

Seeking, Receiving, and Bestowing Blessings

This week's Torah portion, *Vayechi* (Genesis 47:28- 50:26), concludes the Book of Genesis. It also concludes the life story of our patriarch Jacob, so the name of this *parashah*, *Vayechi*, which means "and he lived," is weighted with extra meaning.

Indeed, what is the significance of saying, "and he lived?" Why state the obvious? Ah, the significance is not that he just existed, that he piddled his time bumping and strolling with nary a care, conviction or interest. No, Jacob, our ancestor, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah lived!

Jacob, the one who wrestled with his family, wrestled with strangers and wrestled with faith was thereby blessed with a new name, *Yisrael* (Israel) to consecrate his noble quest. Jacob, more than any other, lived with passion and at every turn sought to fully realize the blessings of life and until his dying day struggled fiercely to bestow those blessings on his children and grandchildren.

On his death bed Jacob/Israel summoned his son Joseph and his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, in order to bless them. This is what transpired:

⁸ *Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, "Who are these?"*

⁹ *And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." "Bring them up to me," he said, "that I may bless them."*

¹⁰ *Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them.*

¹¹ *And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well." ¹² Joseph then removed them from his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground.*

¹³ Joseph took the two of them, Ephraim with his right hand -- to Israel's left -- and Manasseh with his left hand -- to Israel's right -- and brought them close to him. ¹⁴ But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head -- thus crossing his hands -- although Manasseh was the first-born.

¹⁵ And he blessed Joseph, saying, "The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day--- ¹⁶ the Angel who has redeemed me from all harm -- **Bless these lads.** In them may my name be recalled, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth."

¹⁷ When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it wrong; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's. ¹⁸ "Not so, Father," Joseph said to his father, "for the other is the first-born; place your right hand on his head."

¹⁹ But his father objected, saying, "I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations."

²⁰ So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh" (Genesis 48:8-20).

To this day, many of us gather our children on Shabbat in order to share that final blessing from Jacob/Israel. For our sons we say:

Ye-sim-kha Elohim k'Efra-yim ve-khi-Me-na-sheh.

"May God inspire you to live in the tradition of Ephraim and Manasseh" who carried forward the life of our people.

And for our daughters we say:

Ye-si-meikh Elohim k'Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah v'Zilpah.

"May God inspire you to live in the tradition of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah" who carried forward the life of our people.

And there is another important blessing that we can say for our family, friends and guests:

Ye-va-re-khe-kha Adonai, ve-yish-me-re-kha. Ya-eir Adonai panav ei-lekha vi-chu-nekah. Yi-sa Adonai panav ei-lekha, ve-ya-seim lekha shalom.

May the Eternal bless you and protect you. May the light of Adonai shine upon you and grace you. May the presence of Adonai be with you and bring you peace.

By sharing these blessings we carry on the legacy of Jacob/Israel who taught us that the life and legacy of our loved ones transcends death. Yes, we turn the page and begin a new chapter, a new book, a new year, a new decade and so on. And our journey continues, not as some fresh start or with a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Rather, our lives and our life journeys are enriched by the blessings we seek, by the blessings we receive, and by the blessings we bestow on others.

B'vrakhah v'Shabbat Shalom!

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