

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Jacob was on his death-bed. He summoned his children. He wanted to bless them before he died.

But the text begins with a strange semi-repetition: "Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel." (Gen. 49:1-2)

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

Rashi, following the Talmud, says that "Jacob wished to reveal what would happen in the future, but the Divine Presence was removed from him." He tried to foresee the future but found he could not. (Rashi to Gen. 49:1; Pesachim 56a; Bereishit Rabbah 99:5.)

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

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

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

civilisation: tragedy.

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

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

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

The Prophet Isaiah had told King Hezekiah he would not recover, but he did. He lived for another fifteen years. God heard his prayer and granted him stay of execution. From this the Talmud infers, "Even if a sharp sword rests upon your neck, you should not desist from prayer." (Brachot 10a) We pray for a good fate but we do not reconcile ourselves to fatalism.

Hence there is a fundamental difference between a prophecy and a prediction. If a prediction comes true, it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true, it has failed. A prophet delivers not a prediction

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in memory of
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חיים ניסן בן יצחק אייזק ז"ל
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but a warning. He or she does not simply say, "This will happen", but rather, "This will happen unless you change." The prophet speaks to human freedom, not to the inevitability of fate.

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

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

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

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

We are free because we are not merely objects. We are subjects. We respond not just to physical events but to the way we perceive those events. We have minds, not just brains. We have thoughts, not just sensations. We react but we can also choose not to react. There is something about us that is irreducible to material, physical causes and effects.

The way our ancestors spoke about this remains true and profound. We are free because God is free and He made us in His image. That is what is meant by the three words God told Moses at the burning bush when he asked God for His name. God replied, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh. This is often translated as "I am what I am," but what it really means is, "I will be who and how I choose to be." I am the God of freedom.

I cannot be predicted. Note that God says this at the start of Moses' mission to lead a people from slavery to freedom. He wanted the Israelites to become living testimony to the power of freedom.

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

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

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

That is why, when Jacob wanted to tell his children what would happen to them in the future, the Divine Spirit was taken away from him. Our children continue to surprise us, as we continue to surprise others. Made in the image of God, we are free. Sustained by the blessings of God, we can become greater than anyone, even ourselves, could foresee. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Joseph fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his [Joseph's] neck" (Genesis 45:14). The final verse of the last portion of Vayigash summarizes the astonishing achievement of the Israelites in Egypt: 'And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt in the country of Goshen and they took possession of it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly' (Genesis 47:27). Could anything be a clearer testament to the resilience of Jacob's descendants who, in a relatively short period of time, managed to grow rich in real estate, to be fruitful and to multiply?

Yet according to Rashi, this very next verse, the opening of Vayechi, sends us in the exact opposite direction, a 180-degree turn for the worse, informing us that the Egyptian bondage was then beginning! Interestingly, Rashi's interpretation is not based on the words of the verse itself (Genesis 47:28), but rather on the almost hidden or interior meaning of the Torah embedded in the white space – or lack of white space – between the final verse of Vayigash and the opening verse of Vayechi. The portion of Vayechi opens without a parchment hint that a new chapter is beginning, or

that a new story is being told.

There are no paragraphs or indications of chapters in the text of the Torah scrolls. Rather, a white space – anywhere from a minimum of nine letters wide to the end of the entire line – is the Torah's way of indicating that a pause or separation of some kind exists between the previous verse and the following section.

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

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

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

Rabbi David Pardo explains in his commentary Maskil l'David that the first intimations of Jewish slavery are indeed to be found in the portion of Vayechi, but in a later verse describing an apparently uncomfortable situation in the wake of Jacob's demise: "And when the days of mourning for Jacob were over, Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh saying, 'If now I have found favor in your eyes, speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, my father made me swear, and he declared: I am dying. In my grave which I have dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me...'" (Gen. 50:4-5).

Does this request sound like words spoken by the Grand Vizier of Egypt? Does the number two figure at a Fortune 500 company, who undoubtedly confers with the president on a daily basis, need an appointment to see him, forced to go through the usual hierarchy of administrative personnel that junior staff have to go through? Why not a simple knock on the door on the part of Joseph?

Why does the Torah even go to the trouble of reporting the process by which Joseph presents a

petition – through intermediaries – to have his father buried? And Joseph doesn't even go through a secretary; he begs ('if I have found favor in your eyes') the 'house of Pharaoh', which generally refers to the household staff, the servants of Pharaoh. The Grand Vizier asks a maid or butler to whisper his need to bury his father in Pharaoh's ear. Is this the level to which a second-in-command must stoop in order to get time off for a parent's funeral?

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

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

Ordinarily a person wants to be buried in his own homeland where his body will become part of the earth to which he feels most deeply connected. Indeed, in the ancient world the most critical right of citizenship was the right of burial. The wise Jacob understands that Pharaoh expected Joseph to completely identify with Egypt, to bring up generations of faithful and committed Egyptians after all that his adopted country has given to him. But this was impossible for Jacob – and the patriarch hoped that it would also be impossible for his children and grandchildren as well. They were in Egypt, but not of Egypt. They might contribute to Egyptian society and economy, but they could never become Egyptians. Jacob understood that his burial in Canaan would be the greatest test of Joseph's career, and would define the character of his descendants forever. Hence, he makes his beloved son solemnly swear not to bury him in Egypt. Hence, our Midrash understands that Hebrew servitude in Egypt begins at this very juncture, when Joseph understands that the Hebrews would always be stranger-slaves in Egypt. Indeed, Egypt is a story of every Jewish Diaspora in history. ©2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The traditional rabbinic approach as to why this portion of the Torah is titled "vayechi Yaakov" even though the subject matter of this Torah portion concerns itself with the death of Yaakov is that as long as his descendants – the Jewish people – are alive and functioning, then Yaakov is still considered to be alive.

The message here is one of immortality and continuity, family and generations. Like life itself and its counterpart, death, these words mentioned immediately above are difficult to define. Other nations and empires that are long ago extinct in terms of presence and participation in current world events, also have biological descendants alive and present in today's world population.

Nevertheless, we think of Rome and Babylon, Greece and Persia, the Holy Roman Empire and even the Soviet Union as being swept into the dustbin of history, never to rise to power again. So, the rabbis must be telling us a deeper message than mere biological and genetic survival from the past until today.

I have often thought that a great part of the secret of Jewish survival lies in the fact that different – completely different – generations are able to bond together, recognize each other and have the same common goals, values and lifestyle. My father was born before the Wright brothers flew an airplane and he lived to see human beings walk on the moon.

In spite of the difference in age, background and even language, he had close contact with and a great influence on his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They somehow recognized who he was in his essence and beliefs and easily responded to his presence and later treasured his memory. So, to a certain extent we may say that he lived on through his descendants.

Yaakov recognized the different personalities, qualities and talents of each of his children and grandchildren. His blessings to his children and grandchildren, as recorded for us in this week's Torah reading, clearly indicate this fact. He had no one-size-fits-all blessing to bestow. And it is perhaps that fact that guarantees that as long as his descendants are alive, Yaakov also lives.

For every one of his descendants could say in response to the blessing that each one received – all of them different and personal – that their old father and grandfather understood them and recognize them for what they were. And because of that, they treasured his memory and championed his cause throughout the ages.

Relationships that bridge time and space, generations and world upheavals can only be forged upon the recognition and acceptance of the uniqueness of the parties involved. There is no blessing ultimately in national and personal life that is brought about by conformity. The pithy remark of the great Rebbe of Kotzk was: "If I am I and you are you, then I am I and you are you; but if I am you and you are me, then I am not I and you are not you." The blessings of Yaakov to his future generations reflect the wisdom of this truism. ©2023 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

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Why does Jacob, in his blessings to Simon and Levi, say that they will be achalkem (separated) and afitzem (scattered) among all of Israel? (Genesis 49:7).

Rashi notes that as teachers of Torah, the tribe of Simon would spread out to teach children. Similarly, the descendants of Levi, in their role as collectors of tithes and heave offerings, would traverse all of Israel.

Another understanding of Jacob's words requires that we take into account two major incidents in the lives of Simon and Levi. These brothers avenged the rape of Dinah by killing the males of Shechem (Genesis 34). Some also ascribe to them a key role in the sale of Joseph (Rashi, Genesis 42:24). In both incidents, Simon and Levi displayed dangerous anger by taking the law into their own hands.

It is relative to their anger that Jacob addresses his comments. Note the two terms that Jacob uses with respect to Simon and Levi – achalkem (to separate) and afitzem (to scatter).

Akedat Yitzchak seems to comment on afitzem when stating, "Anger and temper, though undesirable qualities, may sometimes prove useful in arousing the heroic in man.... It was advisable that the qualities of anger and passion that had been concentrated in Simon and Levi should be dispersed among all the tribes of Israel.... A little spread everywhere would prove useful, but if concentrated in one place, it would be dangerous." When scattered, the anger will be dispersed and directed productively.

Yet, when considering the other term that Jacob uses, achalkem, another thought comes to mind. After all, achalkem means that Simon and Levi will actually be separated from one another. When living together, Simon and Levi could wreak havoc, as each would feed off the other's anger, creating flames of unlimited destruction. But apart, it is possible that their individual anger would dwindle and eventually disappear. From this perspective, Jacob declares that anger of any sort is detrimental.

Of course, anger is an emotion. But while one cannot control what one feels, action can be controlled. And so, even if one feels anger, the ultimate goal is to refrain from reacting angrily. Optimally, we should wait a short while until our response is more levelheaded. As Rav Nachman of Breslov says, "You cannot make peace with anger."

Certainly, holding onto anger long-term is unhealthy; it demands energy, and we only have so much energy, so using it negatively is not wise. Indeed, holding on to anger means that the person I'm angry with is on some level controlling me – living in my head rent free, as they say.

Jacob's blessing leaves us with an open question: Does anger have its positive elements, as Akedat Yitzchak points out, or should anger be completely obviated, as Rav Nachman suggests? Or is it somewhere in between? ©2023 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Yaakov said to Yosef, G-d appeared to me in Luz in the Land of Canaan and blessed me." (Beraishis 48:3) At the end of his life, Yaakov would have a heart-to-heart talk with Yosef. Throughout Yaakov's seventeen years in Egypt, Yosef made sure they were never alone so Yaakov would not ask him about how he ended up there. When Yaakov was getting close to death, he summoned Yosef and let him in on some items previously not discussed.

He told Yosef that Menashe and Ephraim would have the status of Shvatim, though they were the next generation. The meforshim explain how this was conveyed in the blessing Hashem gave Yaakov.

Then Yaakov discussed how he had to bury Rachel outside of Canaan, in Beis Lechem. He had avoided this topic as it was not a happy one. He therefore delayed it as long as possible. That is a lesson in itself, but our focus will be on the first part of their discussion, being the bracha Yaakov received from Hashem.

The name used here for Hashem (E-I Sha-dai) is not a typical one. Most of us who think of this name recall the Gemara in Chagiga in which Raish Lakish explain this name as being, "I am the One who said to the world, "dai!" (enough!) As the world was expanding out of Hashem's commands to bring things into existence, Hashem at one point told it to stop.

This name, then, seems to be a limiter, and would not be appropriate for applying to a bracha, which means growth and expansion. Why, then, did Hashem use this name when speaking to Yaakov?

The name which includes 'dai,' enough, also implies that Hashem is sufficient and has the power to bless because all blessings are His. So explains Rashi in Beraishis (35:11) when Hashem uses this name in speaking to Yaakov.

When He used it in speaking to Avraham (17:1), Rashi says that Hashem was telling Avraham He is "G-d enough" for all creations, and therefore Avraham should focus his energies on serving Him.

It would seem, then, that this name of Hashem doesn't convey limitation, but rather, appropriateness. In each situation, Hashem directs the right amount of growth and success to be present. Constant expansion may not be a blessing at all, as we see so many

extremely wealthy or good-looking people are not happy. Rather, having the appropriate amount is what leads to satisfaction, and this is what Hashem's bracha was to Yaakov.

He promised to grow Yaakov's family for him, but since Hashem was controlling the numbers, he would ensure that it was never too much or too fast. In each situation, Hashem gives us what will give us the maximum satisfaction, based on His eternal wisdom and knowledge which far surpasses ours. This knowledge is a blessing of its own, and it is what helped Menashe and Ephraim appreciate their own roles without being jealous.

A yeshiva fellow had a powerful and melodic voice and he was very interested in learning how to improve his craft. He became close with famous singers and eventually was even offered a recording contract of his own. This was a dream come true!

He approached his Rosh Yeshiva, whose advice and insight he valued greatly, to discuss the matter with him. He asked whether he should pursue it.

"If you do," said the sage, "you will become very successful. Then, you will leave the path of Torah you've been on." When he heard this, the man chose not to sign the contract and instead devoted his life to teaching children Torah. He never regretted his decision. ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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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 AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Eretz Yisrael is the desideratum to which the Torah's entire narrative leads. From Hashem's promising the Land to Avraham's descendants, to our ancestors' exodus from Mitzrayim and years of wandering in the desert, the path of the Torah's account leads inexorably to the Land.

Even the Torah's description of the universe's creation, as Rashi expounds in his very first comment in parshas Beraishis, is intended to establish that Eretz Yisrael is ours.

And yet...Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (Pri Tzaddik, Vayechi) notes that the first word in our parsha indicates that Yaakov's true "living" took place during his final 17 years in Mitzrayim, after all the challenges he had lived through. Now he was free to attain his spiritual goals. In Egypt.

Similarly, he continues, the main expansion of Torah Shebe'al Peh took place... in Bavel.

Har Sinai, too, is not in Eretz Yisrael.

"In every generation," writes Rav Tzadok, "souls decline." Yet "we see what happened to the Jewish people especially when they were in exile... In exile they arrived to the exalted levels of holiness, because this is the will of Hashem."

And he cites Rav Simcha Bunim of P'shischa

as having said that "even though the souls of each generation progressively decline, the essence of the heart (hanekudah shebilev) becomes progressively purified and rarified (nitaheres umizdacheches yoser) in each successive generation."

I don't claim to know what those phrases truly mean. But that they mean something can't be denied.

Why Jews living and developing in places other than their ancestral home is a vital part of Hashem's plan is not something we can fathom. That fact, Rav Tzadok explains, is symbolized by the parsha's being sasum, "closed off," with no space before it. Spaces in the Torah indicate opportunity to absorb and understand. There can be no understanding of the need for galus.

But the need for Torah to develop outside of the Jewish homeland is clearly established, even if inscrutable. Galus and giluy (revelation), after all, share the same root letters. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and *torah.org*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Ya'akov's Blessing

The blessings that Ya'akov issues to his sons on his deathbed were poetic and subject to many different interpretations. Since the language is poetic, there are often varying translations to Ya'akov's words, as translators often wish to weave their interpreted meaning into the translation. The blessing given to Yosef is a prime example of this difficulty. We will attempt to deal with several different translations and their perceived meanings.

Using Rashi's understanding, we find the following translation of Yosef's blessing: "A son of grace is Yosef, a son of grace to the eye; girls stepped to gaze. They embittered him and became antagonists; the master of arrows hated him. But his bow was firmly emplaced and his arms were gilded, from the hands of the Mighty Power of Ya'akov – from there, shepherd of the stone of Israel. From the G-d of your father, and He will help you, and with the Almighty – and He will bless you with blessings of heaven from above, blessings of the deep crouching below, blessings of castings and womb. The blessings of your father became mighty beyond the blessings of my parents to the bounds of the world's hills. Let them be upon Yosef's head of the withdrawn one of his brothers."

Rashi's comments seem to emphasize Yosef's beauty which attracted all the women of Egypt. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch's understanding of the phrase, "Bein porat Yosef," which Rashi rendered as "a son of grace," emphasizes Yosef's distinguished character instead of his beauty. Hirsch sees the word "porat" as coming from the Hebrew word which means "set apart." Yosef was notably special, even when he was sold into slavery in Egypt. He rose above others, not only because of his wit and intelligence, but also

because of the way he carried himself with dignity. A Midrash mentions that when Ya'akov confronted Eisav upon returning to the land, Yosef was the only son who preceded his mother when greeting Eisav. Yosef was concerned that Eisav would feel that he could take any of Ya'akov's wives that he wished, so Yosef stretched himself to be over his mother as protection. This is another meaning of "ben porat Yosef," namely, "a growing son."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin implies that the use of beauty in Ya'akov's blessing to Yosef is not our common definition of outward, physical beauty. Rachel, his mother, is described as beautiful. Even in Par'oh's dreams, as told to Yosef, the cows which represented the seven good years were described as beautiful. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that Yosef resembled both his mother and his father in beauty. Yosef remembered the strength of his father during the years in which he overcame his mistreatment by Lavan and did not allow his anger to surface. He mirrored that restraint while suffering the injustice of being sold into slavery and then being thrown into prison though innocent. Throughout, he retained his dignity and stature. Rachel also endured the trickery of her father when Lavan switched her with her sister on her wedding night. She maintained her dignity and gave over identifying signs to Leah so as not to embarrass her. This ability to maintain one's dignity and stature is the beauty which is associated with Yosef.

Onkelos understands parat as coming from the word "pri, fruitful." Our phrase would then speak of Yosef and his abundance. Rabbi Yonah and Rabbi Yehudah, who the Radak credits as grammarians of the Torah, speak of parat as branches of a tree spreading out and becoming long. This would fit with the Midrash quoted earlier of Yosef extending himself to protect his mother from Eisav. They also interpret "bein" not as son but having to do with "planting." The Ramban says that one could understand this to mean that "Yosef is a planting containing many branches." The Ramban, however, understands "bein" in its simplest form to mean son. This would render our phrase to mean that, "Yosef is a son of many branches." This could mean that Ya'akov was referring to the idea that Yosef would branch out into two tribes for inheritance, Menashe and Ephraim, taking the place of Levi, who would not receive land.

Again, because of the nature of poetry, it is difficult to interpret the next pasuk of our paragraph, "They embittered him and became antagonists; the master of arrows hated him." Rashi explains that one could understand the antagonists as Yosef's brothers or, alternatively, as Potiphar and his wife. According to Hirsch, the phrase, "embittered him," means that they "accustomed themselves to quarrelling. No just cause was given them for it, but they brought themselves into such hostility towards him by erroneous ideas about

Yosef's intentions and plans." HaRav Sorotzkin explains that, if one assumes that Ya'akov finally knew the entire story of Yosef's capture and sale into Egypt, the use of the phrase "the master of arrows" and later "his bow was firmly emplaced," indicate that Ya'akov was referring to Shimon and Levi as the antagonists. In Ya'akov's words to Shimon and Levi, he describes them as "klei chamas m'cheiroteihem, stolen tools are their weapons." Shimon and Levi had conspired to kill Yosef rather than to sell him into slavery. Yet, in spite of their efforts, Yosef rose to power by the "Avir Ya'akov, the Mighty Power of Ya'akov." This is a reference to the same Hashem Who saved Ya'akov from a position of poverty and brought him to great wealth, and this same Hashem who had taken Yosef from slavery and poverty and raised him to be a ruler of Egypt.

One further blessing is given to Yosef in the name of his father, Ya'akov: "The blessings of your father became mighty beyond the blessings of my parents to the bounds of the world's hills. Let them be upon Yosef's head of the withdrawn one of his brothers." Ya'akov understood that his blessing went beyond that of his parents, and even beyond that given to Avraham. Avraham was told to look out in every direction (West, East, North, and South) as his children would inherit this land. Ya'akov was told to spread out (ufaratzta) in those same directions. Ya'akov understood this to mean that he would spread to all the nations of the world so that he would influence the entire world to the ways of Hashem. This blessing he now passed on to Yosef.

Yosef is a powerful figure in the Torah. He suffers the consequences of his father's favoritism shown to him through the multi-colored cloak, his dreams which foretold his leadership, the antagonism of his brothers, his sale into Egypt as a slave, his time in an Egyptian prison, and his final rise to power. Throughout that suffering, Yosef maintained his dignity and purpose. Ya'akov's blessing to Yosef recognizes his ability to rise above that suffering by his understanding that everything that he experienced was through Hashem's guidance. May we understand and recognize that same guidance within our own lives and our own sufferings. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

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

In Parshas Vayechi, when Yaakov is on his death bed, he calls in his sons and gives each of them brachos. Some of them do not exactly sound like blessings. However, they are all brachos. As we have

said many times, the biggest bracha that someone can give to another person is to point out to him his strengths and weaknesses. The person should know what he should do with his life, what abilities he has and where he needs to improve himself. That, in effect, was what Yaakov was doing here.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is a very complex situation which can have numerous causes. But Rav Shmuel Berenbaum said that sometimes the reason for this situation is that -- for some reason -- the child does not feel loved by his family, by his own peers, and by frum society. On the other hand, he feels that the kids on the street love him. They treat him nicely. They treat him with respect. So where is he going to go? In my school, they sometimes treat me like dirt. My parents are always down my throat. Nobody loves me. 'They' (on the 'street') love me. SO where does he go? Human nature is for people to gravitate to and associate with other people who they feel love them and appreciate them.

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

What did Yosef do? He remained a faithful Jew. He remained steadfast to his religion, in spite of the fact that the girls swooned and the brothers hated him. That is kochos ha'nefesh (strength of character) and commitment. This is the same strength of character that allowed him to withstand the temptations of the wife of Potiphar. That is what Yaakov Avinu was telling us in his bracha. He was describing the strength of his son Yosef. In spite of the fact that the girls climbed up on the wall to see him, in spite of the fact that he was loved by them, and in spite of the fact that he was hated by his brothers, nevertheless he remained an honest and faithful Jew. ©2023 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

