S efer 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 Shemos. 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.

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. 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 overgeneralization. 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 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”
E ach 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 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 that.

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 My Self, as it says “G-d will bless you My Self” (Jer. 31:22).

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.

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 Rabbeini Yerucham suggests is based on the directive made at the very beginning of Messillas 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 Presence⁴, and nothing less.

How glorious a raison d’être, 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.

Rabbeini Bachya Ibn Pakudah indicates “that every single obligation 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 purpose⁵.

Rabbeini 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 effects⁶.

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 them⁷.

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!

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1. Bereishis 27:41; to an extent, 37:34ff. is also worth noting.
2. Vayikra 21:2-3
3. Ibid. Ch. 1
4. Sha’arei Teshuvah, 1:10
5. Introduction to K’lach Pischei Chochmah
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 ha-zeh" using other kinuyim, e.g. haKadosh, which also would connect us with the Beis HaMikdash, the Torah utilizes "ma-kom" 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 that time!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 present5. I live in a community that is bidden not to do so. Whether Jews are the subject (e.g. uttering "modah ani") or the object (e.g. wishing "L'shanah tovah tikaseiv" vs. "...tikaseiv," "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 HaMikdash20. 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"

Perhaps based on Mishne 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 neshamah in noting that, free of its physical bounds, his neshamah would now be gloriously present at the upcoming simchah.

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 ("HKBI, shinigra Tsedek" – perhaps "melech Shuleim" can also be seen as a parallel to "Malki-Tzedek").

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

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

21 See Ta'ansis 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!

8 See Bereisht Rabbah 68:9
9 See Bereisht 13:3
11 This is 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 Tehillim 119:76
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.
16 Perhaps based on Mishne 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 neshamah 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...
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20 In addition to previous references, see Tehilim 76:3.
21 See Ta'ansis 30b
22 Above note 7
23 Henry David Thoreau

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