

Parasha Vayechi, 2nd year, Genesis 49:1-26

by Cynthia Whitehead,
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Shabbat shalom!

Vayechi – Jacob lived. And, as we all must do, he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people.

On this momentous day, the mythic story cycle of Genesis brings us to Egypt to Jacob's deathbed. Here, the chain of stories that began with the creation of the universe, the destruction and recreation of the turbulent world of our blessed patriarchs and matriarchs ... comes to a peaceful close.

Jacob had what we think of today as a 'good death' – after a long life full of prophecy, betrayal, fear, loss, prosperity and accomplishment. Surrounded by a large and loving family. In awareness that the end is near. And yet fully aware and able to share his wisdom with his children, assuming his daughters were also in the room, Jacob blesses his sons.

He calls his sons together, saying:

“Gather round that I may tell you what is to befall you in the days to come.”

“Assemble and hearken, O sons of Jacob;
Hearken to Israel your father”.

By referring to himself both as Jacob and as Israel, perhaps he is telling them that he is speaking in both his 'private' and his 'professional' capacity?

Then in eloquent verse, he speaks directly to each son from Reuben the eldest on down.

In Uri Alter's translation of the Tanakh, Jacob begins by saying:

“Reuben, my firstborn are you—
my strength and first yield of my manhood
prevailing in rank and prevailing in might.
Unsteady as water, you'll no more prevail!
for you mounted the place where your father lay,
you profaned my couch”

After Simeon and Levi, he turns to Judah:

Judah, you, shall your brothers acclaim—
your hand on your enemies' nape—
your fathers' sons shall bow to you.

About half of these verses aren't blessings as we usually understand the term.

Jacob doesn't hold back: Reuben is as unsteady as water and will not prevail, Simeon and Levi trade in weapons of outrage and their fury is cursed, Issachar is a big-boned donkey who becomes a serf, Dan will become a snake on the road attacking travellers on horseback.

He is telling these five sons what he sees in them, and it isn't pretty. Jacob predicts that their past deeds – good or evil – mature or impulsive – will affect their future lives and roles in the Israelite community. Jacob does not have a divine vantage point from which he can see the future. He cannot know that these events will occur. But he can imagine where his sons' past deeds and character will lead them.

What are blessings, really? *Beracha* has the same root – Bet-Resh-Khav – as *bericha*, a wellspring, a source of clear, pure water that gives life and sustains life. Could a blessing be something that creates and sustains life a more profound level? The first *beracha* in the Torah is uttered by God in Genesis 1:28 after God creates humans in God's image.

Ve y'varech otam Elohim.
And Elohim blessed them.

God's promise of abiding love and faithfulness.

In Genesis 12:2-3 God blesses Abram more specifically and urgently:

“And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and
make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless
those who bless you...”

Back to Egypt.

We know that without truth we cannot thrive. So, looked at this way, Jacob's criticisms are indeed blessings, because he is telling his sons some profound truths about their characters and the real-world consequences of their actions.

Truth and consequences. Jacob's sons -- and we -- need that clear vision of our faults and mistakes as well as our strengths, in order to be able to change for the better.

On his deathbed, full of gratitude and love for his children and grandchildren, Jacob the deceiver has become Jacob the truth-teller.

From the human point of view, our blessings may be expressions of gratitude to God. But gratitude alone is not enough. We cannot be grateful in the abstract. We have to be grateful for something, to be aware of and name that something.

Blessing is a noun, and it is also a present continuous verb – it is action.

So in expressing our gratitude or calling for God to bless ourselves or others, we are making a direct connection with God’s creation and with God. As Daniella Levy says in the “Crash Course in Jewish Blessings”:

“I’m declaring that whatever it is I’m making the blessing for –
whether it’s a food I’m enjoying, a roll of thunder I heard,
or a mitzvah I’m about to perform –
is increasing God’s presence in the world,
through my recognition of
[God’s] role in creating or commanding it.”¹

So first we have to be aware, to see what we will bless and then we have to know why we bless it. In blessing, we create and confirm our connection to God and to our true nature as beings created in the image of God.

Maybe the mitzvah of saying 100 *berachot* per day is not too many. Every moment of awareness and connection, every touch of the water from the wellspring, can be a blessing.

Blessing begins with awareness, with vision.

Isaac was blind and weak, and was deceived into blessing his younger son Jacob. And Jacob, in the next chapter of the story, was physically blind but could “see” clearly enough to intentionally bless the younger son despite Joseph’s attempt to correct him. His vision did not depend on his physical eyes.

This year and next, we will see hundreds of thousands of people who are denied the ‘good death’ that Jacob had. Denied comfort and a sense of their own value, denied a rich connection to those who love them, denied connection to their past and future, as they die from COVID, struggling for breath, unconscious and practically alone.

Like Jacob’s family, our community is mourning the loss of five beloved members this past year: Sue Douglass, Nan Strauss, Irene Winston, Carol Cosman and Ralph Kramer. May their memories be for a blessing.

Unlike like Jacob’s family, we are denied the tribal intimacy of gathering together to witness a death, to care for the body according to ancient Jewish traditions, and to aiding, blessing and comforting the dying and the mourners.

Over the past year, our community has also experienced renewal with four births among our members and close friends, including Nadav, son of Renna Khuner-Haber and Illana

¹ Daniella Levy, <https://www.aish.com/jl/jewish-law/blessings/Crash-Course-in-Jewish-Blessings.html>, accessed on December 28, 2020.

Mantel, and Noa, daughter of Itai Trilnik and Angel Ryono. Noa is already coming to services.

Our stories and our blessings given and received are links in a living chain extending from God's first blessing of Adam and Eve, to God's blessing of forefathers and foremothers, patriarchs, matriarchs and the parents' blessing of their sons. A living chain of blessing that extends thousands of years beyond the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph to our time ... and God-willing for generations to come.

As poet Marcia Falk writes²:

*N'varekh et hama'yan
adey-ad'mfakeh—
ma'gal hachayim
hameymit uchayey.*

*N'bareykh et eyn hachayim
v'khoh nitbareykh.*

*Let us bless the wellspring
eternally giving—
the circle of life
ever-dying, ever-living.*

*As we bless the wellspring of life
so we are blessed.*

Shabbat shalom

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² Falk, Marcia (1996) *The Book of Blessings, New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. p. 471.