

As we come to the end of Bereshit, Genesis, the book of beginnings, we see a family begin to heal. Bereishit is full of, to put it mildly, challenging family dynamics. Our ancestors screw up, kind of a lot, and have a troubling, familiar, all-too-human tendency to repeat the same mistakes their parents made. The Torah is nothing if not validating of the human condition.

Here, at the end of the beginning, we feel the tone shift. After this, we know, the story is no longer about a family; it's about a nation. Growth. The path to freedom and independence. This is our last chance to get this family thing right before we have to learn how to scale the model.

Here is the scene. Jacob, now settled in Egypt with all his sons and their families, is dying. Among his deathbed requests are, first, not to be buried in Egypt - an important request, note it well. He also asks to bless Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menashe as his own. They are brought to him, and after an episode of hand-lay-and-switch, Jacob, renamed Israel, says the following:

טו וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלַּכְוּ אֲבֹתַי לִפְנֵי אַבְרָהָם וַיְצַחֵק הָאֱלֹהִים הָרַעָה אֹתִי  
יָמַעֲוֹדִי עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: טז הַמִּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֵל אֹתִי מִכָּל־רָע וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת־הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בָהֶם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם  
אֲבֹתִי אַבְרָהָם וַיְצַחֵק וַיִּדְגּוּ לָרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ:

15 ... “Elohim in whose presence my fathers walked, Avraham and Yitshaq, Elohim who has tended me ever since I was (born), until this day – 16 the messenger who has redeemed me from all ill-fortune, may he bless the lads! May my name continue to be called through them and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitshaq! May they teem-like-fish to (become) many in the midst of the land!”

On his deathbed, Jacob delivers a blessing. Today, that blessing has become a song some families sing to their children before they go to sleep, Hamalach HoGoel. It's one of my favorites. And, fun fact, the most common melody is not a Carlebach tune; it was written by a man named Abie Rotenberg from

Toronto. I don't know that much about him, but I can say that when asked in an interview with Jewish Vues Magazine whether he preferred concerts or simchas, he answered: They don't have a Shmorg at concerts! So, he seems like a nice Jewish boy.

I love this song, and figured others do, too. So I posted on Facebook earlier this week, asking for people to share their reflections and stories around it. (Side note, as a communications consultant I can confidently share that this method of lazy dvar Torah writing is called crowd-sourcing and I highly recommend it. I'll invoice you all after Shabbos.)

It was lovely to hear everyone's stories; I'll share just a few snippets:

Mitchell said: "I remember it sung to me as a child. My most powerful memory of it was during Simchat Torah during the Childrens' aliyah (Kol Ha-Ne'arim). I was about 6 or 7. It was at Anshe Motele, where my grandfather (zt"l) was rabbi. There were dozens of us under the tallitot of the various men at the shulchan. My grandfather was there. My dad was there. My brothers. My grandfather gave a brief introduction with a prayer for good things for each child over the coming year. After the aliyah, everyone was singing. It was a powerful feeling of communal love. And I felt particularly loved. And safe. Thereafter, I got that feeling each time I hear it. I hope my kids have a similar feeling."

Aleeza shared: "I sing this song to my children at night. My one son Avraham always says "that's me!" When we get to his name in the middle. It makes me smile and remember that as much as our patriarchs lived... they too live through us today and in the future generations to come. We are here because of them and they are still here because of us."

Sarah replied: "I sing it regularly and fwiw I have augmented with a verse for vshem imotai. It calls me back to [my children's] birth rituals and feeling connected in a chain."

The most powerful reflection came from my friend Andy, who wrote the following: "I have sung it to both my kids.

When I was in New York once, I stayed with and visited [friends] over the weekend and went to their shul for Shabbat. It was the 1 year anniversary of Sandy Hook, and [the rabbi's] sermon was related to action on gun violence for the sake of those children and our children. She had printed the verses in the weekly Shabbat program and invited us all to sing with her- explaining where it came from and the meaning behind it. It was emotional for most of the people in the room- definitely me.

At the time, [my wife] was pregnant with our first child, and I saved that Shabbat program, so I would remember to sing it when Johnny was born. It was the first song I sang to him. I sang it a lot to him. And later to his sister. What does it mean to me? Well the tune is nice, so it's nice to sing over and over without getting sick of it. I guess I have thought about the connection to parents and grandparents who came before me... And sometimes I do think about how hard it is to live up to the expectation of protecting your children- I mean really keeping them safe from all harm- failing at this is probably the part of parenthood that terrifies me the most. And yet because it is impossible to protect them from everything, our tradition calls on us to ask for help."

It is the end of the beginning and Jacob is dying. The one who wrestled with G-d and man and prevailed finds himself at his most vulnerable.

I thought about this scene throughout the past week; a week full of scary things. Continued anti-semitic attacks. Wildfires. Military strikes. A plane shot down. I hope these scenes give way to heroism and acts of kindness. But sometimes they just make me feel vulnerable.

This sense of overwhelm, of fear, that feeling that the narrowness of the world is closing in on us; that is our Egypt.  
And it can bury us, if we let it.

But we follow the model of Jacob. In moments of vulnerability and transition, we insist we will not be buried in Egypt. We, rather, insist on offering a blessing. For protection on the path ahead, for those who will walk it after we're gone.

The rabbis considered sleep 1/60 of death, so perhaps it's fitting that the blessing Jacob offered on his deathbed has morphed into a lullaby. At the moment of vulnerability, we offer blessing. When we say these words, we anchor ourselves *b'shem avotai*, in the righteousness of the ones who came before us - the ones who made mistakes, and persisted, and, eventually perhaps even healed - and ask for blessing to move forward. We call on them not because they were perfect, but because they persisted. And we ask that the angels, anchored in G-d's compassionate will, who have come through for those ancestors before, step up for us now and deliver that blessing.

That grand lady of blessed memory Maya Angelou has a poem entitled, "When Great Trees Fall" which closes with the following lines:

when great souls die,/after a period peace blooms,/slowly and  
always/irregularly. Spaces fill/with a kind of/soothing  
electric/vibration./Our senses, restored, never/to be the same,/whisper to  
us./They existed. They existed./We can be. Be and be/better. For they  
existed.

[sing hamalach]

They existed. They existed./We can be. Be and be/better. For they existed.

Shabbat shalom.