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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The drama of younger and older brothers, which haunts the book of Bereishit from Cain and Abel onwards, reaches a strange climax in the story of Joseph's children. Jacob/Israel is nearing the end of his life. Joseph visits him, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. It is the only scene of grandfather and grandchildren in the book. Jacob asks Joseph to bring them near so that he can bless them. What follows next is described in painstaking detail:

"Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel's right, and brought them near him. But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn..... When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to him, 'No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.' But his father refused and said, 'I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.' He blessed them that day, saying: 'In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh." (48:13-14,17-20).

It is not difficult to understand the care Joseph took to ensure that Jacob would bless the firstborn first. Three times his father had set the younger before the elder, and each time it had resulted in tragedy. He, the younger, had sought to supplant his elder brother Esau. He favoured the younger sister Rachel over Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Joseph and Benjamin, over the elder Reuben, Shimon and Levi. The consequences were catastrophic: estrangement from Esau, tension between the two sisters, and hostility among his sons. Joseph himself bore the scars: thrown into a well by his brothers, who initially planned to kill him and eventually sold him into Egypt as a slave. Had his father not learned? Or did he think that Ephraim -- whom Joseph held in his right hand -- was the elder? Did Jacob know what he was doing? Did he not realise that he was risking extending the family feuds into the next generation? Besides which, what possible reason could he have for favouring the younger of his grandchildren over the elder? He had not seen them before. He knew nothing about them. None of the factors that led to the earlier episodes were operative here. Why did Jacob favour Ephraim over Manasseh?

Jacob knew two things, and it is here that the explanation lies. He knew that the stay of his family in Egypt would not be a short one. Before leaving Canaan to see Joseph, G-d had appeared to him in a vision: "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." (46:3-4)

This was, in other words, the start of the long exile which G-d had told Abraham would be the fate of his children (a vision the Torah describes as accompanied by "a deep and dreadful darkness" -- 15:12). The other thing Jacob knew was his grandsons' names, Manasseh and Ephraim. The combination of these two facts was enough.

When Joseph finally emerged from prison to become prime minister of Egypt, he married and had two sons. This is how the Torah describes their birth: "Before the years of the famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh, saying, 'It is because G-d has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.' The second son he named Ephraim, saying, 'It is because G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.'" (41:50-52)

With the utmost brevity the Torah intimates an experience of exile that was to be repeated many times across the centuries. At first, Joseph felt relief. The years as a slave, then a prisoner, were over. He had risen to greatness. In Canaan, he had been the youngest of eleven brothers in a nomadic family of shepherds. Now, in Egypt, he was at the centre of the greatest civilization of the ancient world, second only to Pharaoh in rank and power. No one reminded him of his background. With his royal robes and ring and chariot, he was an Egyptian prince (as Moses was later to be). The past was a bitter memory he sought to remove from his mind. Manasseh means "forgetting."

But as time passed, Joseph began to feel quite different emotions. Yes, he had arrived. But this people was not his; nor was its culture. To be sure, his family

was, in any worldly terms, undistinguished, unsophisticated. Yet they remained his family. They were the matrix of who he was. Though they were no more than shepherds (a class the Egyptians despised), they had been spoken to by G-d -- not the gods of the sun, the river and death, the Egyptian pantheon -- but G-d, the creator of heaven and earth, who did not make His home in temples and pyramids and panoplies of power, but who spoke in the human heart as a voice, lifting a simple family to moral greatness. By the time his second son was born, Joseph had undergone a profound change of heart. To be sure, he had all the trappings of earthly success -- "G-d has made me fruitful" -- but Egypt had become "the land of my affliction." Why? Because it was exile. There is a sociological observation about immigrant groups, known as Hansen's Law: "The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget." Joseph went through this transformation very quickly. It was already complete by the time his second son was born. By calling him Ephraim, he was remembering what, when Manasseh was born, he was trying to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh had nothing to do with their ages and everything to do with their names. Knowing that these were the first two children of his family to be born in exile, knowing too that the exile would be prolonged and at times difficult and dark, Jacob sought to signal to all future generations that there would be a constant tension between the desire to forget (to assimilate, acculturate, anaesthetise the hope of a return) and the promptings of memory (the knowledge that this is "exile," that we are part of another story, that ultimate home is somewhere else). The child of forgetting (Manasseh) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And he blessed them on that day, saying, 'Through you shall Israel be blessed, saying, May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe' and he placed Ephraim before Menashe." (Genesis 48:20) For many parents, the highlight of the Friday evening home celebration and meal, indeed the highlight of the entire week, is the moment when they bless their children. However, even this could be tension inducing if your son suddenly wants to know why his sister is blessed to grow up like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, while he has to settle for Ephraim and Menashe, Joseph's Egyptian born sons, instead of the patriarchs. Is it possible that boys are finally getting the short end of the blessing?

I believe the reason can be found if we study the book of Genesis from the perspective of family psychology. Sibling rivalry constantly surfaces as a powerful motif indicating love-hate relationships that end up more bitter than sweet. Right from the opening pages in the Bible, Cain is jealous of Abel, whose offering to God was found more pleasing than his own. Before we know it, Abel is dead, killed by his own brother – the Torah's first recorded murder.

Of course, this takes place in the early stages of recorded time, but how much has really changed by the time we get to Abraham? His two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, cannot live under the same roof. Sent into the desert with his mother Hagar, who watches helplessly as he nearly dies from thirst and hunger, Ishmael's fate is doomed if not for the deus ex machina appearance of the angel. True, Isaac cannot be legally charged with Ishmael's suffering, but Ishmael and his mother are driven away only because of Sarah's concern that Ishmael will have a negative influence on Isaac, destined carrier of the torch of Israel.

In the next generation, things get worse. Jacob spends twenty-two years away from home because he's afraid Esau wants to kill him. Upon returning from his long exile, richer, wiser, head of a large household, he makes all kinds of preparations to appease his brother, and if that should fail, he devises a defense strategy should Esau's army of four hundred men attack. All of this hatred came about as a result of Jacob's having deceived his father, at the behest of his mother, in order to wrest the birthright and blessings away from his less deserving brother.

Jacob's own sons live through aspects of their father's sibling experiences; since Jacob felt unloved by his father, he lavished excessive favoritism upon his beloved son Joseph. As a result of the bitter jealousy the brothers harbor toward Joseph, they take the radical step of slow but inevitable death by casting their defenseless brother into a dangerous pit. Had Judah's last-minute advice to sell the boy to a caravan of Ishmaelites been ignored, Joseph would have been torn to death by some wild animal, or at the very least – died in the pit from starvation.

When the Torah commands "…do not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev. 19:17), it could have easily used the word 'friend' or 'neighbor.' The word 'brother' is deliberate; the people we are most likely to hate are the ones closest to us. If the natural affection between brothers backfires, the very same potential for closeness turns into the potential for distance. No silence is more piercing than brothers who refuse to speak to each other because of a dispute over an inheritance. Unlike a feud between strangers, family members do not bury the past – they live with it, and all too often, continue to fight over it. There is even a custom, retained by some old Jerusalem families, that children should not attend their parent's funeral. The esoteric reason which is given by

the more mystical commentaries is that the illegitimate children of the parents – the spirits born of the father's seminal emissions – will fight with the legitimate biological children over the inheritance. All too often we find the legitimate children fighting over the inheritance at the grave site.

There is one remarkable exception to the pervasive theme of sibling hatred in Genesis. In contrast to their ancestors, Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe, do not fight when Jacob favors the younger brother, Ephraim, with the birthright blessing. Joseph even tries to stop Jacob. "That's not the way it should be done, Father…the other one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head" (Gen. 48:18). But Jacob knows exactly what he is doing. "The older one will also become a nation…but his younger brother will become even greater…" (Gen. 48:19).

As a result of this seeming favoritism of the younger Ephraim, one might expect a furious reaction from Menashe, lashing out like Cain. But Menashe overcomes personal feelings. Unlike his forebears, there is no biblical hint of sibling rivalry between these two sons of Joseph, despite what could well be seen as unfair favoritism. Since we each want our children to be there for each other no matter what – and indeed, this is chiefly what my wife prays for as she lights the Sabbath candles each week – every parent blesses his sons that they have as harmonious a relationship as Ephraim and Menashe.

There still remains, however, a nagging question. Why did Jacob bestow the birthright upon the younger Ephraim? What lies substantively behind the words – and order – of this particular blessing?

As usual, the Midrash fills in the missing pieces. When the brothers first meet the Grand Vizier in their attempt to purchase food, the Bible tells us that the Egyptian provider appeared not to understand Hebrew, "there was an interpreter between them" (Gen. 42:23). The Midrash identifies this interpreter as Menashe, apparently a PhD in languages and diplomacy from the University of the Nile. Menashe seems to have been his father's trusted aide in all important affairs of state. Ephraim, on the other hand, was studious, devoting his time to learning Torah with his old and other-worldly grandfather Jacob. In fact, when we read in our Torah portion of how Joseph is brought news of his father's illness, the text does not reveal the messenger's name but the Midrash identifies him as Ephraim, returning from Goshen where he had been studying with his grandfather.

Perhaps Menashe, the symbol of secular wisdom, does not object when his younger brother – expert in and dedicated to the wisdom of family tradition – receives the greater honor. From this perspective Jacob is expressing in his blessing the deepest value of Judaism: secular and worldly wisdom is significant and represents a giant achievement, but Torah must take preference and emerge as the highest priority. From the prism of the Midrash, we bless our children to excel in worldly knowledge, wisdom and Torah together, but with Torah receiving the greater accolade.

The capacity to submerge one's abilities and gifts to those of another, especially to a sibling who is younger, shows true commitment to the direction of the divine, an overriding concern for the welfare of the nation as a whole, and a profound maturity. This is precisely the character displayed by Joseph when he gratefully accepted his double portion (blessing), but conceded the true sovereign, international and ultimately, redemptive leadership to his brother Judah (as expressed in Jacob's final blessings, [Genesis 49:8–10, 22–26]).

In a much later period (eighth century BCE), Jeroboam of the tribe of Ephraim, whom King Solomon had appointed over the taxation of both tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, waged a revolution on behalf of the ten Northern Tribes against the tribe of Judah, against Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon and grandson of King David, and against the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Our Talmudic Sages, who respected Jeroboam's administrative abilities and cultural accomplishments, predicate the following conversation in the name of Raba: "The Holy One Blessed Be He grabbed the garment of Jeroboam and told him, 'Repent, and I and you and the son of Jesse [David, King of Israel and progenitor of the Messiah] will join together, for our travels in Paradise.' Said [Jeroboam], 'Who will take the lead?' Said [the Almighty] 'the son of Jesse.' [Said Jeroboam] 'If that is the case, I am not interested.'" (Sanhedrin 102a)

Apparently, the descendants of Joseph were not gifted with the largesse of their ancestor – and herein lies the tragedy of the split between Jerusalem-Judea and Ephraim-Northern Israel, as well as between Torah study and secular wisdom.

Thankfully, our Ephraim and Menashe were different. And the importance of this filial ability to overlook favoritism and remain together takes on added significance when we come to the book of Exodus, the saga of the birth of our nation. Before the nation of Israel could be molded, a family had to emerge in which a profound harmony reigned. The heroic relationship between Menashe and Ephraim paved the way for a similar harmony between Aaron and Moses, where the younger brother served as the great leader, while the elder remained his loyal spokesman and interpreter to the people. These represent a crucial beacon of possibility, especially since our nation still in formation – from the rebellion of Korah to the Knesset inter- and intra-party eruptions – has constantly been plagued by sibling strife.

When parents bless their daughters to be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, what is being evoked is the very bedrock of Jewish existence, our matriarchs. When they bless their sons to be like Menashe and

Ephraim, the blessing evokes the long slow process of Genesis which finally bears fruit with the sons of Joseph, the only brothers who overcome sibling rivalry and achieve an incredible unity, with wordly wisdom merging with Torah traditions to bring the promise of redemption to a strife-torn world. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBereshit. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

The book of Bereshith is completed in this week's Torah reading. The story of the emergence of first one person and then an entire family as being the spearhead of monotheistic belief in a pagan world is an exciting but difficult one.

At so many turns in the events described in the Torah the idea of monotheism and the few who championed its cause could have died at birth. Yet somehow the idea and the people advancing it survived and grew until, over the ages, it became the defining idea in the major religions of civilization.

Truth somehow survived, unable to be crushed by the great and mighty forces always aligned against it. Our patriarch Yaakov tells the Pharaoh that "my years are relatively few and very difficult ones." But Yaakov is not only speaking for himself in this statement. He speaks for the Jewish people as a whole in all of its generations and ages. And he also speaks for all those in the world who still value truth over falseness, accuracy over populism, reality over current political correctness and imposed intellectual conformity.

The Midrash taught us that the seal of God, so to speak, is truth. The book of Bereshith begins with truth inscribed in its opening words, the last letter of these first three words of the Torah spelling the Hebrew word emet – truth. Falseness requires publicity, media, excuses and greater falsehoods to cover and justify the original untruth.

In Yiddish there is a phrase that says: "The best lie is the truth." Truth needs no follow-up. It stands on its own for all eternity.

Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence stated that truths are self-evident. If we merely contemplate, even on a superficial level, the events as described in the book of Bereshith, we must stand back in awe to realize the power of truth and the tenacity of individuals who pursue it and live by it.

How easy and understandable it would have been for any of our patriarchs and matriarchs to have become disappointed and disillusioned by the events of their lives. Yet their ultimate faith, that truth will survive and triumph, dominates the entire narrative of this first book of the Torah. Bereshith sets the pattern for everything that will follow.

All of the Torah is a search for and vindication of truth. God's revelation at Sinai was an aid in this quest for truth, otherwise so many people could not have arrived at that moment of truth all together. But falseness, human nature, greed and apathy continually whittle away at the idea of truth as the centerpiece of human endeavor.

The rabbis taught us that the acts of the patriarchs, which are the main story of the book of Bereshith, guide us for all later generations. This Shabat we will all rise and say "chazak" – be strong - at the conclusion of the Torah reading. The never ending pursuit of truth requires strength of purpose and will. May we really have the strength of purpose and belief to "be strong." *© 2025 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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*

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.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Yaakov's Final Words

As the first Book of the Torah, Bereishit, comes to an end, the last of the Avot (forefathers) was in his final days. Before Ya'akov passed, he blessed each of his children, each with a different blessing which defined their unique character. Once the blessings were completed, Ya'akov gave the final instructions for his burial. The Torah states: "All these are the tribes of Yisrael – twelve – and this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them; each according to his blessing he blessed them. Then he instructed them; and he said to them, 'I shall be brought in to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpeilah, which faces Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Avraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as a burial estate – there they buried Avraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Yitzchak and Rivka his wife; and there I buried Leah – purchase of the field and the cave within it from the sons of Heth.' When Ya'akov finished instructing his sons, he drew his feet onto the bed; he expired and was brought into his people. Then Yosef fell upon his father's face; he wept over him and kissed him."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin was puzzled by the first sentence of our section: "All these are the tribes of Yisrael – twelve – and this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them; each according to his blessing he blessed them." We have just read the "blessings" that Ya'akov bestowed on his children, yet the words said to Reuvein, Shimon, and Levi hardly seemed like "blessings" at all. To Reuvein he said: "Haste like water – do not take more, because you mounted your father's bed; then you desecrated [Him] Who ascended my couch." Reuvein had been upset when Ya'akov chose to place his bed in Bilhah's tent rather than in Leah's tent after the death of Rachel. His impetuous moving of his father's bed caused Ya'akov much anguish. Shimon and Levi were also criticized in Ya'akov's "blessings." To them he said, "Into their design, may my soul not enter! With their congregation, do not unite, O my honor! For in their rage they killed a man and in their wish they hamstrung an ox. Accursed is their rage for it is mighty, and their wrath for it is harsh; I will divide them in Ya'akov, and I will disperse them in Yisrael." HaRav Sorotzkin states that even though Ya'akov spoke harshly with Reuvein, Shimon, and Levi, he appears here to include them among the B'nei Yisrael. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the words, "and this is what their father spoke to them" indicates that the harsh words of the "blessings" were spoken as a father to his sons, and yet he blessed each of them "according to his blessing," even though the blessings were not equal.

The Ohr HaChaim discusses a different problem: Ya'akov told Yosef that Menashe and Ephraim were to be considered like one of his own sons. That would mean that there were to be thirteen tribes, as the tribe of Yosef would then be split into two. The Ohr HaChaim asks whether the tribe of Levi was to be counted, even though Levi would not inherit land, since that tribe was chosen to serve in the Temple as Kohanim and Leviim. This dual identity of the tribe of Levi is often found from this point on in the Torah. In certain cases, Levi and Yosef appear as the twelve tribes and at others Levi is absent, and Yosef is divided into Menashe and Ephraim. It appears from this problem that the tribe of Levi was diminished in the blessing given it by Ya'akov.

The Ramban is troubled by the word "el, to," literally "bury me to (with) my fathers" in the cave that Avraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite. The Ramban says, "It is possible that the word el serves here to indicate many meanings: Bury me 'with' my fathers, just as in the verse, 'And thou shalt not take a woman 'el' her sister, meaning with her sister. El hama'arah means 'in the cave,' just as in the verse 'Ve'el And in the ark thou shalt place the testimony that I shall give thee.'" It is also possible that it means "and carry me 'to' my fathers to the cave." HaAmek Davar explains that the word "el" indicates the completion of a task. The cave where the forefathers were buried was created at the time of the Creation of the World. Its task was to be the burial place of the forefathers and their wives. When Adam and Chava were buried there, that began the task. Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, Leah (but not Rachel) were all buried there. When Ya'akov would also be buried there, it would be the completion of the cave's task. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that burial in the Land of Israel (Canaan at that time) was so important that Ya'akov was willing to inconvenience his sons to carry him back to the Land that Hashem had promised His People.

Ya'akov stated, "I shall be brought in to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpeilah, which faces Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Avraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as a burial estate." The Ramban explains that the intention of this verse is to let us know that the purchase was for an everlasting inheritance, not a temporary ownership. It is also clear that the cave was purchased for the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people which ended with the burial of Ya'akov. This was a clear statement to Yosef that he was not to be buried there with his father, as Ya'akov's burial was the completion of Avraham's purchase. Eisav's family also sought the cave for their burial site, and Midrash tells us that a battle ensued between Eisav's family and Yosef's family for rights to the cave. Some say Eisav was beheaded there; others say that his grandson, Zepho, led an army to capture the cave, and Yosef defeated that army and took Zepho captive to Egypt. Later, Zepho traveled to Rome and eventually became the leader of the Romans. This would clarify why Rome continuously tried to defeat the B'nei Yisrael and destroy them.

We have seen that Ya'akov spoke harshly to Reuvein, Shimon, and Levi yet included them when blessing the B'nei Yisrael. The Torah commands us, "hohei'ach tohi'ach, you shall surely reprimand" someone who has sinned. Ya'akov understood that we must be very careful with that mitzvah. While it is essential to reprimand our families and our acquaintances when we see them doing something wrong, we must do this out of love for them, with hope that our words will improve their lives. The reprimand, then, must include a clear demonstration of our love for them but not for their actions. May we reprimand in the same way that Hashem does, for He has promised that we are His people no matter how we have sinned. May our children and acquaintances see our love through any of our words.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Benjamin is a wolf that will tear; in the morning he will eat the spoils, and in the evening, he will divide the spoils." (Beraishis 49:27) At the end of his life, Yaakov called his sons together to reveal the time of Moshiach. However, Hashem did not allow it. Instead, Yaakov proceeded to bless his children with prophetic blessings which allude to future times.

In explaining the blessing of Binyamin, Rashi and other commentaries discuss times in the later history of the Tribe of Binyamin where they would gather and divide spoils. In the morning, or the ascension of the Jews' glory, Shaul HaMelech from this tribe would eat the spoils of his enemies, and even in the evening, when the Jews were under control of Babylonia, Binyamin's descendants Mordechai and Esther would divide the spoils of Haman's household. The strength of the tribe at other times, as well, corresponded to the might of a wolf.

It is surprising, then, that the Targum Onkelos does not go along with these ideas at all. In fact, his commentary seems to have nothing to do with a wolf, and actually little to do with the Tribe of Binyamin. He says that Hashem's presence dwells in the portion of Binyamin and the Mikdash will be built in his land. In the morning and evening the Kohanim will offer sacrifices, and in the evening, they will distribute priestly portions. Not only is there no reference to a wolf, the Kohanim were from the Tribe of Levi, and Binyamin is not getting the "spoils" of the Mikdash, i.e., the korbanos. What's going on here?

Perhaps we can understand the maala of Binyamin to be that he is an opportunist. When he sees something good, he wants to grab it, and he does; just like the wolf who races in and grabs his prey. However, what Binyamin seeks is not physical wealth nor material spoils. What he seeks is spiritual, as the verse in Mishlei (10:8) states, Chacham lev yikach mitzvos, the wise of heart will take good deeds. This will later be applied to Moshe, who chose to busy himself with bringing Yosef's body to burial, while everyone else was gathering the material riches in Egypt.

Even if Binyamin's children would not be the ones to serve in the Bais HaMikdash, he wished to grab the merit of the sacrifices and have them in his portion. The Gemara in Megilla (26a), says that there was a strip of land of the portion of Yehuda which extended into Binyamin's portion. On that strip, the altar was built, and Binyamin was pained every day, wishing he could swallow that portion as well.

Like the wolf, Binyamin sought to grab every bit of true goodness he could, and was not satisfied with his current prey. This is the reference to the wolf which Onkelos sees, and such is the nature of one who understands the opportunities of life, and takes advantage of the chance to grab the true goodness.

R' Yankel Galinsky z"l would relate the story that, as a spirited and rambunctious young boy, his father sent him to the strict Novardok yeshivah in Bialystok, known for its focus on character improvement. The mashgiach told him he first needed to refine himself by learning mussar.

Discouraged, Yaakov left the office and wandered into a small, seemingly empty synagogue. He noticed a single candle and heard a sweet voice repeatedly chanting a passage from the Gemara (Eruvin 54a): "Chatof ve'echol, chatof ve'ishtei d'alma d'azlinan minei k'hilula damei".

The passage translates to: "Grab and eat, grab and drink, for this world that we will leave is like a wedding celebration." The repeated chanting emphasized the urgency of seizing opportunities for good deeds and spiritual growth in this fleeting world.

This mesmerizing mantra penetrated the boy's bones and he returned to the Yeshiva, where he was accepted.

Years later, the young man chanting with such intensity was identified as none other than the future Steipler Gaon, R' Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky z"l, who became one of the greatest Torah leaders of his generation. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

In a good example of Talmudic humor, Rav Nachman reacted to Rav Yitzchak's recounting of what Rabi Yochanan said -- that "Our patriarch Yaakov did not die" -- with a wry question: "So was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him and the embalmers embalmed him and the buriers buried him?" (Taanis, 5b).

The way to understand the contention that Yaakov didn't die, I think (and it's borne out of the verses quoted in that Gemara), is that he lives on -- as the patriarch whose children, all of them, became the progenitors of Klal Yisrael -- through the eternal Jewish people.

The Midrash in Vayeishev, commenting on Yosef's dream about the sun, moon and stars bowing to him, has Yaakov wondering, "Who revealed to him that my [secret] name is 'sun'?"

It's interesting to reflect (pun intended) on the fact that the moon -- the symbol, in its waxing and waning, and in its role in the Jewish calendar, of Klal Yisrael -- reflects the light of the sun. We reflect Yaakov, are the continuation of his life.

Even more interesting, according to the Tikkunei Zohar (brought by the Shela and the Bach [Orach Chaim 281]), "the image of Yaakov is carved out [i.e. visible] in the moon." *© 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org*

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

As I have previously mentioned, in my adolescent years I was enamored with Sherlock Holmes and read the entire series several times. One of the more impactful passages on my 15-year-old mind related to Holmes teaching Watson the difference between seeing something and observing it. The following exchange is found in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, 1891).

Holmes: "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room." Watson: "Yes, frequently." Holmes: "How often?" Watson: "Well, some hundreds of times." Holmes: "Then how many steps are there?" Watson: "How many? I do not know."

Holmes: "Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed."

By its very nature mankind is self-centered. This is somewhat understandable; we focus on what we need to survive. Our lives begin as helpless babies who only know our own needs. As we progress through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, that initial self-centered nature is hopefully replaced with a more outward focus. That is, seeing things outside of one's own desires and being attentive to the needs of others.

Even so, many people fail to notice the details of the lives of other people such as the color of their eyes or what they bring for lunch. In fact, we rarely notice details within our own lives. We look at our watches hundreds of times yet we cannot answer with certainty the style of the hands, where the date and logo are located, how many links are in the band, etc. When we check our watches we're just retrieving the time and not attending to the details of the watch itself. We are merely using the watch for what we need and are not observing the ontology of it.

This reminds me of the following story – most likely apocryphal (one hopes). A medical school professor was teaching his class the importance of being observant in the practice of medicine. He took out a jar of yellow-colored liquid. "This," he explained, "is urine. To be a doctor you have to be extremely observant; to color, smell, sight, and taste."

After saying this, he carefully held up the jar and examined the color, sniffed it, and then dipped his finger into the jar and put it into his mouth. His class watched in amazement, and most, in disgust. But being the serious students that they were, as the jar was passed, one by one they dutifully followed suit and dipped a finger into the jar and then put it into their mouths.

Once the last student finished, the professor shook his head sorrowfully and gave them a lesson they would not soon forget: "If any of you had been truly observant you would have noticed that I put my index finger into the jar and my third finger into my mouth."

We often "see" a distorted reality, our preconceived notions blurring our perception and not strictly reflecting what actually is. We find an example of this in last week's Torah reading. Joseph sees his brothers for the first time after some twenty-two years and immediately recognizes them. Ten of his brothers stand before him and yet not a single one of them identifies him; they know he was sold to someone in Egypt, therefore they expect him to be a slave and not in a position of power.

This week's Torah portion recounts a related subject from the final events of Jacob's life, and it opens with, "Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years. The days and years of Jacob's life numbered one hundred and forty-seven years" (Genesis 47:28). The great medieval commentator known as Rashi points out an oddity in the way this Torah portion is written.

Generally, the text of the Torah is divided into

paragraph-like passages. These paragraphs are sometimes separated by a blank space the width of nine letters between the words of one subject and the next, while other times separated by a complete paragraph break with the rest of the line left completely blank.

However, in the opening of this week's portion neither method is used – and in fact there is no break at all between last week's Torah portion and this week's portion. Rashi (ad loc) explains this unusual "closure"; "Once Jacob died the hearts and eyes of the Israelites were 'closed up' by the suffering of the enslavement – for once Jacob died the Egyptians began to enslave them."

There are several points here that demand clarification. Rashi is known for his clear and straightforward interpretation of the text; he rarely, if ever, takes poetic license. So Rashi commenting that "the hearts and eyes of the Israelites were 'closed up' by the suffering of the enslavement" is a very odd description. Besides, what does "their hearts and eyes were closed" even mean, and what does that have to do with enslavement?

In the final paragraph of the Shema prayer we are enjoined to "[…] remember all the commandments of God and perform them; and you should not seek out the desires of your heart and your eyes after which you stray" (Numbers 15:39). Rashi (ad loc) comments, "The heart and the eyes are spies for the body, procuring sins for it – the eyes see, the heart desires, and the body commits the transgression."

Rashi is articulating the nature of man and how we use our senses to serve ourselves. This is why it is so important to develop one's character. Depending on how we develop ourselves (or do not) we dispatch our "scouts" (i.e. the heart and eyes) to seek our desires. But there is one exception to this rule – slaves.

Slaves have no sense of self; they exist at and for the pleasure of their masters. They cannot do anything for themselves. This is what Rashi means when he says that the enslavement caused the hearts and eyes of the Jewish nation to become closed. Rashi is not taking poetic license – he is simply explaining the mechanics of slavery.

Ultimately, this is why the Jewish people needed to go down to Egypt; to understand what it means to sublimate oneself and the self-centered base desires of the body. Only once this lesson was learned did the Jewish nation become worthy to receive the Torah and be true servants of the Almighty. Though the difference between a slave master and the Almighty is that the latter wants a person to sublimate his sense of self for his own betterment – in order to achieve a higher level of existence and a better, more meaningful life.

By converse, we find that using one's self-centered "scouts" (i.e. the heart and eyes) for the betterment of others is actually the mark of true leadership.

The sages teach that Moses, who grew up as a prince in the house of Pharaoh, was given the position of overseeing the Jewish slaves (in another column I explained the brilliance of this tactic by the class of oppressors over the oppressed – and how it was successfully used by the Nazis in WWII).

Moses was from the tribe of Levites, who were never part of the enslaved class of the Jewish nation. Still, when he went to check on his fellow Jews – who were now his responsibility to oversee – he sympathized with them, "he went out to his brethren and saw their suffering" (Exodus 2:11). On this verse the sages teach that "Moses went out and gave over his heart and eyes to be distressed for them" (see Rashi ad loc). True leadership is using your core senses to be sensitive to the needs of others and to do what you can to build them up. This is why we find at the end of this week's 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 for the Jewish nation. The Davidic Dynasty (and the eventual Messiah) are descended from the tribe of Judah. While wine is commonly associated with royalty (and one of the reasons that the color purple was adopted for royal vestments), what is this cryptic message from Jacob about teeth being white with milk?

The Talmud (Kesuvos 111a) gives an absolutely fascinating explanation of this verse, and in doing so defines the role of a monarch. The Talmud reads the verse literally and translates it to "white teeth preferred than milk." From here we see that it is better to show a person the white of one's teeth (i.e. a smile) than to give him milk. What does that mean?

Giving someone milk only sustains them for a short while, but genuinely seeing someone for who they are and validating them with a smile provides that person with a feeling of value and self-worth. This is considerably more precious and lasts much longer as it lifts their spirits and transcends any fleeting physical gift. This is the role of kingship; to focus on others and build up those around you. This is the very same trait we find in Moses in next week's Torah portion.