

## What is Our Legacy?

### Parshat VaYechi

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In 1888 Alfred Nobel woke up, opened up a French newspaper and was shocked to see a picture of himself, accompanied by his own obituary. The headline read: *Le marchand de la mort est mort* ("The merchant of death is dead"). Reading his own obituary, Nobel was disgusted to find out his public image. The newspaper condemned Nobel for inventing dynamite and went on to say "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

As it turned out, Alfred Nobel had not died, evident from his reading the newspaper. The newspaper had been correct to publish an obituary, but for the wrong Nobel brother: his brother Ludvig had died in France of a heart attack!

While it was never clear in Nobel's later bequest *why* he wanted to establish the Nobel prize, this obituary may have served as a warning. He was concerned with his legacy, how *he* would be remembered and what would happen after his passing. Nobel's realization had a great impact: before hearing this story, the vast majority of us probably had no idea Nobel invented dynamite or produced weapons of war.

Yacov too was concerned with questions of legacy, as he faced his death:

וַיִּקְרָבוּ יְמֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת וַיִּקְרָא | לְבָנָו לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם-נָא מֵצָאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שְׂיִם-נָא  
יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאַמֶּת אֶל-נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם:

*And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, "Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt."*

Faced with mortality, Yacov starts by taking care of his funeral arrangements. He then turns his attention to his sons, offering them some choice words.

Reading this parsha, I've been struck by the following question. Yakov got to share his final words to his sons at the end of his life. What would mine be? What would yours be? What would we say to our loved ones if we knew that our time left is dwindling?

I've been thinking about this question more than usual as I read daily of *chayalim* who are giving their lives for Israel. What their legacy will be is a question that must be on their minds, and on ours as well. Some of these *chayalim* have been able to share a short version, messages which are equally heartbreaking and inspiring:

"I could have chosen not to come here and hide. But that goes against everything I believe in and value – and the person I consider myself to be. Therefore, I had no choice, and I would do the same thing if I could choose again." This is what Sergeant First Class (res.) Joseph Gitarts, 25, from Tel Aviv, who was killed in Gaza last Monday, wrote to his parents.

While none of us here are serving, these headlines and our parsha this morning invite us to examine what blessings we might give to our loved ones and what values we might seek to pass on to future generations.

Yacov's blessings were part wisdom, part prophecy, and part "Grandpa Jake" doesn't suffer fools and is going to tell it like it is. Among all these dubious blessings and character assessments, Yacov's words for Shimon and Levi really stand out:

שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֲחִים כָּלִי חֲמָס מְכַרְתֵּיהֶם: בְּסֹדֶם אֶל-תִּבְא נַפְשִׁי בִקְהָלָם אֶל-תִּתְּד כְּבִדִּי כִי  
בְּאַפִּם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרִצְנָם עָקְרוּ-שׁוֹר:

*Shimon and Levi are a pair of brothers; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen.*

אָרוּר אַפִּם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשָׁתָהּ אַחֲלָקָם בִּיעֲלֹב וְאַפִּיצֵם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:  
*Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel.*

Yacov knew his sons well. There is much to say about this doozy of a blessing which really reads as more of an indictment. How should we understand this odd blessing and what was Yacov trying to pass on in this moment?

First, it was clear to Yacov - as it should be to all of us - that Shimon and Levi have a serious anger problem, especially when they're together. Yacov is referring to Shimon and Levi's revenge on Shechem after the rape of Dina, when they massacred Shechem, his father Hamor and all the men in their city.

Second, there's something funny about cursing Levi in particular. "*Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel.*" This curse would make a lot more sense if Levi didn't amount to much of anything. But in just a few chapters, Levi will become a very prominent tribe: the tribe of Amram, Aaron, Moshe, the Kohanim and Leviim of course. If Yacov cursed his son Levi, then why did this tribe become the leaders of Bnei Yisrael?!

A number of commentaries explore what Yacov meant.

Rashi writes, *אֶפְלוּ בְּשַׁעַת תּוֹכָהָ לֹא קָלַל אֶלָּא אַפָּם* / *Even when he was reproving them he did not curse them but their anger.* Their anger is problematic, but there was nothing inherently wrong with Shimon and Levi. But he goes further, teaching us something important about the larger narrative arch of Shimon and Levi:

**אחלקם ביעקב. ...דבר אחר אין לה עניים וסופרים ומלמדי תינוקות אלא משמעון, כדי שיהיו נפוצים, ושבטו של לוי עשאו מחזר על הגרנות לתרומות ולמעשרות, נתן לו תפוצתו דרך כבוד:**

*Both of these tribes would be dispersed in Israel, and this happened, for you will find that the very poor — the scribes and elementary teachers — were all of the tribe of Simeon, and this was so in order that this tribe should be dispersed. As for the tribe of Levi, He made them travel round from one threshing floor to another to collect their heave offerings and tithes; thus He caused them also to be “scattered” but in a more respectable manner (Genesis Rabbah 99:6).*

Shimon's punishment was that they were dispersed among the tribes and became *sofrim*; they would write tefillin and mezuzahs and they would teach Torah. Levi were dispersed and had to gather tithes and offerings, yet they too became the religious leaders of the Jewish people.

Rashi's approach to a Shimon and Levi is to scatter them. Don't allow their destructive energy to pool together and for them to feed off one another.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch offers a slightly different approach. While Rashi says that Shimon and Levi's anger is really the problem and can be diluted, Rav Hirsch suggests that context is key.

He notes that in Yacov's blessing, there is a difference between לחלק [to divide] and להפיץ [to scatter]. The former implies distributing something good so that its value can

have widespread impact. The latter implies spreading out something concentrated in order to weaken its intensity.

Rav Hirsch suggests that at certain points in Jewish history (particularly in the Diaspora, when resolve is weakened) what's needed is a good dose of Shimon and Levi's intensity and passion (אחלקם). Perhaps even now, we can learn from Shimon and Levi's intensity and seek to bring it to our Jewish and religious lives.

Att other times however says Rav Hirsch, particularly when we are living as a nation in the Land of Israel, the passion and zeal of Shimon and Levi must be diluted and restrained, in order to prevent the type of reckless behavior for which Shimon and Levi are rebuked by Yaakov. Putting Shimon and Levi in their proper context is key.

In a similar vein, the Gemara (Bavli Shabbat 156a) notes that

מֵאֵן דְּבִמְאֲדִים יְהִי גִבֵּר אֲשִׁיד דְּמָא. אִמְר רַב אֲשִׁי אִי אֹמְנָא אִי גִנְבָּא אִי טַבְחָא אִי מוֹהֲלָא  
*One who was born under the influence of Mars will be one who spills blood.*  
In other words, there is something to be said for astrology and horoscopes, and if you're born under Mars, you will spill blood. It's just your nature. However, *Rav Ashi said: He will be either a blood letter, or a thief, or a slaughterer of animals, or a circumciser.*

One's personality or one's nature says Rav Ashi doesn't tell the whole story. He agrees that someone born when Mars is ascendant will have a predilection toward spilling blood. But it's their choice as to whether they become a blood letter, thief, OR they use their powers for good, and become a *shochet* or a *moyel*.

Regardless of which interpretation you prefer, the commentaries suggest that at the end of his life, Yacov had an important message for Shimon and Levi. He told them some version of: your passion is a powerful weapon and your greatest gift, choose carefully how you wield it.

Most of us imagine for ourselves something like Yacov's storybook finale. We hope to live a good long life, to be surrounded by loved ones as our days come to an end. The honest truth is that we don't control the when or where of the end of our lives. But we do control what we would say and when we would say it.

No matter what stage of life we are in, we learn from Yacov and articulate what is most important to us. We can take the time to think about what we would say, and even say what needs to be said. It's incumbent upon each of us to share this wisdom, ensuring that our legacy, like Yacov's, will last for generations to come.