

## Dangerous Work – Parashat Vayhi

My colleague, Rabbi Adam Greenwald, tells the story about an eighth grade student who once came to interview him about being a rabbi. In preparation for Career Day at her school the young woman had been assigned to meet with someone whose job she found interesting and to ask a pre-set list of questions including such items as: “Do you have to wear a suit to work? How much do you get paid? Is there much heavy lifting?”

Rabbi Greenwald describes that his favorite question of the bunch was: “Is being a rabbi dangerous?” a query that was probably designed with police officers or construction workers or deep-sea fisherman in mind rather than white collar employees. Still, he found himself giving a most unexpected answer. “Yes, Rabbi Greenwald affirmed, “Being a rabbi definitely can be dangerous. Any job that comes with a title most certainly is.”

This morning we read *Parashat Vayhi*, the final Torah portion in the Book of Genesis which brings to a close the epic drama of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph has by now risen from his humble roots as an immature braggart to the position of second in command over all of Egypt, using his considerable power and wealth to relocate the family who spurned him long ago so that they can all live happily ever after, safe from the famine still plaguing Canaan. As our *parasha* opens, Joseph’s elderly father, Jacob, is on the brink of death and gathers together his offspring so that he may bless them before he passes. Joseph may be a man with a big and important job, but at the end of the day he’s still a grief-stricken son standing alongside his brothers at the bedside. Even high position and status cannot forestall human mortality.

Before Jacob blesses his sons, however, he first blesses his grandsons, Joseph’s two boys, of whose existence he did not even know for so many dark years. “I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well,” he exclaims in an expression of true poignancy and pathos before stretching out his hands towards their young heads (Genesis 48:11). Joseph places his eldest, Manasseh, on Jacob’s right and his youngest, Ephraim, on Jacob’s left, so that the boys will be blessed properly according to birth order, but the older man crosses his hands instead so that Ephraim is given precedence. Even when Joseph gently corrects his father, Jacob insists it is no mistake saying: “I know my son, I know. [Manasseh] too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he” (Genesis 48:18). Thus Jacob put Ephraim before Manasseh.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to see the institution of primogeniture, the additional rights and inheritance traditionally accorded to first-born male children, once again upended in this episode as it has been so many times before throughout the Book of Genesis. Indeed, it is Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau, Rachel and not Leah who accrue special status and might as we move through the early stories of our ancestors; in Exodus, too, it will become Moses and not Aaron who ultimately carries the highest mantle of leadership. In Joseph's own family we have seen not Reuben, the eldest, but rather Joseph and Judah emerge as central characters; later Aaron's two older sons, Nadav and Abihu, will be killed off in strange fire leaving only the younger ones left to shoulder the priesthood. Amongst Judah's boys it is not Zerah, the first baby to thrust a hand from his mother's womb, but rather Perez, his twin, who beats his brother out of the birth canal. Time and time again, later born children seem to supplant the first born status of their siblings.

Dr. Ismar Schorsch, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, explains that central to this emphasis on the younger over the older is that it asserts God's ability to choose freely based on criteria of righteousness rather than being compelled by arbitrary rules. He writes, "Abraham and his clan have no claim on God's favor other than merit. They are neither the oldest nor the most powerful of clans. They are singled out because they have a moral sensibility that graces them with the promise to envision a more just and compassionate way to conduct human affairs. Though latecomers, Israel was to become God's firstborn on moral grounds, displacing those who preceded them chronologically, in order to establish a new beacon of virtue for humanity" (Canon Without Closure, p. 176). In other words, it is not birth order but rather character that reigns supreme for Torah. God will choose not based on societal convention but rather based on virtue.

Schorsch goes on to explain that in addition to emphasizing God's ability to choose, our *parasha* also highlights humanity's ability – perhaps even our responsibility – to choose as well, leaving us free to set the course of our own lives without being compelled by rules of predestination. It is no coincidence, says Schorsch, that we bless our children each Friday night by Ephraim and Manasseh precisely to indicate that individual worth is not predetermined by birth order or race or socio-economic status or any number of other things but rather develops as result of being a decent person and contributing to society in meaningful ways. (Other commentators suggest that we bless by Ephraim and Manasseh either because they're the first pair of brothers to get along in Torah or because they were raised in Egypt and thus serve as strong role-models of holding onto Jewish identity even while in Diaspora.) One should not rest on one's laurels as an eldest or despair as a youngest; in the grand scheme of things,

when a child is born is of little ultimate consequence. Rather, what a child does with his or her lot in life is where true meaning lies.

It is possible, of course, that all this was in Jacob's mind as he crossed his hands and decided, quite deliberately, to bless Joseph's younger child first – that he was intending to make a statement about human worth and responsibility, about God's ability to choose, about the latent potential of the nascent Jewish people - the younger sibling starting to finally emerge into full power. And it's also possible that something else entirely was going on for Jacob in this episode, a theory promoted by Lord Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of the UK. Sacks posits that Jacob knew little about the personal qualities of his two grand-sons, indeed he seems not even to recognize them in this incident although his sight is surely failing and perhaps his mind as well. Rather, writes Sacks, the only thing that Jacob knows for certain about the boys is their names: Manasseh who was called after God making Joseph forget (*nasheh*) all his trouble and his father's household and Ephraim who was called after the fruitfulness (*fara*) that Joseph enjoyed while in Egypt. While it may be true that first-born Manasseh's birth was a turning-point for Joseph, finally giving him a family of his own after all the hurt that he experienced during childhood, it must be painful for Jacob to know that Joseph wanted to forget from whence he had come so completely, that he actually named his child for the hope that he would no longer remember. Hence, says Sacks, the patriarch swapped hands so that Ephraim was put first. Jacob wanted to honor the blessings (Ephraim) that had come from Egypt without also disdaining all that had come first from Canaan.

Any job that comes with a title is just a little bit dangerous, and that is true for Joseph's title of vizier as well as it is for any of ours still today. Titles make us feel like we're invincible or untouchable or above the law; they give us, by mere association, status, reputation, privilege, and power that may or may not rightfully be ours. The judge comes to see herself as such an exacting arbiter of justice that she forgets that the rules apply equally to her as well. The doctor, imbued with super-human powers of healing, comes to see himself as master of life and death. The rabbi, so often associated with piety and good character, becomes holier than thou. Titles project a certain image to others, whether or not they are deserved, and they plant seeds of hubris in their bearers such that they come to believe that what the titles convey is true. What is the antidote to all of these hazards? I believe that it lies in remembering.

Talk to important people and you'll hear that one of the things that keeps them grounded is staying connected with those who knew them before they were famous. When someone remembers you not as "Mr. President" or "Madame Chairperson" but rather as that awkward guy who could once barely use

a computer or that goofy girl who used to get really nervous before speaking in class, it humanizes and humbles you. When people who are wealthy remember the modest circumstances from whence they came, when people who are powerful remember those times where they felt helpless, when people who are respected remember what it once felt like to be overlooked, it helps them to be more beneficent with the way in which they yield their authority. Jacob may have been personally hurt to hear that Joseph wanted to forget the circumstances of his youth, but I believe that the father's concerns went well beyond simple issues of ego. Jacob wanted to make sure that Joseph remembered his childhood so that he could use it now in his role as a most influential adult.

Being a rabbi *can* be dangerous, and so too can be being a nurse or a professor or a CEO or any other kind of job imbued with a title. Monikers like these make it all too easy to hide behind the badge, as it were, to rest on imagined merit rather than to actively have to earn it, to abuse our position and authority or come to believe we're better than we really are. But to mitigate against these dangers, we luckily have a very good remedy. We should always remember our past, the people we were before and apart from the labels that have come to define us. We should make sure to be like our forefather Jacob, putting fruitfulness before forgetting.

*V'simech Elohim c'Ephraim u'chi Menasseh* – May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh. Next Friday night when we bless our sons (and our daughters too), perhaps these words will have slightly different meaning. They will remind us to help our children see themselves as we do as their parents, no matter what future glory they may ultimately go on to gain.

Shabbat Shalom!