

מתוקים מדבש



Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah

RABBI DAVID RICEMAN

Bemachshvah Techilah

Sefer Bereishis starts and ends with blessings. At the beginning of the book, when G-d creates the world, He gives three blessings. He blesses fish and fowl with fecundity (1:23), He blesses people with fecundity and dominion (1:28), and He blesses the Sabbath day without specifying the blessing (2:3). At the end of the book, our ancestor Ya'akov gives three blessings. He blesses Yosef with fecundity for his children Efraim and Menasheh (48:15-16), he blesses Efraim and Menasheh with being a paradigm for blessing (48:20), and he blesses his twelve sons "each according to his own blessing" (49:28).

Arguably Ya'akov himself has fulfilled two of the three blessings with which the book began. In Parshas Vayeitzei, Ya'akov and his flocks demonstrate their own miraculous fecundity. In the beginning of Sefer Shemos, setting the stage for what comes next, we find that Ya'akov's descendants "were fruitful, swarmed, multiplied, became very strong, and filled the land" (1:7). At first glance the blessing of the Sabbath day drops out of the book, and does not reappear until the Jews reach Marah, well into Sefer Shemos¹. I shall argue below that the blessing of the Sabbath day plays a central role in Sefer Bereishis, and, indeed, that Ya'akov has fulfilled it as well.

¹ Compare Rashi on Gen. 2:3, s.v. "vayevarech vayekadesh"

First, however, it behooves us to understand what a blessing is, and how it takes effect. R' Moshe Nachmanides (Ramban) noted an interesting difference between the first two blessings of Sefer Bereishis:

*This [second blessing] is an actual blessing, and therefore the Bible adds "and G-d said to them". Previously [in the first blessing, 1:22] it said "G-d blessed them saying," implying that the blessing gave them the faculty of fecundity, not that it was a spoken blessing.*²

He is pointing here to an essential difference between people and animals. Animals are primarily driven by instinct, and, in order to make them reproduce, G-d needed to make reproduction instinctive. People, however, have the capacity to give themselves instincts. As a result, they must consciously set up their lives in such a way as to encourage fecundity. G-d needs to tell them what to do, not merely to hardwire it.

Now anyone who has ridden a horse knows that this is an over-generalization. Animals also can be trained. The difference is that almost all of people's instincts are mediated through society, whereas most animals' instincts are instinctive. People need to make social arrangements in order to bring up children, but animals generally do not.

This is what the philosophers meant when they call habit "second nature". People have the capacity to

² Nachmanides' Commentary on Gen. 1:28

instill instincts into themselves, and, once instilled, those habits seem natural. Yet not every habit can be instilled. People do have individual natures, and not everyone can end up identical, no matter how thoroughly processed at home and school. This is the definition of blessing: a blessing is an indication of a type of second nature that a person can and should instill within himself. This is emphasized most clearly in the final blessing of Sefer Bereishis: after Ya'akov blesses his sons the Bible comments that "he blessed them each according to his own blessing" (49:28). In other words, he described to each son his own individual talents, and suggested that he develop those particular traits.

I have not yet mentioned the central blessing of Sefer Bereishis. It appears in many summaries throughout the book, for example, Yitzchak's second blessing of Ya'akov: "May G-d bless you, make you fruitful and help you multiply. And may you be a confederation of nations. May G-d give the blessing of Avraham to you and your descendants, that you inherit the land you dwell, which G-d gave to Avraham" (28:3-4). At first glance this seems fairly straightforward: G-d's blessing of Avraham is a promise about a certain piece of real estate. When we look more carefully, however, we realize that the blessing truly signifies something more.

G-d's first promise to Avraham includes the phrase "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you. All the nations of the world will be blessed through you"

(12:3). Our sages comment “Anyone who blesses is himself blessed.”³ What do the sages mean by that?

Think once again of the act of blessing. To bless someone you point out a trait of his character that he can and should develop. Blessing someone requires that the blesser know him well enough to recognize traits that ought to be encouraged, and to specify them. Not only does this require knowing the person blessed, it requires that the blesser have a system of values, so that he can decide what is important. A blessing, in other words, is not only a suggestion about the recipient’s personality, it is a suggestion about the recipient’s goals.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book “After Virtue”, chapter 5, cites a dispute between Aristotle and David Hume. Aristotle believed that, ideally, a person’s intellect ought to control his passions and desires, whereas someone whose intellect was subservient to his passions and desires had simply not fully developed himself. Hume, on the other hand, believed that people’s intellects are always subservient to their desires.

³ This appears several times in Chazal. See Rabbeinu Bachya, *Kad HaKemach*, s.v. “bracha”, ed. Chavel, p. 85.

Each and every one of us ordinarily fine, upstanding Torah-observant Jews has his or her challenges in the course of a workday. Not only to be successful, bright, and productive – but to in fact be fine, upstanding Torah-observant Jews at the same time. Some of us fail, the truth be known; and some few fail rather loudly at that. While others manage to do quite well.

So when “one of us” manages to succeed in business and to maintain his or her moral, spiritual

A blessing, by its very nature, makes desires subservient to intellect. The goals of the blesser are not driven by the desires of the blessed. This is most clearly emphasized in the third blessing of Sefer Breishis: “G-d blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it” (2:3). G-d sanctified the Sabbath by making it a day devoted to sanctity, to G-d’s desires, not our own. The blessing of the Sabbath was precisely its sanctity, its goal.

There are two types of blessings. A partial blessing is a blessing without an explicit goal, for example, a blessing of fecundity. Even a disciple of Hume can benefit from such a blessing. A full blessing is a blessing leading to sanctity, for example, the blessing of the Sabbath, something only a disciple of Aristotle can appreciate. Avraham’s blessing was not only that he inherit the land of Israel, but that he use it to develop his sanctity. The distinctive feature of the blessing of Avraham is that its purpose is sanctity. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov, who strived for sanctity, fulfilled the blessing of the Sabbath.

Now we can understand our sages’ gloss. When G-d promised Avraham “I will bless those who bless you,” they generalized this to “anyone who blesses is blessed.” In order to give a full blessing, one must have a goal.

compass we all need to learn what that person did right.

Our best role model for that has always been Yosef, of course. Since he remained a *tzaddik* in some very public and powerful circumstances, as Rabbeinu Yerucham of the Mir pointed out, “which is no small thing!” After all, one would need “an astounding amount of inner fortitude” to do that¹.

¹ Da’as Torah

Someone who blesses Avraham first recognizes that Avraham has devoted his life to G-d, to sanctity. The fact that a person cares enough about sanctity to bless someone like Avraham indicates that, even in his own life, he is devoted to sanctity.

Our sages tell us:

G-d said: originally I had to give my own blessings. I blessed Adam and Eve, ... I blessed Noach and his children, ... I blessed Avraham.... G-d told Avraham: From now on you will be responsible for blessings Avraham had two children and did not bless them ... and G-d blessed Yitzchak.... Yitzchak blessed Ya’akov and Ya’akov blessed his twelve sons G-d told Moshe: From now on you will be responsible for blessings; the kohanim will bless Israel G-d said: In this world the kohanim will bless you, in the future I will bless you My Self, as it says “G-d will bless you from his righteous dwelling, the holy mountain” (Jer. 31:22).⁴

Sefer Bereishis details the transition from people who lack goals, who must be directly blessed by G-d, to a people who have sufficiently clear goals that we can bless one another.

⁴ Cited from several sources in Bachya, *ibid.* pp. 86-87

RABBI YA’AKOV FELDMAN

Bakeish Shalom

Rabbeinu Yerucham then poses the obvious question: What enabled Yosef to do that? Faith and dedication to *halachah* alone does not do the trick, the truth be known, as experience will tell. So there must be something aside from that. But, what?

Rabbeinu Yerucham offers that the thing to do is to always have a certain “goal in mind” which he goes on to enunciate.

It is important first, though, to talk about the whole notion of goals – spiritual goals most especially, since

the latter is a hardly-know notion in our day and age.

What sets high achievers apart from the rest of us in general is that they dream of achieving high and distant goals, while we frankly only hope to get by unscarred. Along the same lines that sets those of high spiritual achievement – *tzaddikim* – apart from the rest of us is the fact that they have **spiritual** goals, first off; secondly, that those spiritual goals are high and distant; and thirdly, that they largely achieve them.

Obviously, then, we would need to have spiritual goals if we are to be the Jews that we are capable of being.

The one goal that Rabbeinu Yerucham suggests is based on the directive made at the very beginning of Messilas Yesharim that the things “we are to direct our sights and proclivities towards ... should become clear and self-evident”. So, what in fact should we direct those “sights and proclivities” toward?

The realization that “we were created to delight in G-d and to enjoy

the radiance of His Divine Presence”², and nothing less.

How glorious a *raison d’etre*, how lofty a perch, and how very much deeper and overarching a mission that is than material success! Could anyone with that as his or her life-motto fail to keep things in perspective? Would anyone doubt that this is in fact what Yosef realized in his day-to-day life and what helped him lunge forward in his being?

The point to be made about this goal is that it is rooted in caring more for G-d and your relationship to Him than anything else. Hence, it challenges us to place our day to day on a higher plane.

In fact, we find a number of quotes from Mussar authorities that corroborate just that idea. So I will now provide some and suggest that you and I both take them to heart and make them personal mottos and mission-statements if we are ever to achieve the spiritual-material balance required of us as Jews.

Rabbeinu Bachya Ibn Pakudah indicates “that every single obligation

² Ibid. Ch. 1

and good quality required of us ... is an aspect of and a step up to the love of G-d, which is their aim and purpose”³.

Rabbeinu Yonah encourages us to realize that “the Creator breathed a living spirit into (our) nostrils, along with a knowing heart and good sense, so as to be conscious of G-d and fear Him, and to reign over (our) body and all its effects”⁴.

And finally, Ramchal says elsewhere that “a person should always ask himself, ‘What am I?’, ‘Why have I come into the world?’, ‘What does G-d require of me?’, and ‘What will my end be?’.... And he should ... ruminate about what good things he should be doing in his life, then do them”⁵.

May the Ribbono Shel Olam grant us all the wherewithal to live up to our potential – and may we be willing to take Him up on His offer!

³ Chovos HaLevavos, Introduction to the Gate of the Love of G-d

⁴ Sha’arei Teshuvah, 1:10

⁵ Introduction to K’lach Pischei Chochmah

REB MICHAEL POPPERS

Sefasai Tiftach

I would like to dedicate this d'var Torah to Debra Appelbaum (whom I was unable to provide n'chamah to after a suicide bomber prevented my cousin from marrying her daughter Naava H'y'd' a few months ago).

Ya'akov Avinu passes away in this week's *sedra*, and for the first time the Torah explicitly tells us¹ that one of the post-*petirah* activities was “*eivel, shiv'as yamim*” (a seven-day period of mourning). I pray that those of us who have never experienced *aveilus* should remain in such a state until their close relatives² reach the exalted age of *mei'ah ve'esrim*³, but

¹ The concept is mentioned earlier (see Bereishis 27:41; to an extent, 37:34ff. is also worth noting).

² See Vayikra 21:2-3

³ See Bereishis 6:3

nearly all of us who are *Ashkenazim*⁴ are familiar, perhaps too familiar, with one aspect of *aveilus* accomplished by those who come *l'hisnacheim*⁵ (to console), namely the utterance of the phrase “*Ha-Makom yenacheim eschem besoch sh'ar aveilai Tziyon viYrushalayim*” (May G-d comfort you among the other mourners for Zion and Jerusalem). I would like to spend a few moments with you considering this phrase's components while hoping

⁴ *Sephardim*, I am told, follow the Rambam – see Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Aveil 13:2.

⁵ See Bereishis 37:35

that the cause of mourning will soon become an historical footnote⁶.

“HaMakom”

This phrase differs from the language used in the Mishnah⁷, possibly because the speaker is not together with the mourner near the *mekom haMikdash* but nevertheless

⁶ As per many prophecies – especially see Yishayahu 25:8 and the 2nd & 3rd parshiyos of Yirmiyahu 31.

⁷ Middos 2:2: “*HaShochein baBayis hazeh yenachemcha*”

wants to evoke that place with a term used by *Chazal*⁸.

While we could refer to the Mishnaic "*haShochein baBayis hazeh*" using other *kinuyim*, e.g. *haKadosh*, which also would connect us with the *Beis HaMikdash*, the Torah utilizes "*makom*" as our first⁹ and repeated¹⁰ introduction to the area. It may also be worth noting¹¹ that the Arabic equivalent, '*maqam*,' translates as not just "place" but "**holy** place," something for us to consider as we speak of G-d by way of the holiest place on Earth.

"Yenacheim"

This is the only holdover from the language of the Mishnah, and used by the Torah in reference to the patriarch who passes away in this week's *sedra*¹². As explained by R' Samson Raphael Hirsch¹³, the intent apparently is to help the mourner not only deal with the current, sad situation but also come to a type of "*gam zu l'tovah*" recognition, what Prof. Matisyahu Clark might call¹⁴ a "change [of] attitudes."

"Eschem"

I grew up in a community that grammatically altered this word based on whether male or female *aveilim* were present¹⁵. I live in a community that is bidden not to do so. Whether Jews are the subject (e.g. uttering "*modeh ani*" vs.

"*modah ani*") or the object (e.g. wishing "*L'shanah tovah tikaseiv*" vs. "...*tikaseivi*," "*tikaseivu*," or "*tikasavnah*"), gender and number appear to be important grammatical concerns, so why do some not alter "*eschem*" based on the object(s)? One possible answer¹⁶ resonates personally¹⁷: the departed is in some manner still present and is also being addressed, such that the plural number is appropriate¹⁸. This answer could additionally explain why we seemingly also violate number (and, possibly, gender) considerations when greeting a fellow Jew or Jewess with "*Shalom aleichem*," especially as "*Shalom*," like "*HaMakom*," is a Divine name¹⁹ and as both terms center our thoughts upon the location of the *Beis HaMikdash*²⁰. Moreover, it could imply a *limud z'chus* for the *niftar* as one of those who was "*misabeil al Yerushalayim*" (mourned for Jerusalem) during his lifetime and thus is truly "*besoch sh'ar aveilai Tziyon viYrushalayim*" who will be merit to witness its happiness, "*b'simchasah*."²¹

¹⁶ Perhaps based on Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Aveil 14:7

¹⁷ I sat in *aveilus* for my father *a'h'* (who was bedridden for a few months before his passing) just before my wedding, and one member of the community offered wonderful *nechamah* in noting that, free of its physical bounds, his *neshamah* would now be gloriously present at the upcoming *simchah*.

¹⁸ However, when no men are listening to the "...*eschem*..." the matter is still unclear, as the word "*neshamah*" is feminine in gender. Perhaps more than just the *neshamah* is present, or perhaps we need to take the passage from the Rambam (above note 16) more literally...

¹⁹ See Rus 2:4 (i.e. we use "*Shalom*" instead of the Tetragrammaton), and also note Ramban on Bereishis 14:18 ("*HKBH*, *sheniqra Tzedek*" – perhaps "*melech Shaleim*" can also be seen as a parallel to "*Malki-Tzedek*").

²⁰ In addition to previous references, see Tehilim 76:3.

²¹ See Ta'anis 30b

"Besoch Sh'ar Aveilai Tziyon ViYrushalayim"

The Mishnah²² does not mention this phrase, but *minhag Ashkenaz* does, apparently, as noted above, because the *aveil* is not currently walking within the precincts of *Yerushalayim*. A possible implication is that the mourner is not alone in his sad state, just as the *aveil* of the Mishnah was presumably not the only one walking the "wrong way," but saying to a fellow Jew that "misery loves company"²³ seems like small comfort. (In response, some have suggested that the phrase's "*sh'ar*" [with an *aleph*] actually is "*sha'ar*" [with an *ayin*] and thus the phrase both connects with the Mishnaic situation and lacks the mentioned problem, but the custom, as recorded for at least the last few centuries, intends that those comforting the mourner say the former word.) Returning to the thought expressed in the previous stanza, the intent may actually be to help the *aveil*, in concert with the speaker, look ahead to a Messianic time of *simchah*, a time when the speaker, *aveil*, and *niftar* all can once again see each other in the flesh and together celebrate the elimination of the state of *aveilus*. May we merit to witness and share in that time!

²² Above note 7

²³ Henry David Thoreau

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⁸ See Bereishis Rabba 68:9

⁹ See Bereishis 13:3

¹⁰ See Bereishis 13:14, 22:3-14, 28:11-22 (compare 28:14 with 13:14).

¹¹ This as per Mark Steiner – see http://www.ottmall.com/mj_ht_arch/v34/mj_v34i12.html#CCW

¹² See above note 5.

¹³ See his commentary to Tehilim 119:76

¹⁴ "Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew," p. 154

¹⁵ Apparently based on the singular number in the Mishnah (above note 7); also see Perishah, Tur YD 393:3, and *Siddur Avodas Yisrael*, end of Seder Kabbalas Shabbos.