

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

The book of Bereishit ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Jacob's sons. Joseph's brothers were afraid that he had not really forgiven them for selling him into slavery. They suspected that he was merely delaying his revenge until their father died. After Jacob's death, they express their concern to him. But Joseph insists: "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21)

This is the second time Joseph has said something like this to them. Earlier he spoke similarly when he first disclosed that he -- the man they thought was an Egyptian viceroy called Tzophnat Pa'aneach -- was in fact their brother Joseph: "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45:3-8)

This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have suffered. But it also establishes another important principle: the idea of Divine Providence. History is not, as Joseph Heller called it, "a trash bag of random coincidences blown open in the wind." (Good as Gold [Simon & Schuster, 1979], 74) It has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is at work behind the scenes. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends," says Hamlet, "rough-hew them how we will." (Hamlet,

Act 5, scene 2)

Joseph's greatness was that he sensed this. He saw the bigger picture. Nothing in his life, he now knew, had happened by accident. The plot to kill him, his sale as a slave, the false accusations of Potiphar's wife, his time in prison, and his disappointed hope that the chief butler would remember him and secure his release -- all these events that might have cast him into ever-deeper depths of despair turned out in retrospect to be necessary steps in the journey that eventuated in his becoming second-in-command in Egypt and the one person capable of saving the whole country -- as well as his own family -- from starvation in the years of famine.

Joseph had, in double measure, one of the necessary gifts of a leader: the ability to keep going despite opposition, envy, false accusation and repeated setbacks. Every leader who stands for anything will face opposition. This may be a genuine conflict of interests. A leader elected to make society more equitable will almost certainly win the support of the poor and the antagonism of the rich. One elected to reduce the tax burden will do the opposite. It cannot be avoided. Politics without conflict is a contradiction in terms.

Any leader elected to anything, any leader more loved or gifted than others, will face envy. Rivals will question, "Why wasn't it me?" That is what Korach thought about Moses and Aaron. It is what the brothers thought about Joseph when they saw that their father favoured him. It is what Antonio Salieri thought about the more gifted Mozart, according to Peter Shaffer's play Amadeus.

As for false accusations, they have occurred often enough in history. Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and burned at the stake. A quarter century later she was posthumously declared innocent by an official court of inquiry. More than twenty people were put to death as a result of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692-3. Years later, as their innocence began to be perceived, a priest present at the trials, John Hale, admitted, "Such was the darkness of that day... that we walked in the

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in memory of
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חיים ניסן בן יצחק אייזק ז"ל
נפטר ט"ו טבת תש"כ

clouds, and could not see our way." (Quoted in Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present*, vol. I [Pearson, 2001], 94.)

The most famous false accusation of modern times was the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent who was accused of being a German spy. The Dreyfus affair rocked France during the years 1894 and 1906, until Dreyfus was finally acquitted.

Setbacks are almost always a part of the life-story of the most successful. J. K. Rowling's initial Harry Potter novel was rejected by the first twelve publishers who received it. Another writer of a book about children suffered twenty-one rejections. The book was called *Lord of the Flies*, and its author, William Golding, was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

In his famous commencement address at Stanford University, the late Steve Jobs told the story of the three blows of fate that shaped his life: dropping out of university; being fired from Apple, the company he founded; and being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Rather than being defeated by them, he turned them all to creative use.

For twenty-two years I lived close to Abbey Road in North London, where a famous pop group recorded all their hits. At their first audition, they performed for a record company who told them that guitar bands were "on their way out." The verdict on their performance (in January 1962) was: "The Beatles have no future in show business."

All this explains Winston Churchill's great remark that "success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

It may be that what sustains people through repeated setbacks is belief in themselves, or sheer tenacity, or lack of alternatives. What sustained Joseph, though, was his insight into Divine Providence. A plan was unfolding whose end he could only dimly discern, but at some stage he seems to have realised that he was just one of many characters in a far larger drama, and that all the bad things that had happened to him were necessary if the intended outcome was to occur. As he said to his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God."

This willingness to let events work themselves out in accordance with providence, this understanding that we are, at best, no more than co-authors of our lives, allowed Joseph to survive without resentment about the past or despair in the face of the future. Trust in God gave him immense strength, which is what we will all need if we are to dare greatly. Whatever malice other people harbour against leaders -- and the more successful they are, the more malice there is -- if they can say, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good," they will survive, their strength intact, their energy undiminished. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl*

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Gather together and I shall tell you what is to happen at the end of the days" (Genesis 49:1)

The portion of Vayehi, and the entire Book of Genesis, concludes with Jacob's deathbed scene in which he "reveals to his sons what will befall them at the end of the days," expressing the various strengths and weaknesses of each of his heirs and foretelling what each tribe will contribute to the great collage of future Jewish history. He is both Jacob the father of a family as well as Israel the father of a nation -- and he leaves the world in the fullness of his success as a parent who has finally united his family and as a patriarch who has established the guidelines for an emerging nation with a mission to unite the world.

Jacob is indeed called by our Sages "the chosen one of the Patriarchs." What made him deserve this very special accolade? What is the unique contribution which he made to the legacies of Abraham and Isaac? Our Sages compare Abraham to a mountain, Isaac to a field and Jacob to a house (or household) (Pesachim 88a)

Apparently, the secret to a successful family -- as well to a successful nation, which is after all, a family "writ large" -- is to be found within the persona of Jacob, perhaps even within the very blessings he bequeaths to his sons. What is it? The major challenge to each of the Patriarchs was that of succession. Each needed to identify which of the children in the next generation would be the bearer of the Abrahamic legacy. The major struggle within Jacob's life was the deception he perpetrated upon his father, albeit at the behest of his mother, to wrest away the blessings Isaac had meant to bestow upon his older brother, Esau.

This act of deception, no matter how justified it may have been in the light of the characteristics of each of the brothers, was to haunt Jacob for the rest of his life: He is deceived by Laban, who argues that in his place the younger sister does not receive a prize before the elder; he is deceived by his sons who tell him that a wild beast tore apart his beloved Joseph; and he is even deceived by Joseph who, while dressed up as the Grand Vizier, requests that Jacob send Rachel's only remaining son, Benjamin, to Egypt.

His punishment goes even further: His beloved Rachel dies before her time because she deceives her father Laban by stealing his household gods (in the Mari and Nuzu documents from that time, the one who got the household gods also received the parental inheritance.)

And Jacob seems to be so resentful of his loving mother's role in suggesting and facilitating his deception that the Bible mentions his weeping over and providing the burial for his nurse Deborah with ne'er a

mention of Rebekah's death and Jacob's mourning over her.

Now, at the end of his life, the time has come for Jacob to bless his own sons. In previous commentaries, I have maintained that Isaac wanted to give the material blessings to Esau and the spiritual "messianic" blessings to Jacob, whereas Rebekah had insisted that both areas of leadership must go to the same son, to Jacob.

And indeed, Joseph's dreams expressed his mastery in both the realm of the material (the 11 sheaves of grain bowing down to his sheaf) as well as of the spiritual (the 11 stars bowing down to him). Logic would indicate that Joseph would receive both of these blessings from Jacob.

But this is not to be the case. You will remember that, in the past, the rejected son was ousted from the family: Ishmael was actually banished from Abraham's household and Esau left the ancestral homeland for Seir-Edom. Jacob has learned that different strengths may warrant different blessings, that in a true family one victor need not be the recipient of all with the loser going into exile. A family – much like an orchestra – provides the possibility for different individuals (or tribes) each playing the instrument they can play best for the ultimate achievement of a harmonious symphony.

Hence Judah receives the spiritual blessing of the scepter of messianic leadership, the ingathering of all of the nations to Jerusalem when the world will be at peace (Gen. 49:10). And Joseph receives the blessing of material fruitfulness (the ten tribes, especially Ephraim and Manasseh) and the physical ability to overcome the arrows of our enemies (ibid. 22-26). Jacob succeeded in uniting his family and in giving a charge to the tribes for a united nation. The latter has yet to be achieved – and therein lies the prescription for the true coming of our redemption. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

At the end of the book of Bereshith, as we read in this week's Torah reading, there is little warning as to what the very next Torah reading will discuss and describe. The transition, from the benign and idyllic last years of the life of our father Jacob, is a harsh reality of servitude and slavery visited upon his descendants.

From the biblical narrative, it appears to have been sudden and unexpected. However, we already read in this week's concluding Torah reading of the first book of the Bible, that both Jacob and Joseph speak of redemption from the sojourn in the land of Egypt and a return to the land of Israel.

From the nuances of their words and the hope and prayer that they expressed, it is obvious that they

wish to warn the Jewish people that their future lay not in the land of Goshen or the flesh pots of Egypt but rather their stay in Egypt, no matter how many centuries long, should be viewed as only a temporary one.

In this, our forefathers indicated to us that this would be the pattern of Jewish history throughout the ages and that no matter how long the Jewish people would live in countries and areas outside of the land of Israel they should never view those societies as being permanent.

The remarkable thing about Jewish history is how repetitive it has been. If the Jewish presence in ancient Egypt was only for a few centuries, the presence of the Jews in areas such as Babylonia, Egypt, and Eastern Europe generally was for many more centuries than that of Egypt. We are all aware that all those societies came to an end, Jewishly speaking, as did ancient Egypt.

The last words of Jacob and Joseph were to the effect that the Lord would take the Jewish people from Egypt and return them to their ancient homeland, the land of Israel. It is this final message of the book of Bereshith that haunts them and follows the Jewish people throughout the biblical narrative of the remaining four books of the Torah.

Whenever troublesome challenges arose, regardless of the great miracles of survival the Jewish people were blessed with, there always was an element within the people that said it was preferable to return to Egypt rather than continue the struggle for Jewish identity and independence that only the land of Israel could guarantee to them.

Apparently, Jacob and Joseph were aware of this tendency towards weakness and assimilation within their descendants. Their final message to all future generations of the Jewish people concentrated on the belief that the Lord would certainly redeem the Jewish people from all exiles, whether benign or cruel, and restore them to the challenge of independent nationhood in the land of Israel. That is why at the conclusion of this week's Torah reading we will repeat our ancient model and prayer to be strong and to strengthen ourselves and others for the tasks that always lie ahead. ©2020 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Notified that his father Ya'akov (Jacob) is sick, Yosef (Joseph) takes his sons Ephraim and Menashe to see their grandfather. As they enter, Ya'akov proclaims "mi eileh"? "Who are these"? (Genesis 48:8)

Having already been in Egypt for 17 years, is it possible that Ya'akov didn't know the identity of his grandsons?

Some commentators suggest a physical reason for Ya'akov's question. Bearing in mind that Ya'akov could not see, he could not recognize his grandsons even as they stand before him. (Chizkuni, Rashbam, Radak)

Alternatively, Ya'akov may not recognize his grandchildren because he has little relationship with them. This could be because, for some reason, Yosef rarely ever took them to Ya'akov.

Another approach: Ya'akov's question "mi eileh" does not refer to his grandsons themselves, but rather a question about their progeny. Prophetically, Ya'akov discerned that amongst the descendants of Ephraim and Menashe would be evil people. Ya'akov inquires, "who are they"? How is it possible that such evil men could come from good people like Ephraim and Menashe? (Midrash Tanchuma)

Perhaps, too, "mi eileh," is an existential question. Having grown up in Egypt, Ephraim and Menashe must have, on some level, assimilated into Egyptian society. Standing before Ya'akov as Jews living in Egypt, Ya'akov asks, "who are these"? What he is really asking is do my grandchildren identify themselves as Egyptians or Jews?

My preference is that Ya'akov asked "who are these"? to precipitate a "nachas report" from Yosef about the moral, spiritual and religious progress of Ephraim and Menashe. (Genesis 48:9)

Whichever way one approaches Ya'akov's "mi eileh" question, one point is certain: Ya'akov is the first person to be recorded in the Torah as interacting with his grandchildren on any level at all. Not only does he interact with them, he actually gives each of them a blessing.

A grandparent's relationship to a grandchild is different than a parent/child relationship. Unencumbered by parental responsibility, a grandparent rarely if ever says no. With wisdom and maturity of life, grandparents lovingly bestow blessings upon their grandchildren.

No wonder the blessings offered by parents on Shabbat Friday night are really Jacob's blessings to his grandchildren – "May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe." (Genesis 48:20) For just a moment, parents are saying, may our love for our children be a grandparent's love. ©2020 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Ephraim and M'nashe

Parashat Vayechi speaks of the death of Ya'akov after seventeen years in Mitzrayim. Before

Ya'akov died, he blessed each of his sons, describing their character and their special place in Israel. Before these final blessings, Ya'akov raised the status of Yosef's two sons to be equal to that of his own sons. We know from previous parshiot the order of birth for all of the brothers. We also know that Yosef and Binyamin were the youngest. We are familiar with the fact that the division of the births to the mothers was unequal; six came from Leah, the two servant-wives, Bilhah and Zilpah, each had two, and the last two came from Rachel. We also know that Reuven was the bachor, the firstborn, and should have been entitled to the double inheritance and leadership role as the oldest, but he had sinned and was stripped of leadership.

Ya'akov told Yosef about his conversation with Hashem before leaving Canaan. "And He said to me behold I will make you fruitful and multiply and you will become a congregation of peoples and I will give this land to your children after you for an everlasting possession. And now your two sons that were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt are mine, Ephraim and M'nashe will belong to me like R'uvein and Shim'on." With these two p'sukim, Ya'akov removed the double inheritance from R'uvein and placed it on Yosef, one portion each going to Ephraim and M'nashe. In reality, this became one portion for Ephraim and a double portion for M'nashe, Yosef's bachor. This punished R'uvein for his actions involving his father's tent after Rachel died. Furthermore, it justified Ya'akov's own receiving of the rights of the bachor from his older brother Eisav. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin indicates that by raising Yosef's sons to the level of his own sons, Ya'akov was able to give Rachel the appearance of a greater number of sons than the two servant-wives. This was his final gift of love to Rachel.

There is however a huge problem that we have with this action taken by Ya'akov. We are cautioned in Parashat Ki Teitzei about taking the b'chora from the firstborn of a "hated" wife and giving it to the firstborn of the "loved" wife. "And on that day when he causes his sons to inherit whatever will be his, he cannot give the right of the firstborn to the son of the beloved one ahead of the son of the hated one, the firstborn." The normal explanation given for this action by Ya'akov is that he lived before the giving of the Torah and therefore the specific rules of the Torah did not yet apply. This is not a satisfying answer especially in light of those who wish to say that the Avot kept the entire Torah because they were capable of understanding the need for these laws even though they had not been given them as mitzvot. But perhaps there is another explanation. Each of the Avot were not the firstborn but were clearly significantly better than the bachor in their families. Even though they did not all stem from different wives of their fathers, it is clear that the true firstborn was not worthy of either the leadership or the

double inheritance. Going back even further to the time of Kayin and Hevel, Adam's sons, we see a pattern of the younger son deserving the birthright more than the older. The mitzvah in Ki Teitzei is dealing with a case where there are no other factors in the father's decision other than one wife is "hated" and the other is "loved". It does not speak about the qualities of the sons, which could affect the leadership.

The Torah presents us with another problem which nearly interfered with Ya'akov's plan. Yosef brought his two sons before Ya'akov, and Ya'akov did not know them. "And Yisrael saw the sons of Yosef and he said 'who are these'? And Yosef said to his father, 'these are my children that Elokim has given me in this place' and he said bring them please to me and I will bless them." The Midrash explains that the sons of Yosef always changed from their Egyptian court clothes into their Jewish clothes before visiting Ya'akov. This time, when the messenger came with word that Ya'akov was ill, Yosef rushed them to visit without changing. Ya'akov wanted to know the true essence of these boys. Were they the Jewish boys that had visited him all his days in Egypt or were they like the Egyptians both in dress and action? Yosef's answer makes it clear; they were only dressed like Egyptians while at court, but their essence was that of Elokim, Who gave them to Yosef in Egypt.

At this point we encounter the intricate placing of M'nashe and Ephraim before Ya'akov so that he could place his right hand on the elder, M'nashe, and his left on the head of Ephraim. Ya'akov switched his hands so that his right was on Ephraim and his left on M'nashe. "And Yosef said to his father, not like this my father because this one is the firstborn, place your right hand on his head. And his father refused and he said I know my son I know, he will also be a nation and he will also become great, but his younger brother will be greater than he and his children will fill the world of nations." Rashi tells us that from M'nashe would come Gid'on who would wipe out a force of one hundred thirty-five thousand men with only three hundred men of his own. Yet from Ephraim would come Yehoshua who would become known to the entire world when he stopped the sun in Giv'on and the moon in Emek Ayalon. Both sons would be great, but Ephraim's children would be greater than M'nashe's.

We see from Yosef's reaction that he was confused by his father's actions. Was he uncertain whether Ya'akov could see well enough to know on which son he was placing his right hand? Rashi seems to say that it was just a case of "mistaken identity." HaRav Sorotzkin says that Yosef was questioning whether Ya'akov was following the pattern of the Avot, honoring the younger son. Yosef was only trying to be certain that his father was giving a message rather than making a mistake.

Ya'akov ends this section with the blessing that

we give to our sons and adjust for our daughters, "Y'simcha Elokim k'Ephraim v'chi'M'nashe, May Elokim bless you like Ephraim and like M'nashe." May we and our children emulate Ephraim and M'nashe (or Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah). May we rise to their level of kedusha, and may we serve Hashem all the days of our lives. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

A Sick Person

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When our forefather Yaakov became sick and bed-ridden (*choleh she-nafal le-mishkav*), he became the first such person mentioned in the Torah. What are the various laws dealing with such a *choleh*, and when is he exempt from certain *mitzvot* because of illness and its accompanying weakness?

A *choleh* is exempt from the mitzva of living in a *sukkah*, as are his caretakers. This is true not only for someone who is dangerously ill, but even for someone who merely has a headache or sore eyes. (This exemption is specific to the mitzva of *sukkah*, and one should not extrapolate from it to other *mitzvot*.) A *choleh* is also exempt from traveling to Jerusalem for the three major festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot (*aliyah le-regel*). Those who can travel are obligated, while those who cannot are exempt. There are *mitzvot* from which a *choleh* is exempt because it is assumed he will not be able to summon the requisite levels of concentration, such as the mitzva of *tefillin*. Additionally, a person wearing *tefillin* must be able to control his bodily functions (*guf naki*). Somebody sick is likely to be unable to do so.

Normally, people are required to stand out of respect for a king or prince, an elderly person, or a *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar). Sick people are exempt from doing so. This is either because they are understandably preoccupied with their pain, and thus cannot show the proper respect, or because when sick people stand, it is not seen as showing honor. The difference between these two reasons comes into play in a case where a sick person chooses to stand. If the reason that sick people are exempt is because they are preoccupied with their pain, one choosing to stand would indicate he has overcome this difficulty. However, if the reason is that the rising of someone in a weakened state does not show honor, then perhaps he should be asked to sit.

The Talmud (*Moed Katan* 27b) states that if a sick person stands up for a king, we do not tell him to sit. Some understand this to mean that a sick person may stand up if he wishes. This fits with the behavior of our forefather Yaakov, who exerted himself and sat up in bed (*Bereishit* 47:31).

However, others explain that the reason we do not tell a sick person to sit down is that it might sound as if we are saying, "Sit in your illness," meaning "Stay

sick," which would be insulting. According to this approach, the Talmud does not permit a sick person to stand. As we said above, it is even possible that such standing does not show respect. If this is the case, why did Yaakov act as he did? A close reading of the verse indicates that Yaakov did not stand, but rather sat up in bed. Out of respect for the king he sat up, but went no further than that. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd the days of Yisrael drew closer to death, and he called to his son, to Yosef..." (Beraishis 47:29) When Yaakov felt his energy waning, he began to think about his own mortality and wanted to plan for the future. He did not want to be buried in Egypt lest he be treated like a deity. He wished to return to his homeland and be buried in Me'aras HaMachpeila with his parents and grandparents.

He therefore called to his son Yosef, and asked him to swear that he would bury him in Canaan. The Midrash picks up on the fact that the posuk says that he called to "his son" and also "to Yosef." It explains that though Reuven his first-born, or Yehuda, the "king" of his brethren (and future king of Klal Yisrael) would have accepted this task, Yaakov made the request of Yosef because, as viceroy, it was within his power to fulfill the request.

Much as Yaakov originally "favored" Yosef because of his unique potential, as he noted that Yosef was distinctly more capable in some ways than his brothers, he now sought Yosef's promise to bury him in Canaan because this was something only he could do.

It makes sense, therefore, to mention that he called "to Yosef." But why mention "to his son"? Since Yosef was chosen because of his power in Egypt and his exclusive ability to complete the request, the posuk could have said, "And he called to Yosef."

Perhaps the Torah was providing us with another important aspect of completing a mission: the desire to do so. The Midrash says that when Yaakov called to his son, to Yosef, he could have called to Reuven or Yehuda. This tells us that they would have been willing to honor their father, and perhaps show gratitude to him, by carrying out his last request. However, they didn't have the power to do so.

But even with the ability, one must still WANT to do what he is asked, so the Torah says that Yaakov called to his son, indicating that Yosef would be willing and desirous of fulfilling Yaakov's request.

We, as Jews, are often called upon to do things for Hashem. He asks us to study His Torah, perform His mitzvos, and live as He wants us to live. Not all of us will have the wherewithal to complete everything, but as Hashem's children, we should have the desire and

willingness to do so.

Additionally, if we are unable to do something ourselves, but we have the ability to help and support others who can, we should be happy to do that and thereby have a share in ensuring that Hashem's will is done.

The Chofetz Chaim had a student who became so wealthy that he was the only Jew allowed to live within the city of St. Petersburg. Once, the Chofetz Chaim came to visit him at his opulent mansion, which was filled with fine art and priceless treasures.

As they sat in the study, the man began to cry. "Rebbi," he sobbed, "before I had money, I used to dream of all the tzedaka I would give and how much I would help people. But now it's like my fist is cemented closed! I CAN'T give even though I know I should."

"What do you think?" replied the sage. "That it comes for free? This is the test of wealth. Either you control it, or it controls you." ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Lelamed Weekly Dvar

As Yaakov feels that his time on earth is nearing an end, he calls for his grandchildren to bless them. The blessing he gives Yehuda is the longest, spanning five pessukim, mostly acknowledging Yehuda as the leader (49:8-12). Among the blessings Yehuda receives is that his "teeth be white from milk" (49:12). As Rabbi Yochanan Zweig asks, why is having white teeth a blessing, especially for a future leader?

Rabbi Zweig explains that white teeth represent the smiles that permeate our interactions with others. Yaakov is blessing Yehuda that his smiles towards family, friends, work, and community be genuine. Our smiles affect those around us, and even when we are having a bad day, week, or life, something as small as a smile can change someone else's world. Yaakov's blessing to Yehuda is that he (and we) uplift each other whenever and however we can. ©2020 Rabbi S. Ressler and Lelamed, Inc.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

As we close the book on 2020, I wanted to reflect on the two most important stories of the year: the pandemic and the political strife. Unfortunately, this column is only two pages long so I could only choose one. As I have written in this space quite often about the pandemic, I decided to turn my focus on politics.

In his classic work Politics, Aristotle writes that man is a "political animal" because he is a social creature with the power of speech and moral reasoning. Reflecting upon this, and in particular to the relationship between animals and politics, I began to wonder what is the origin of the donkey as the symbol for the

Democratic Party and the elephant as the symbol for the Republican Party.

It turns out that both symbols originated in the 19th century. The Democratic donkey was born in 1828 during the presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson. His political opponents shrewdly noticed the similarity between Jackson's name and the coarser appellation for donkey, and immediately started using it as his first name to refer to him pejoratively.

Jackson, who may have actually invented the concept of "there's no such thing as bad publicity," seized upon the donkey as a symbol for his campaign and printed it on all his campaign posters. He went on to defeat John Quincy Adams and became the first Democratic president.

The Republican Party was formed in 1854 and six years later Abraham Lincoln became its first member elected to the White House. The symbol of the elephant may have originated during the Civil War when "seeing the elephant" was an expression used by soldiers to mean experiencing combat. Both the donkey and elephant were brought into the mainstream consciousness by political satirist and caricaturist Thomas Nast who drew them prominently as symbols of the Democrats and Republicans in his political cartoons for Harper's Weekly.

Animal Farm, one of the most famous and important works of the 20th century, was written by George Orwell as an allegorical novella of the events surrounding the Russian Revolution of 1917. In his book, Orwell assigns different animals to represent the different political players in the drama of the revolution and slyly highlights their idiosyncrasies.

The book satirizes some of the biggest Russian political personalities of that era; Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and Molotov among others. They are mostly depicted as different types of pigs who stage a revolution to get rid of the drunken farmer (representing the Czar) and take over the farm. The book was quite incendiary for its era, and the manuscript was initially rejected by a number of British and American publishers.

The 20th century, though, saw actual animals running, or at least attempting to run, for political office. In 1959, a Brazilian rhinoceros named Cacareco was proposed as a write-in candidate by journalist Itaborai Martins who was disappointed with the human candidates. The rhinoceros garnered more than 100,000 votes for city council, soundly defeating every one of the human candidates.

A decade later, Cacareco inspired another political movement: The Rhinoceros Party of Canada. The satire political party argued that rhinos make the perfect politicians because they are "thick-skinned, slow-moving, and not too bright (but can move fast as heck when in danger)."

In 1980, the state of New Hampshire had Colossus G. Benson, a 500-pound silverback gorilla,

listed as a presidential candidate for the Vegetarian Party in the New Hampshire primary election. A local chimpanzee served as the gorilla's campaign manager and went to the Secretary of State's office to handle all the paperwork. His owner pointed out that New Hampshire law did not stipulate that those filing to be on the ballot had to be human and said that the gorilla met the age requirement as well as the requirement of having been born in the United States (Detroit). Contrary to popular belief, he never quite made it to the White House.

As a rule, Judaism teaches that there is much to be learned from the world around us, and in particular from the animal kingdom. Judaism recognizes there are characteristics and traits that can be observed in the animal kingdom that can inform and inspire how humans relate to others, to themselves, and even to the Almighty.

The Talmud cites many examples of this and here are some of them; we can learn modesty from cats, honesty from ants, and fidelity from doves. Cats discreetly attempt to cover their waste, ants steadfastly refuse to steal (if an ant carried a piece of wheat other ants can smell this and they will not take it), and doves mate for life -- teaching us loyalty and fidelity as the dove has relations only with its mate.

Another passage in the Talmud (Kiddushin 82b) goes a step further. There the Talmud describes what kind of professions certain animals would assume if they were to enter the work force. For example, the lion would be a porter and the fox would be a merchant.

While it is easily understandable how the cleverness of a fox would be useful to transform him into a successful merchant, it is difficult to understand why a lion -- the "king of the jungle" -- would choose the lowly job of a porter. What is the Talmud trying to teach us?

The answer can be found in a curious verse from this week's Torah reading; "His eyes shall be red with wine and his teeth white with milk" (Genesis 49:12).

This blessing was given by Jacob to his son Judah -- the progenitor and source of royal lineage in the Jewish nation. The royal line and the eventual messiah are descended from the tribe of Judah. While it is fairly easily understood what wine has to do with royalty, what is this cryptic message from Jacob about the teeth being white with milk?

The Talmud (Kesuvos 111a) gives an absolutely fascinating explanation for this verse, and in doing so defines the role of a monarch. The Talmud reads the verse literally (which translates into "white teeth preferred than milk") and goes on to explain that we see from this verse that it is better to show a person the white of one's teeth (i.e. in a smile) than to give him milk.

The Talmud is saying that merely giving

someone milk will only sustain them for a short while. But genuinely smiling and acknowledging someone provides that person with a feeling of value and self worth, which is much more valuable and lasts far longer. A smile lifts a person's spirit and transcends any fleeting physical gift.

The Talmud is imparting a very deep message regarding Judaism's view of leadership. Real leadership is about empowering others to actualize their potential. In Judaism's worldview, leadership isn't about the majesty of the position, rather it is about taking the steps necessary to allow others to grow and blossom into who they were meant to be.

This is why a lion, king of all the animals, would choose to be a porter. The proper role of a king is not about his self-aggrandizement, it is about empowering others and making them feel important and significant. The true king desires more than anything else to fulfill his role in empowering others. If that means acting as their porter (and carrying all their "baggage") then so be it. This is what it means to be a public servant.

This is the message that Jacob wanted delivered to the royal line and future kings of the Jewish people. They will certainly have the wine of royalty, but it must be used with the "white of one's teeth" to empower others. ©2020 Rabbi Y. Zweig and torah.org.

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

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Chazal observe that twice in Parshas Vayechi the Torah refers to Yosef and his sons, Ephraim and Menashe, as not being subject to the negative impact of an ayin hara -- an "evil eye". Yaakov blesses Ephraim and Menashe that they should multiply like fish -- just as fish are not seen as they swim underwater (either due to their depth or due to refraction), so too the descendants of Yosef are protected from those who may look at them with an ayin hara. Yosef receives his personal blessing from Yaakov and is described as one who is "alei ayin -- above the eye". This blessing also acknowledges that Yosef is not influenced by the evil eyes that surround him. What is the significance of ayin hara and why are Yosef and his children immune from its negative influence?

Ayin hara can be understood to be synonymous with jealousy, which begins when one looks at what others have. A jealous person both wants the desired object for himself and does not want the other person to have it. As such, his looking at others



with negativity is literally an ayin hara. Yosef, of all people, seems to be the most impacted by the ayin hara of jealousy. In

Parshas Vayeishev we learn that "vayir'u echav -- his brothers saw", i.e. they saw the favoritism symbolized by the kesones passim, and this led to their jealousy and the extreme ayin hara with which they viewed, and dealt with, Yosef. How does Yosef, the man whose brothers sold him into slavery due to their jealousy, eventually become the one who no longer has to ever worry about this powerful ayin hara of jealousy?

The trait of jealousy which manifests itself in our relationship to our fellow man emanates from a deficiency in our relationship with Hashem. "Kol mah d'avid rachmana l'tav avid -- whatever Hashem does is for the good". A sincere belief in the ultimate goodness even of what appears evil enables a person to look at everyone and everything with an ayin tov -- a good eye. One who fully internalizes this perspective and thus views everything in life positively will never be jealous of others because he never views himself as lacking anything.

Throughout his life, Yosef exhibited tremendous optimism. In every difficult situation he makes the best of his lot and succeeds to whatever degree he can notwithstanding the challenges that face him. What is the source of this powerful positive outlook that enables Yosef to survive his brothers selling him into slavery and later his imprisonment for false accusations? How does he cope with the pain of being forcibly separated from his father and the difficulties of surviving alone in a foreign land?

The Torah reveals this secret of Yosef in one of his last conversations with his brothers. They are frightened that upon the death of Yaakov, Yosef will punish them for all that they had done to him. With tears in his eyes, he consoles them saying, "Elokim chashva letova -- Hashem planned it for the good". These were the words that kept Yosef positive throughout all of his ordeals; he truly believed that at every moment of his life, Hashem was planning for the good. Yosef's genuine belief in "Kol mah d'avid rachmana l'tav avid" left no room for negativity in his heart. Watching others prosper didn't induce jealousy because Yosef truly believed he was receiving only the good of Hashem. "B'mida she'adam moded kach modidin lo -- the way one acts to others is how Hashem responds to him". One who never exhibits an ayin hara to others because everything is for the good is not subject to the potential affects any ayin hara directed towards him.

Yosef, despite having initially suffering greatly jealousy-driven actions of others, emerges as one who is immune to the effects of the ayin hara of others due to his lifelong commitment to always seeing the good of Hashem in everything. This lifelong commitment and avodah transformed Yosef and his descendants into people who were "alei ayin" -- above and immune to the jealous eyes of others. ©2014 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & TorahWeb.org