

Parshat Vayechi

Each tribe a blessing.

In a certain sense, this Parsha is a long, protracted death scene. The foreboding shadow of Jacob's impending death sets the tone and topic for the parsha - "And Israel's days approached death"(47:28). We read a series of speeches: bequests, "living wills," of the father Jacob, to his family.

In a pointedly human manner, Yaakov's fears about his impending death precipitates a string of communications recorded throughout our parsha. Ironically, we sense Yaakov's feelings of his imminent mortality time after time, as it would appear Yaakov's life outlives his worries regarding his old age. This image quite realistically captures the unpredictability of death and the fears of the elderly.

In the first scene, Jacob commands Joseph, "Do not bury me in Egypt" (47:29). In the second "scene" Joseph is summoned in an atmosphere of emergency to the sickly Jacob where Jacob outlines his plans to give Joseph his uniquely elevated status within the family by raising Joseph's sons - Ephraim and Menashe - to parity with his own sons. And he blesses them with a blessing which would be echoed through all future generations "May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe". Yaakov's final speech to his children is the moment at which we witness the entire family surrounding Jacob's deathbed where the dying patriarch delivers his last comments; child by child; until, finally Jacob "is gathered to his people."(49:33)

The Rabbis noted this protracted preparation for death. They observed that Jacob was the first Biblical personality to instruct his children on his death-bed in such a detailed manner. Indeed, Jacob is the first Biblical personality of to be described as having some sort of sickness. "Sometime afterwards Joseph was given the message, 'Take note, your father is ill'". The Midrash notes the word "Hinei" - "take note", and the first mention of illness in the Torah. The Midrash states:

" From the day that heaven and earth were created, people did not become sick. A person might have been walking in the market, he would sneeze and his soul would leave his body through his nostrils. Jacob requested mercy, 'Master of the Universe, do not take my soul until I have instructed my children and the members of my house.' God acceded to the request.... That is why one wishes a person 'life' when they sneeze" (Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer Ch.52)

Apparently this entire Parsha is the opportunity that Jacob wished for. Jacob puts his affairs in order, and is able to give over certain final messages and teachings to his sons. Indeed our Haftara this week is a direct reflection and continuation of this theme of our Parsha. It describes David on his death-bed ordering his son Solomon, how to close his affairs after his death.¹

BLESSINGS

What did Jacob have to say to his children? What was it that was so important for him to transmit to his children at the

moment of his death? We will focus our attention on the nature of the blessings which were given to the twelve sons of Jacob.

"And Jacob called all his sons. He said 'Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in the end of days. Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob; hearken to your father.

Reuben you are my First-born, My might and first fruit of my vigour; exceeding in rank and exceeding in honour. Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer; For when you mounted your father's bed, you brought disgrace ..

Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness...

Let me not be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men...

Cursed be their anger so fierce and their wrath so relentless,

I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel.

You O Yehudah, your brothers will praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's sons shall bow down to you...

The sceptre shall not depart from Yehudah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, so that tribute shall come to him and the homage of peoples be his...

Dan shall be a serpent by the road, a viper by the path that bites the horses heels so that his rider is thrown backwards - I wait for your deliverance, O Lord.

Asher's bread shall be rich, and he shall yield the sweet foods of the rich." (Excerpts from Chapter 49)

Following a rather ceremonial invitation, we hear a short message to each of Yaakov's sons. What is the common thread which ties all the elements of this final testimony together? Some of the messages here would seem to be messages of rebuke, others are of praise or position. We search, it would seem in vain, to find a common theme here and we sometimes get a feeling that these blessings are a collection of final musings rather than a unified message aimed at achieving a singular goal.

The **Abarbanel** suggests four possible options as to the purpose of Jacob's "living will". Either (i) he is offering a blessing, or (ii) moral teachings and rebuke for past wrongs. He might be (iii) offering a prediction of future events or possibly (iv) telling them of their future inheritance in the Promised Land.

The ambiguity and mystery surrounding Jacob's last words are but a reflection of the verses themselves. On one hand Jacob talks about telling them of "what is to befall you in DAYS TO COME". Others translate this phrase more ominously as "the end of days". Apparently, Jacob wishes to reveal the future. But when we look at the blessings, no future events as such are predicted!

On the other hand, the concluding verse of this chapter talks of blessings:

"All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them; he blessed them, blessing each one with a blessing appropriate to him." (50:28)

And then there is the content of the messages to the 12 children. Are these really blessings? When Joseph curses the

violence and anger of Simeon and Levi, could that be seen as a blessing? Are these messages Jacob's final moral rebuke to his sons?

So the ambiguity here lies in the very fabric of the chapter. The introduction gives one pointer, the conclusion another, and the content is also unclear. What was it that he was trying to communicate as he lay on his death-bed?

THE SEARCH FOR A KING

The **Abarbanel** is troubled by the nature of these messages. After presenting his four possibilities for the purpose of this last testament of Jacob, he analyses the chapter again and opts for a fifth approach. The Abarbanel tells us that these "blessings" do have a single focus. They are aimed at laying a most deliberate stress on the DIFFERENCES between the brothers. This is because Jacob is searching for the individual who is most suitable for the future leadership of the Jewish people. This is what he writes :

"As to the purpose of these statements and blessings. I think that Jacob, at the time of his death, wanted to explain and clarify from which of his children would emerge the future leadership and government of his descendents. He realised and saw through prophecy that his children would form a large collective and they would need a leader or a king, a governor of some sort. At the time of his death, Jacob wished to clarify from where the leadership and monarchy would come in order that the nation should not descend into conflict and argument over the appointment of a leader.

To this end he performed a review and an analysis of each and every one of his sons, their personality, traits and talents to determine who was most fit for the leadership ... for the nature of children...will be a product of the basic pattern set by their ancestor.. It was for this reason that he mentions here, son by son; with some, his character traits, with others, future events which will occur to his descendents. This is not for blessing, nor is it for moral correction, nor to tell the future ... It is to explain and inform who will be fitting for leadership and high office."

So now we understand why the chapter mentions the faults of some brothers and the praises of others. Let us look at one example.

REUBEN

Reuben is Jacob's first-born and therefore, the most immediate choice for leadership. Jacob stresses this in his blessing when he calls him "my might and first fruit of my vigour". He is the first in line. This is Jacob describing his expectations of Reuven. But Jacob also tells of how Reuven failed to act on this powerful potential. Jacob calls him "unstable as water". He stresses that he shall "excel no longer". Why is Reuven described as "unstable"? Why does he lose his privileged position?

We might point to the fact that Reuven is most definitely a leader. The brothers follow him on many occasions. But if we look closely at the Biblical story, we observe how in each case that Reuven demonstrates some initiative, he seems to fail to rise fully to the moment. Let us explain.

1. The brothers sieze Joseph and want to kill him. Reuben wants to do the moral thing; he wants to save Joseph's life. So he suggests that rather than killing him, the brothers throw him into a pit. The text records for us, the readers, that Reuben's

real plan was to "save him from them and restore him to his father" (37:22). But Reuben's plan fails. By the time that Reuben gets back to the pit, Joseph has already been sold.

"When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes. Returning to his brothers, he said, 'The boy is gone! Now what am I to do?'" (37:29-30)

Reuben's leadership goes only so far. He doesn't manage to save the situation.

2. A second and similar occurrence takes place later in the story when there is a need to take Benjamin back to Egypt. The mysterious viceroy of Egypt has demanded the presence of Benjamin and the brothers know that they will starve if they do not comply with his wishes. Reuven makes a suggestion to his father in order to facilitate their return to Egypt while at the same time giving protection to Binyamin. The moment the brothers arrive home Reuven offers:

"You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you." (42:37)

Jacob does not take Reuven seriously. After all, what sort of a comfort is this? Jacob is worried about losing a son and Reuven suggests that if he loses hold of Benjamin, his own two sons should die. Reuben makes a concerted effort to lead but his timing is bad and his suggestion - while eager and showing good intent - is unconvincing. Rather, it is Yehudah who later finds the right moment to persuade his father and convinces him of his commitment to Benjamin's security. In the final analysis, Jacob listens to Yehudah and not to Reuben.

3. Even Reuven's sin; the time when he slept with his father's concubine (35:22) is an attempt to assume a position of leadership. Taking the wife of the head of the household is an attempt to assume that position. (cf. Samuel II 16:22 when Absalom sleeps with King David's concubine as a sign that he is his heir as monarch and see also I Kings 2:13-24) But Reuben always seems to fail to act in the correct way, in spite of the best intentions. He is, in this sense, "unstable". He is not an unstable person, but he is an unstable leader.

So the Abarbanel raises the issue of leadership as the central concern of Jacob's final speech. Indeed, every son who is mentioned can be seen in this perspective. Dan is mentioned in his ability to fight wars, just that his war would be a guerrilla warfare (typified by the Dan-ite Samson) - "a viper by the roadside" - unsuitable for kings and statesmen. Asher too has a relationship to the throne. He will provide, food and other delicacies for the king, but he too will not become the leader. Jacob chooses Yehudah to lead. It is Yehudah who is seen by the brothers as leader and it is he who has shown a steady composure and a reliable and effective leadership over the past chapters. It is Yehudah who is given the sceptre of the future monarchy.

ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL

The Abarbanel's theory is sound, but nonetheless, a little troubling; for on the basis of his thinking, it would appear that this last will and testament does more to divide and arouse resentment between the brothers than it unifies them.

A comment by the Or Hachayim on the concluding verse of this last speech of Jacob, provides a very different direction to that of the Abarbanel, but a more unified angle on the entire chapter. The verse states:

"All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them; he blessed them all, blessing each one with a blessing appropriate to him." (50:28)

The Or Hachayim comments:

"A BLESSING APPROPRIATE TO HIM: A blessing which matched the inner traits of his soul and his actions. For every soul has a particular virtue. It may be the priestly service or the majesty of a monarch, the crown of Torah or physical strength, wealth or simple good fortune. Jacob wanted his blessings here to bring out the inner nature of every son. HE BLESSED THEM ALL: He blesses them as a collective, for the particular blessing of every one of the brothers will help all the brothers. When one brother has a particular virtue ... a small amount of that virtue will reach each and every one of the brothers."

In this reading, our chapter is about emphasising the unique characteristics of each of the tribes. That is the "blessing" of each tribe. But it does not lead to competition or rivalry. Jacob gathers them all together so that they realise that every one has something unique. Each brother has something to contribute to the others. Each brother can add his uniqueness to the family as a unit.

Even Jacob's curses may be understood as blessings in this light. Rabbi S.R Hirsch expresses this teaching when Jacob curses Simeon and Levi. These are two sons who had killed innocent civilians in the town of Shechem. Jacob curses their anger, but then adds that "I will divide them in Jacob" (see the verses above). Rabbi Hirsch has an interesting approach here. He talks of the motives which prompted Simeon and Levi to action: family pride, a sense of the dignity of the Jewish people, an unwillingness to see their sister disgraced, to be taken advantage of.

Rabbi Hirsch explains that these motives can be good and beneficial, but only when applied in moderation. In its extreme form of Simeon and Levi, this feeling of pride and of self-respect becomes dangerous, even explosive. Their outrage leads to murder. In this sense, when Simeon and Levi are "a pair" their anger must be cursed. However, when these feelings of self-worth and national dignity are divided throughout the family, when the intensity is divided by twelve, then this can be a most valuable and essential commodity for a nation.

UNITY THROUGH DIFFERENCE

This approach stresses the unity of the Jewish nation. But this unity is not a unity through conformism and uniformity. The togetherness that Jacob proposes for his children is one that takes account of the differences between his sons; of their various talents and strengths, their strong temperaments and ideologies. Jacob suggests that the family can live together despite their differences. In fact Jacob goes a step further; the family will be built precisely because of the tribe's differences. It is the unique nature of each tribe which will build a stronger Israel.

May this be a lesson that we learn today; to accept the difference of other groups within our nations. That we begin to learn from the strengths of others rather than fighting them, attempting to make them more like ourselves. We can be strong and unified in our various shades and colours. In this way, we too might just merit the blessings of our forefathers when they see "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live

together harmoniously." (Psalms 133:1)

Shabbat Shalom

¹ There is a certain irony here in Jacob's meticulous preparation for his passing from the world. I say this because in certain ways, Yaakov Avinu was a man who always sought to be in control, to guide events, and yet, in his lifetime, was never allowed to be the master of them. Let me explain.

Yaakov always seeks to control his destiny. Even at birth he holds on to Esav's heel as if to control him. (For a slightly different angle on this theme, see Aviva Zornberg's book; Genesis: the beginning of desire, pg. 229-231.) At a young age he invests in the future by assuring his rights to the Birthright. He thinks that this will buy the role of Firstborn. Later in life, he masquerades as his brother in order to secure the family future, but yet, events do not match his careful planning, and the usurping of Esav's blessings lead to the opposite effect. He is forced to leave the parental home.

In Laban's house, he is promised a wife. He works for her, and all would seem to be organised. Yet he is tricked in to marrying another woman. (A famous midrash suggests that there was a special code between Rachel and Yaakov - Yaakov constantly aware of the possibility of deception - but the code was broken by Rachel.)

Yaakov plans out the meeting with Esav with painstaking care, aiming to split his camp and meet him in a strategically secure way. But yet, we read the story and realise that events do not turn that way. A night-time adversary wrestles with Jacob and he emerges bruised and limping and just at that moment Esav arrives.

In situation after situation we gain the feeling that Yaakov tries to plan events so that they follow the course which he sets for them. Each time, it seems that God prevents his desire from becoming reality. As Rashi states just a few parshiot ago:

"At the moment when Yaakov wished to live in stability and serenity, he was struck by the upheaval of Yoseph... God said: is the portion in the next world not sufficient that they desire peace in this world too?" (Rashi on 37:1)

In this parsha, Yaakov is allowed to lay out all his plans with great care and detail and we are left with the distinct impression that this time, his final bequest will be honoured..