. Indeed, it is such a difficult and sensitive matter that Joseph cannot face his patron Pharaoh directly with it. At that moment Joseph understands an even deeper truth: were he, his brothers, his children and grandchildren to make the choice to live as Egyptians and to die as Egyptians, the chances are that they would be totally accepted into the mainstream of the land and life in that country. However, were they to choose to live as Jews, with their own concepts of life and death, they would never be accepted and would probably be persecuted. It is this realization in the aftermath of Jacob's death which Rashi correctly sees as the beginning of the slavery of the Israelites. In Egypt, Joseph's kinsmen may have everything: Goshen Heights and Goshen Green, progeny and patrimony. But as long as they are determined to remain Jews, servitude and persecution are inevitable. They may rejoice in their preferred Egyptian status, where 'they took possession of it and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly,' but they cannot ever pause to enjoy this good fortune. The realization upon Jacob's death of the transient and illusory nature of their good fortune comes upon them inexorably and imperceptibly, as in the blink of an eye, as in a following sentence without a change of paragraph.

And so this portion is closed just as Egypt will soon be closed to their children. Such is the ultimate fate of the children of Israel in every exile. Shabbat

Shalom

TORAH SHORTS: Weekly Biblical Thoughts by Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

Fragmentation of a Merchant's Mind (Vayechi) Merchants have no country. The mere spot they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gains. -Thomas Jefferson After a very long and tumultuous life, the patriarch Jacob is on his deathbed. He convenes his twelve sons and proceeds to give them his last words which include cryptic personalized prophecies and blessings. For his ninth son, Zevulun, Jacob declares the following:

"Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a shore for ships, and his flank shall be upon Zidon." Genesis 49:13

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619) states the maxim, based on this verse, that the Tribe of Zevulun was destined to become merchants, sailing to far-off destinations to make a living. Furthermore, he states the famous partnership that existed between the Tribe of Zevulun and the Tribe of Yissachar; the Tribe of Yissachar became a bastion of Torah scholars, dedicating themselves exclusively to full-time study, enabled only by the generous support of Zevulun.

However, according to the Kli Yakar, Jacob's prophecy contains a warning as well. The verse has Zevulun in three distinct places. Zevulun shall live in one place ('shore of the sea'), travel to a second place to conduct business ('shore for ships'), and his merchandise will be in a third place ('Zidon' – a commercial center of the ancient near east). The Kli Yakar explains that having one's mind on three (or more) geographic locations fragments the mind, reduces performance, and increases anxiety.

He thus claims that Yissachar has a better quality of life and peace of mind. Nonetheless, the reward of Zevulun is greater due to their support of their Torah-studying brothers, hence their being placed ahead of Yissachar in the blessings.

May those merchants amongst us enjoy greater peace of mind and less fragmentation, whether mental or geographical and may those blessed with the portion of Yissachar appreciate the sacrifice.

Shabbat Shalom, Ben-Tzion Dedication To British actor, Stephen Fry, on his important and courageous message of Jewish pride.

Office of the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis Dvar Torah: Vayechi

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

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

Since Jacob influenced so many people who internalised his values and passed them on through the generations, he is considered still to be alive. We often reflect on the immortality that our souls can attain, through life in Olam Habah – the world to come. But the Gemara wants to teach us that there is an additional form of immortality which we can attain here, in this world. In the Book of Bereishit, there are two parshiot which have in their titles the term 'life'. They are 'Chayei Sarah' and 'Vayechi'. 'Chayei Sarah' means 'the life of Sarah' but if you look at the content of the parasha, it is all about her death. And similarly, 'Vayechi', our parasha of this week, describes the death of Ya'akov, the death of Yosef – the death of that entire generation. But the message is very clear: because Sarah's values continued to be cherished and to be transmitted throughout the generations, the parasha is called 'Chayei Sarah' – Sarah is alive! Similarly, Ya'akov is very much alive even to this day! We speak about him and reflect upon his great teachings and therefore the parasha is called 'Vayechi' – because he lives on and on.

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

Shabbat Shalom.

Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vayechi Supply Side Diplomats

After Yaakov's passing the brothers were worried. After all, Yosef was the ruler of Egypt and their father Yaakov was now gone. And so the Torah tells us at the end of this week's portion, "Yosef's brothers perceived that their father was dead, and they said, 'Perhaps Joseph will nurse hatred against us and then he will surely repay us all the evil that we did him.' So they instructed that Joseph be told, 'Your father gave orders before his death, saying: 'Thus shall you say to Joseph – 'O please, kindly 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.'"

The Torah continues by telling us that "Yosef wept when they spoke to him. His brothers themselves also went and flung themselves before him and said, "We are ready to be your slaves. But Joseph said to them, "Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good – in order to accomplish — it is as clear as this day — which a vast people be kept alive. So now, fear not — I will sustain you and your young ones.' Thus he comforted them and spoke to their heart." (See Genesis 50 15-21)

Yosef seems very benevolent. He committed himself to sustain his brothers, despite their having sold him into a life of slavery. Yet, maybe they truly wanted some form of retribution. After all it is quite hard to bear the burden of guilt for the rest of your life, and if that is the case,

perhaps Yoseph's benevolence may have defeated the purpose of their request. An old yarn that I heard as I was still unmarried has the wealthy father of the prospective bride interviewing her suitors before they got a chance to meet her.

Each one of the young men who discussed their anticipated financial plans was rebuffed.

One said that he would be going to medical school another was going to law school, and yet a third was waiting for an inheritance that would come any day. Each eager beau was barraged with a series of questions about the details of his future life and none had the proper answer.

Finally, a young Yeshiva fellow came to see the tycoon's daughter. After talking to the young man for twenty minutes, the man was beaming. He proudly introduced the prospective groom to his daughter with the highest recommendation. His wife and assistants were all astounded. What had this young man said that the others had not?

The man was still beaming when he repeated the conversation. "When I asked him where he plans to live when he first gets married he replied, 'G-d will provide!' When I asked him how he plans to feed a family if he is sitting and studying he looked at me and declared, 'G-d will provide!' When I asked when there are children, how does he plan to pay for their education and welfare, he beamed once again and exclaimed, 'G-d will provide!'" The man's entire household was baffled. "Why do those responses please you so much?"

The man smiled as he puffed out his chest, "He thinks I'm G-d!" It is said that Yoseph Dov HaLevi Soleveitchik of Brisk once remarked in wit that Yoseph was telling the brothers, "If you are afraid of retribution, I will provide you with the sweetest revenge. I will be your sole source of support and you will have to rely upon me for your sustenance." The Talmud in Beitzah 32 states, "R. Natan ben Abba also said in the name of Rav: If someone is dependent on someone else's table, the world looks dark to him, for it says, 'He wanders about for food-where is it?-he realizes that the day of darkness is ready, at hand' (Job 15:23). The Rabbis taught: One of three whose life is no life, is a person who is dependent on someone else for his meals."

And so, Yoseph was telling his brothers, perhaps I will not employ physical retribution but perhaps your greatest punishment will be that your livelihood will be dependent on the little brother you thought was only worthy of a place in a pit. In the Grace After Meals we beseech the Almighty, "Please don't have us rely upon the gifts of flesh and blood, but rather sustain us from Your hand." To live a life dependent upon others is no blessing. So according to this insight, Yoseph gave them something the brothers may really have asked for – the sweetest and most benevolent punishment they could have desired. Good Shabbos, Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky Dedicated in memory of Joseph Miller z"l HY"D by his children Mr and Mrs. Geoffrey Miller

Rabbi YY Jacobson

[What Does It Mean to Be a Leader?

Reuben and Judah: A Psychological Profile

Thu, Dec 28, 2023 at 5:30 PM

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:

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"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 pompousness 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 Vayeichi 5730, December 27, 1969 [25]).

[1] Genesis chapter 49. [2] Rashi to Genesis 49:3-4. [3] Midrash Tanchumah (Buber edition) Vayeitzei 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 Vayeichi 9; Targum Einkleus, 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 Melachim 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.chief Rabbi.com).

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Avraham Yitzchak ben Alter Lieb. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

The Powers of Eisav Shimon and Levi are brothers; their weapons are stolen tools (49:5).

A puzzling statement appears in Parshas Vayeitzei, in the Torah's account of the births of the shevatim: After the birth of Yehuda, the possuk states about Leah, "stopped giving birth." This is unusual, for the Torah makes no such statement regarding the other wives of Yaakov. Ostensibly, it is self-evident when the Torah finishes listing the offspring of each wife that they had no further children after that. Moreover, this statement is not even accurate as Leah later had three more children: Yissachar, Zevulun, and Dinah. Why, then, do these words appear in the possuk?

There is an interesting pattern in the brachos of the first four children of Leah: Each of them is associated in some way with a characteristic of Eisav. Yaakov praises Yehuda for being a powerful warrior, telling him, "Your hands are at the nape of your enemies' neck," even though the ability to fight is a characteristic of Eisav. The Torah states that "the hands are the hands of Eisav," which the Gemara interprets as a reference to warfare; Chazal teach us that anyone who achieves victory in war has some connection to Eisav's powers of combat. Thus, although Yehuda is praised for his might, that seems to be a quality that should be associated with Eisav's offspring, rather than the progeny of Yaakov.

Shimon and Levi, too, are associated with Eisav, for Yaakov states that their "weapons are stolen tools;" as Rashi explains, this means that their acts of violence were appropriate for Eisav, rather than for the family of Yaakov. Likewise, Reuven is criticized for his anger and impetuosity, which the Torah also associates with Eisav; in Parshas Toldos, Rivka instructs Yaakov to leave home until Eisav's fury abates. In fact, Chazal state that Reuven's name itself alludes to the contrast between him and Eisav; the name is derived from the words, "see the difference between my son and the son of my father-in-law." It would not be possible to contrast Reuven with Eisav unless there was some basis for comparing them; there is no logic in pointing out a contrast between two people who have no similarities or connection to each other whatsoever. Thus, there must be some link between Reuven and Eisav in order for this statement to be logical.

This can be explained as follows: Leah was created as the bas zug, the intended spouse, of Eisav. As the Torah hints, and as Chazal explain, Leah wept bitterly over her fate to the point that her eyes became disfigured, as she prayed fervently to be spared from a marriage to Eisav. Ultimately, her prayers were accepted and she became Yaakov's wife, but this did not change her fundamental character traits. As Eisav's intended soulmate, she certainly possessed attributes that made her a fitting match for him, and once she married Yaakov, those characteristics were bequeathed to his children instead.

Thus, Leah's first four children had certain character traits that would have been appropriate for the children of Eisav. In a certain sense, they were actually Eisav's offspring. This explains Reuven's rage, Shimon and Levi's use of violence, and Yehuda's strength as a warrior. Unlike Eisav, though, Leah's children made the proper choices in life, and they remained part of the Jewish people. When the Torah states that Leah "stopped giving birth," it means that she stopped bearing children who harbored Eisav-like traits; all of the children who were born subsequently were not considered like Eisav in any way.

In truth, Yaakov's vision was for Eisav to be a part of Klal Yisroel as well; it was only the negative choices he made that prevented him from becoming part of the nation. But Eisav's unique attributes and strengths were also important for the Jewish people. Therefore, those characteristics had to be integrated into Klal Yisroel in another way; through Leah's first four children. Indeed, Chazal state that Dovid Hamelech was "ruddy," the same term used to describe Eisav, for in a sense, Dovid was just like Eisav. The difference between them, according to Chazal, was that Dovid was "with beautiful eyes;" this refers to the fact that he subjugated himself to the Sanhedrin, who were termed the "eyes of the congregation." Eisav, on the other hand, did as he pleased; he did not accept the authority of any Torah sages, which rendered him unfit to be part of Klal Yisroel. However, Klal Yisroel still needed Eisav's strengths, which is why they became part of the contribution made by the four oldest sons of Yaakov Avinu.

King or Servant? His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk (49:12). This is part of the blessing that Yaakov gives to his son Yehuda, scion of the royal lineage of the Jewish people. Clearly, wine has always been associated with royalty. But what does the color white and milk have to do with the future kings of the Jewish people? The Gemara (Kesuvos 111a) has a fascinating interpretation of this verse; "Better is the one who shows the white of his teeth (i.e. in a smile) to his friend, than the one who gives him milk to drink." In other

words, “white toothed from milk” can be interpreted as “to be white toothed with a smile is better than to give milk.”

This is because one who provides milk to the poor provides a physical gift that sustains the person for a little while. But the one who smiles at or comforts the forlorn with encouraging words gives that person an everlasting feeling of self-worth. This lifts his spirits and sustains the recipient a lot more than any physical gift, which is merely a temporary respite.

This concept is also found in the animal kingdom. The Gemara (Kiddushin 82b) describes what kind of professions certain animals would assume if they had to enter the workforce; the lion would be a porter and a fox would be a merchant, etc. While it is easily understandable how the cleverness of a fox would make him a successful merchant, why would a lion, king of all the animals, choose the lowly job of a porter?

The answer lies in the Torah’s view of leadership. Real leadership is about empowering others to actualize their potential. In other words, leadership isn’t about the majesty of the position. True leaders take the resources at their disposal to help move others forward. Sometimes, perhaps even often, it means carrying the “baggage” of others so that they can get to where they need to go. Leaders realize that their role is to move the overall mission forward and take responsibility for its execution. A lion becomes a porter because his real desire has nothing to do with his own self-aggrandizement, rather his role is solely to help others. This is the message that Yaakov wanted to instill in the future kings of the Jewish people. They will have the wine of royalty, but it must be used with the “white teeth” to empower others.

Empowerment of Marriage Parsha Breaks are short Divrei Torah (generally 5-7 minutes long) given by the Rosh HaYeshiva between Mincha and Ma'ariv at one of the Yeshiva's daily minyanim. These links can easily be downloaded on your smartphone.

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights For the week ending 30 December 2023 / 18 Tevet 5784 Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

VAYECHI “Yosef’s brothers perceived that their father was dead...” (Ber. 50:15) It’s amazing how much we need approval I recently got a new car. It’s all-electric, all ‘whistles and bells,’ and does absolutely everything thing for you. It turns the headlights on when it’s dark, tells you when you need air in the tires and even warm itself up for you before you get in on a cold day. The only thing it doesn’t do is make you a cup of coffee, but I’m sure they’re working on that. One of the features that was new to me is that, if you have the electric key in your pocket, your mere approach to the car releases the lock on the door and all the light flash. The other day, I was crossing the road to take out the trash and I came within a few feet of the car. The lights flashed; the door locks opened with a welcoming clunk, and the side mirrors flipped out like a pair of ears of an old canine friend. I had this unmistakable feeling, absurd as it was, that the car was smiling at me, and gave me a fleeting moment of happiness. I caught myself and thought, “Wow! If being recognized by an inanimate object can bring a smile to my face, how much more does the recognition of a human being lift our spirits?” “Yosef’s brothers perceived that their father was dead...” With Yaakov’s death, the brothers sensed that Yosef’s attitude to them had changed. He no longer invited them to dine with him as he had done during their father’s lifetime. They thought his latent resentment was now surfacing, but they were wrong. The Marahal explains that with the death of Yaakov, Yosef knew that the persecution of the Jews could start at any time. An invitation to the palace could be construed as the Jews seeking power and influence. So, to minimize this latent antisemitism, Yosef stopped inviting them. Yosef knew that his actions might be misinterpreted by the brothers, but to be a leader of the Jewish People means knowing when to override the natural sensitivity that a brother has toward his siblings for the greater good of the Jewish People. © 2020 Ohr Somayach International

Office of the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

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Parshat: Vayechi 8 January 2020

You can live forever! Jacob never died. This extraordinary statement is recorded in the Gemara, (Mashechet Ta’anit). There we are told how Rav Nachman and Rabbi Yitzchak were exchanging words of Torah, and when they came to Jacob our Patriarch, Rabbi Yitzchak declared, “Ya’akov Avinu lo met” – “Jacob, our Patriarch never died”. Rav Nachman challenged him: “In the Torah we read how he was eulogised, he was embalmed, he was buried. So how can you say Jacob never died?” Rabbi Yitzchak replied: “I learn it from a scriptural source in the book of Jeremiah Chapter 30. There, the prophet tells us about the promise of Hashem, that the day will come when the children of Jacob will be reunited in the Holy Land at a time of redemption. Therefore, ‘Ma zar’o ba’chayim af u’ba’chayim’ – since his descendants are alive, he too is alive.” Since Jacob influenced so many people who internalised his values and passed them on through the generations, he is considered still to be alive. We often reflect on the immortality that our souls can attain, through life in Olam Habah – the world to come. But the Gemara wants to teach us that there is an additional form of immortality which we can attain here, in this world. In the Book of Bereishit, there are two parshiot which have in their titles the term ‘life’. They are ‘Chayei Sarah’ and ‘Vayechi’. ‘Chayei Sarah’ means ‘the life of Sarah’ but if you look at the content of the parasha, it is all about her death. And similarly, ‘Vayechi’, our parasha of this week, describes the death of Ya’akov, the death of Yosef – the death of that entire generation. But the message is very clear: because Sarah’s values continued to be cherished and to be transmitted throughout the generations, the parasha is called ‘Chayei Sarah’ – Sarah is alive! Similarly, Ya’akov is very much alive even to this day! We speak about him and reflect upon his great teachings and therefore the parasha is called ‘Vayechi’ – because he lives on and on. There is a double message for us here. First of all, we can guarantee that our forebears remain alive through us – through all the good deeds that we perform. And secondly, we can attain our own immortality by touching the hearts and moulding the minds of as many people as possible. If Jacob is still alive today, so too, we can be alive forever. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Rav Frand - Parshas Vayechi "Shoot From Hip and Ask Questions Later" – Is Not a Quality for a Jewish Leader On his deathbed, Yaakov gives brachos to his children. He begins with his firstborn son and tells him: “Reuven, you are my firstborn... Yesser s’ais v’yeser az (greater by raising and greater by might).” (Bereshit 49:3). What do the words “yesser s’ais v’yeser oz” mean? Rashi interprets, “You were potentially fit to be greater than your brothers by having the kehunah, as indicated by the word s’ais which is related to the expression “nesias kapayim” (“lifting of the palms,” which takes place during Birkas Kohanim). Rashi also interprets the expression “v’yeser oz” as implying that Reuven should have also had the leadership role in Klal Yisrael – malchus (monarchy). Rashi infers this from the similar expression “v’yiten oz l’malko” (Shmuel I 2:10). What caused Reuven to lose this greatness, for which he had been destined? Yaakov continues his blessing to Reuven in the next pasuk: “Pachaz k’mayim al tosar olisa mishkivay ovicha” (Haste like water – do not take more, because you mounted your father’s bed...) (Bereshit 49:4). Rashi interprets “Pachaz k’mayim” – your impetuosity, which caused you to react impulsively when you felt your mother was slighted (in the incident in which Reuven shifted Yaakov’s bed from the tent of Rochel’s handmaiden to the tent of his mother, Leah, following the death of Rochel). The impulsiveness you demonstrated on that occasion disqualified you from being the king. Rashi says the expression “pachaz k’mayim” connotes fast flowing water that is in an apparent hurry to get to its destination. “You are like a quick flowing stream – too quick, too trigger-happy. Therefore, you are ineligible to receive all these extra benefits (kehuna and malchus), which you were destined to receive.” On the other hand, by the bracha of Yehuda – who does receive the monarchy – the pasuk says: “A lion cub is Yehudah; from prey my son, you ascended (m’teref b’nee alisa)” What does that mean? Rashi interprets: You, Yehuda, were part of the

conspiracy to kill Yosef. You were the one who came up with the supposed story that Yosef was killed by a wild animal. You were part of all that. But what happened, Yehuda? You changed your mind. You withdrew and you said “What gain will there be if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?” (Bereshis 37:26) You argued, let’s not kill him, but rather throw him into a pit. We can sell him to the Yishmaelim. According to Rashi, Yaakov further noted that this is not the only time Yehuda changed his mind and regretted an earlier statement. He also initially issued a decree that Tamar should be executed (when he suspected her of being unfaithful and having illicit relations outside her family). But upon seeing her evidence to the contrary, he said “She is more righteous than I.” (Bereshis 38:26) What is Rashi teaching? Rabbi Buxban from Florida wanted to explain these Rashis as follows: There is one quality that disqualifies a person from being a king or a leader in Klal Yisrael – the quality of impetuosity and impulsiveness. Knee-jerk reactions are unacceptable for a Jewish leader. A leader needs to be able to think things through, and rethink things if necessary. Before carrying out a decision, a king must ask himself “Is this the right way to go?” Reuven did not rethink his steps. He was offended. He stood up for his mother’s honor – all well and good. But he didn’t say “Hey, wait a minute! Let me think this thing through. What am I doing to my father? I am insulting him.” Because of that quality, Reuven could not be the melech. Yehudah, on the other hand, also made mistakes. His initial reaction was “Let’s kill Yosef. Let’s kill Tamar.” But then he thought about the matter and said “mah betza” (What is to be gained by this)? He changed his mind and retracted his position. He said, “Maybe I was not right.” That is an attribute needed to be a melech Yisrael. “Shoot from the hip and ask questions later” is not the quality we want in a Jewish leader. And if a person cannot say the words “I was wrong. I made a mistake” he cannot be the melech. Reuven ultimately did teshuva. In fact, the Medrash (Bereshis Rabbah 98) says that when Yaakov Avinu explains that Reuven did teshuva, he expresses it as follows: “You have made yourself a mikvah of water and have purified yourself within it.” Those who know a little about the laws of tahara (ritual purification) know that there are two kinds of bodies of water that can provide tahara to a person. The first is called a “mikvah” which is an accumulation of rainwater. It must be completely still water, so still that if there is any leakage, it is not a mikvah anymore. It is called zochalim (flowing waters), which invalidate a mikvah. The other type of medium of purification is a “ma’ayan,” which is a fast-flowing stream. If a person immerses in the Mississippi River, he has achieved the highest form of tahara. A “ma’ayan” even purifies a Zav (a form of impurity which cannot achieve tahara by immersion in a standard “mikvah”). Yaakov emphasizes that the way Reuven repented was by immersion in a mikvah. As opposed to “pachaz k’mayim...” (as impetuous as a fast-flowing stream), which was the quality of Reuven that previously caused him to offend his father. Now he immersed in a stationary mikvah. The choice of that mode of tahara is symbolic. Reuven said to himself, “No. Don’t rush. Sometimes we need still waters, like the waters of a mikvah, rather than the fast-flowing waters of a ma’ayan.” **How the Doctor from Minnesota Won His Friday Night Bet With the Yerushalmi Yid** There is a custom throughout the Jewish world to bless our children on Friday nights. (Some people do this every Friday, and some people do it specifically on Erev Yom Kippur.) We bless our sons with the famous

blessing (from this week’s parsha) “May Elokim make you like Ephraim and Menashe.” (Bereshis 48:20) and we bless our daughters with the blessing “May Elokim make you like Sora, Rivka, Rochel, and Leah.” Over the years, we have said numerous peshatim on the meaning of the bracha “May Elokim make you like Ephraim and Menashe.” Tonight, I would like to say over the following story which I heard recently: There was a medical conference in Yerushalayim that brought together experts from all over the world on the topic of epilepsy. A doctor from Minnesota, who was a world-renowned expert in this field, came to the conference. He met there a Yerushalmi looking Jew who was participating in these meetings. This was not the type of person who looked like a doctor (although today it is not always easy to tell). The doctor asked him, “Nu, is your medical expertise in the field of epilepsy?” The Yerushalmi said, “No. I am not a doctor at all, but I have a child who has epilepsy. Many times, I have travelled all over the world to conferences on this condition to hear what is new in the field. I want to know if there are any new medications or new treatments. Now there is an epilepsy conference in Yerushalayim, so certainly I came.” The Yerushalmi then invited the doctor, the epilepsy expert, to his home for Shabbos dinner the Friday night after the conference concluded. The doctor accepted the invitation. As the guest entered the house, the host told him (in private), “I have five daughters. One of them has epilepsy. I bet you won’t be able to tell which of the five has epilepsy. Her epilepsy is for the most part under control, and my daughter is perfectly normal. She is not self-conscious about her condition. I bet you won’t be able to tell which daughter has epilepsy.” The doctor responded, “Listen, I am a world class expert in epilepsy. I will be able to tell which daughter it is.” The host asked, “Would you like to bet on that?” The doctor said he did! (I don’t know what exactly they bet, but that is not important to the story.) Throughout the entire meal, everything was fine. There were no outward manifestations of her illness at all. After the meal, the host (privately) asked the doctor, “So tell me: Which is the one that has epilepsy?” The doctor said (not in front of the daughters) “It is that one!” The host was astonished. He said “You are right! How did you possibly figure that out? She behaves exactly the same as all of her sisters! How did you know?” The doctor explained: “Do you know how I knew? It was because when you benched your daughters before the meal, I saw that your heart rate increased when you benched her.” When we sit at our Shabbos tables Friday night and we bench our children, in our minds we think “What do I want from this child? What do I want this child to be? What do I want this child to become?” As much as this father knew his daughter’s illness was under control, still, her condition affected his heart strings. It affected his heart rate. That is how the doctor knew. The moment when we bless our children Friday night is really special. We have a unique ability to connect with each child, and then give each a bracha asking that they become like Ephraim and Menashe or like Sora, Rivka, Rochel and Leah. This is a most emotional moment. Perhaps the outer manifestations of these emotions are not visible to the average person. Perhaps this is not even something we are ourselves aware of — but these subconscious expressions of bracha come from the deepest place in our heart. *Transcribed by David Twersky; Yerushalayim DavidATwersky@gmail.com Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org.*

לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
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PARSHAT VAYECHI

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

YAAKOV'S BLESSING TO YOSEF - BECHIRA or BECHORA?

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

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

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

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

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

[Textual parallels are highlighted by CAPS.]

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

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

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

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

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

'BECHORA' - TO THE SON OF RACHEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT TOLDOT

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

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

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

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

'HA-MAL'ACH HA-GOEL'

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

"ha-mal'ach ha-goel oti mi-kol ra - yevarech et ha-nearim"
[God's angel who protected me (Yaakov) from all those who wanted to harm me, He should bless these children (to help them 'blend in')],
"ve-yikare ba-hem shmi, ve-shem avotai - Avraham ve-Yitzchak..."
[And they should be known by my name, and by the names of Avraham and Yitzchak (for they are part of the

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

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

A TIME WILL COME...

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

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

It is precisely this message that Yosef repeats to his brothers and family on his deathbed, at the conclusion of Sefer Breishit:

"And Yosef told his brothers, behold I am about to die, 've-Elokim pakod yifkod etchem' [God will surely remember you] and bring you from this land to the land which He promised by oath to give to Avraham, Yitzchak..." (50:24).

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

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

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

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

According to the latter interpretation, this final blessing forms an appropriate conclusion. After mentioning that God will one day return his offspring to Eretz Canaan (fulfilling 'brit bein ha-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 leader. Even the kings of the House of David must be constantly conscious of their conduct, in order that they be worthy of exercising their leadership (see Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!).

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

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

UNITY OR HARMONY

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

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

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

B. HA-TACHAT ELOKIM ANI?

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

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

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

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

C. "PAKOD YIFKOD" AND SEFER SHMOT

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

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

1. Compare these psukim, as well as 48:21, 50:24 and the psukim of Brit Bein Ha-btarim (15:13-19), with God's revelation to Moshe Rabeinu at the 'sneh' in Shmot perek 3.
2. Note God's Name in the various psukim in Sefer Breishit noted above, and relate it to Shmot 3:13-22.
3. At what point did it become unrealistic for Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt and return to Eretz Canaan? Had they returned, to what area would they have returned? Who owned the land, etc.?

D. Between Reuven and Yosef

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

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

Parshas Vayechi: May God Make You as Ephraim and Menasheh

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. FLASHBACK: YITZCHAK'S BLESSING

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

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

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

6) Why was Rivkah so concerned that Ya'akov get that particular blessing, even at the risk of his being cursed instead?

7) What is the relationship - if any - between Ya'akov's purchase of the b'khorah (right of the firstborn) at the end of Chapter 25 and his deceptive taking of the blessing in Chapter 27?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Double inheritance,

Political control over the family and

Representation of the family at sacrificial rites.

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

IV. KEHUNAH - THE LEGACY OF EVERY FAMILY

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

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

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

V. S'MIKHAH - EMBRACE AND TRANSMISSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VI. THREE TYPES OF B'RAKHOT

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

a) The conventional well-wishing b'rakhah, (e.g. B'resheet 47:7,10).

b) The designation-b'rakhah, (e.g. Ch. 49, where Ya'akov gave his children a b'rakhah - which was, essentially, his last will and testament.) This designation-b'rakhah was an assignment of duties, properties etc. within the family.

c) The conferral-b'rakhah - which was the model for the post-Sinaitic s'mikhah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VII. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH (REDUX)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This (previously) enigmatic response is now clear:

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

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

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

VIII. POSTSCRIPT

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

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Parashat Vayechi: A Family Becomes a Nation

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

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

SEFER BEREISHIT: A QUICK LOOK BACK:

TZELEM ELOKIM:

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

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

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

FAILURE AND DISAPPOINTMENT:

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

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

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

A NEW PLAN:

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

SELECTION: AVRAHAM:

At this point, we began to focus on the selection of the Avot and the rejection of various figures along the way. The Torah

presents the greatness of the Avot as emerging from their successfully meeting the challenges with which they struggle. The strength the Avot display as they develop is what makes them Avot. We traced the growth of Avraham's trust in Hashem from his initial uncertainty of Hashem's promises, to the breathtaking faith he manifests at the Akeida (Binding of Isaac). Along the way, we learned about Avraham's struggles for justice (saving Sedom), his courageous self-sacrifice (saving Lot from captivity), and other lessons too detailed to sacrifice to synopsis. We also examined the rejection of Yishmael for his vicious, cynical sniggering.

A HOLD ON ERETZ YISRAEL:

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

YA'AKOV, "ISH TAM":

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

YEHUDA AND YOSEF:

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

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

TAKE IT PERSONALLY:

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

PARASHAT VA-YHI: TRANSITION

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERNAL DIVERSITY:

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

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

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

NATIONAL THEMES:

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

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

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

NATION, INSTITUTIONS, AND LAND:

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

BEREISHIT 48:3-4 --

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

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

BEREISHIT 49:5-7 --

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 48:21 --

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

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

BEREISHIT 49:10 --

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

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

TRIBES:

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

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

A LOOK BACK AT THE LAND:

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

1) Hashem's promises to the Avot that they / their children shall inherit the land.

2) Avraham's purchase of a permanent personal "foothold" in the land -- the Field of Mahpela.

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

BEREISHIT 49:29-32 --

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

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

BEREISHIT 50:13 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

YA'AKOV TAKES THE LONG VIEW:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PREPARATION FOR SEFER SHEMOT:

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

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

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

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

As you cruise through the text at high speed:

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

Shabbat shalom