

א ביסל תורה!

The Maimonides School Parsha Newsletter

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ויחי

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The Meaning Behind יעקב's Two Posthumous Instructions

By Ma'ayan Kahan

ויחי outlines the final moments before יעקב's death. The family is at long last reunited in Egypt, and it is time for יעקב to pass on. When יעקב realizes his end is near, he meets with יוסף and makes him promise to not bury him in Egypt, saying, "וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמַת אֱלֹהֵי תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם" (בראשית מז:כט), make me a vow and do not bury me in Egypt. Shortly after יעקב makes this request, he decides it's time to meet with his sons to say his goodbyes. With every farewell, he provides them with a unique ברכה. These ברכות were all different, and were by no means equal, clearly providing some brothers with the short end of the stick. Some sons got lengthy blessings spanning several פסוקים, while others received only a few words from their father. Almost all of the blessings were positive, but יעקב singled out שמעון and לוי to criticize them for their anger in their actions against שכם. יעקב said that they and their descendants would be scattered. Additionally, יוסף was the only one whose sons were also able to receive a ברכה, while the other brothers' children were never addressed. Once he finishes giving ברכות, he again provides instruction for after his death, this time going into a little more detail, as he requests, "אֲנִי נֶאֱסָף אֶל-עַמִּי קְבְּרוּ אֹתִי אֶל-אֲבֹתַי אֶל-הַמַּעֲרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׂדֵה עֶפְרוֹן הַחֲתָי" (בראשית מט:כט), saying that he is about to be gathered with his nation and that he should be buried with his fathers in the fields of עפרון, i.e. in מערת המכפלה.

Why did יעקב chose to split his post-mortem instructions into two different parts, and why it is bisected with these brachas to the שבטים? After all, isn't it more effective to convey your wishes in one explicit statement, rather than say them at different times, while dropping premonitions about the future in between? Perhaps we can say that יעקב's first set of instructions were meant to prepare his children for his death, while his second set were to prepare his children for a life without him, and ensure that they stay united, regardless of their different prophecies and life trajectories. To remind them of their differences, יעקב provided them all with unique prophecies, while then reuniting them in the end.

יעקב's first set of instructions is very simple and practical, merely asking to not be buried in a specific location. יעקב makes יוסף swear to follow this request. By creating such a binding sense of finality, he is alerting his children that his time is running out in the most simple way possible. יעקב's second set of instructions, however, are much more elaborate, using much more complicated language and with a detailed request. Just before the brothers heard these instructions, they had received their prophecies, explicitly separating them from one another in a way that they hadn't before. They were likely reeling after hearing all the different ways their lives would go, with each of them bound to a different path. One can easily imagine that the brothers weren't too pleased with one another at the time. If a many-colored coat could whip them into a murderous frenzy, this polarizing series of prophecies could have an extreme effect. יעקב's second request comes to soothe the brothers, and remind them that they are at their core, a family. The אבן עזרא explains that a core tenet of יעקב's second request was that the brothers all travel to bury him together. רש"י finds interest in the specific word יעקב uses in his request, נֶאֱסָף. He explains that it means to be gathered and that when used in relation to death, it means the soul is gathered to שמים. By having the brothers all travel to bury their father, they are all able to play this vital part in helping to serve their father. Despite the brothers' many differences from each other, in the end, they are all united under the same banner as עם ישראל. Today, all of כלל ישראל is different from one another in a myriad of ways, whether it be beliefs, preferences, or community. Nevertheless, just like the brothers were reminded to put aside their differences for the sake of their father, so too, we must remember to put aside our differences and unite as a greater and stronger community, dedicated to creating a better world for each other and for serving ה'.

Were All of יעקב's Blessings Really Blessings?

By Aaron Banks

The definition of a ברכה is a blessing, or thanksgiving, portraying good fortune, and/or a happy fate for the recipient. פרשת ויחי is a פרשה full of ברכות: a ברכה for each and every child of יעקב as well as his grandchildren. To the average observer these blessings would seem to be just that: a blessing. However, as we take a closer look at the translations/meanings behind a few of the individual ברכה's given by יעקב to his children; the ברכה's begin to look more like insults.

One of these examples is the ברכה of דן: "וְהָיָה דָן נָחֵשׁ" Dan will be a serpent (מט:יז). In Judaism and many other religions, a serpent is considered to be a trickster or sneakster. The snake is typically associated with the story of the snake telling אדם and חווה to eat from the עץ הדעת. Additionally a snake is disliked by a majority of the world's population, leaving us with a burning question. If a snake is so widely hated, why is דן, one of the 12 sons of יעקב, blessed to be a snake!? The answer to this question lies in the descendents of דן: the judges of Israel. The פסוק states that "דָן יִדִּין עַמּוֹ", that דן will judge his people. Judges need to be crafty and smart in order to discern all information relevant to the trial. This perfectly relates to a serpent which is called the "cleverest of all animals" in פרשת בראשית; a fitting title for the tribe of judges.

An additional example of a more-insult-than-blessing ברכה is the ברכה given to יששכר. יששכר is compared to a "חֲמֹר גֶּרָם", a donkey. Once again this raises a big question with this פסוק: how can the tribe associated with תורה learning be compared to a donkey - one of the lowliest of animals? The answer to this lies in the comparison of a donkey and a horse, and how each animal rests after their work is done. By a horse, the rider needs to remove all the saddlebags and the gear in order for the horse to relax. However, with the donkey, it needs only a quiet place to rest, and it can still rest fully geared up. This applies to our vacations as well, with regards to learning תורה. When you take a rest or go on vacation, you should still remember to keep your תורה values and continue your תורה learning, like the donkey who keeps its gear on its back; not like the horse who loses everything.

A great life lesson we can learn from these two ברכות is that there are multiple ways of looking at certain events in our daily lives. You can either interpret it as a negative event just like with דן and יששכר's ברכה's, but you can also look at it from a positive perspective: that ה' did this for a reason which we may not always be able to see or even understand. May we all be able to see the positive in everything that happens to us in our lives.

Parsha Question of the Week

Q: Who is the only brother to never get a ברכה for specifically for himself or his family, neither in פרשת ויחי nor פרשת וזאת הברכה?

A: שמעון

The Blindness of Yaakov and Its Nature

By Ephraim Fischer

In this week's פרשה, we see יעקב blessing the children of יוסף. When יוסף introduces them to יעקב, he initially doesn't recognize them. The פסוק says, "וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אֵלֶּה", that ישראל saw the sons of יוסף and asked who they were. Right after this פסוק, the תורה mentions the sight of יעקב, that, "וַעֲיַיִן יִשְׂרָאֵל", his eyes were heavy from his old age, so he couldn't see. It seems from this פסוק that the reason why יעקב didn't recognize the sons of יוסף was because he couldn't see. However, if this is the case, then shouldn't the פסוק about יעקב's eyesight come before this פסוק about יעקב not recognizing יוסף's children? Why did the תורה place the justification for יעקב's actions after his actions themselves?

רש"י comments on this that יעקב didn't really mean to ask who they were. When יעקב saw them, he knew that they were the sons of יוסף, and he wanted to bless them. However, the שכינה moved away from them because ירבעם and אחאב, two bad kings, would eventually come from אפרים, and יהוא and his children, more bad kings, would come from מנשה. רש"י says that when יעקב said "מי אלה", what he meant was, "Where did these people come from, as they are not fit to receive a blessing!". According to רש"י, what יעקב is saying is that he almost doesn't even recognize them. He saw that their children would become very bad people, and he felt as if he didn't even know them anymore, which is why he asked who they were. One question that can be asked on this is, why did the שכינה only go away from מנשה and אפרים? Didn't bad people come from all of the שבטים, such as מנשה the king, and his son, אמן, came from יהודה! רב עובדיה מברטנורא answers this by saying that the זכות of יעקב only guarded over his own children. When he wanted to bless his own children, his זכות kept the שכינה from departing. However, when he was blessing his grandchildren, his זכות didn't guard them from the שכינה departing due to their descendants.

רבנו תם (ישועות כהן, בראשית מח:ח) provides a different view. He states that יעקב saw the image of a person but didn't know who it was. This still doesn't answer our question, so רב אדלר provides an explanation on this. The גמרא (יומא כח ב) says that when the word "זקן" is mentioned, it means that one learned תורה when they were old. When יעקב was old, he learned תורה, as our פסוק says, "וַעֲיַיִן יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּבִדּוֹ מִזֶּקֶן", that the eyes of יעקב were heavy from his old age. However, the פסוק also says that יעקב was "לֹא יָגַל לְרְאֹת" Is this פסוק saying that he was learning, or is it saying that he was blind? The answer רב אדלר gives explains why the פסוקים are in the order that they are. When the פסוק says that יעקב couldn't recognize the children of יוסף, it's going to show that יעקב only saw the vague image of a person, but couldn't recognize who it was. This פסוק is the פסוק that really says that יעקב couldn't see very well. The פסוק of "וַעֲיַיִן יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּבִדּוֹ מִזֶּקֶן" is saying that יעקב was learning. However, the question still remains on why the פסוק says that יעקב couldn't see! The answer to this question is that he became blind because he learned so intently. The גמרא on the פסוק we just learned explains that it's not because of his old age that יעקב became blind, rather it's because he learned so much that he stressed his body too much. The ריטב"א explains that learning so hard has a physical toll. The פסוק is saying that he was blind, not to disgrace יעקב, but to praise him for his learning. Therefore, the fact that יעקב is blind fits in with the פסוק explaining that he learned in his old age.

This explanation teaches us a valuable lesson: We shouldn't judge someone based on their physical capabilities. When the תורה was calling יעקב blind, it was actually praising יעקב for his great learning, not disgracing him for his blindness. To bring another example from blindness, throughout the תלמוד and מדרש, a blind person is often called a "סגי נהור", literally meaning "enough light". While this may seem like a normal euphemism for blindness, the סגי נהור (במדבר כד:ד) says that a blind person is called a סגי נהור because when they lose their vision, their other senses are amplified. Therefore, through these other senses he becomes enlightened enough that he has "enough light". In our case, יעקב had "enough light" because he was enlightened through his intense learning. While we may be inclined to judge somebody based on one of their physical traits, we should hesitate to do so, as we don't know what they have inside.

מנשה's Superiority over אפרים

By Sam Goldberg

This week's פרשה is פרשת ויחי. The פרשה begins with the fact that יעקב has dwelled in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and has grown old living there. יעקב requests from יוסף that once he dies, he will be buried in ארץ כנען in מערת המכפלה. יוסף realizes that יעקב is growing old and brings his sons to יעקב for a ברכה. When יעקב realizes יוסף is coming he sits up in bed and gathers his strength. יוסף explains that he has brought his sons אפרים and מנשה. יעקב asks יוסף to bring them forth so he can give them a ברכה. יעקב places his hands on אפרים and מנשה according to their ages, with מנשה under the right hand, as he was older, and אפרים under the left hand as he was the younger one. Just as יעקב is about to bless the two children, he switches his hands and places his left hand on מנשה and his right hand on אפרים. יוסף attempts to switch the hands back to the 'correct' order, but יעקב stops him, saying that the younger son shall be greater than the older son, and he will have many descendants.

What does יעקב mean by this? רש"י states that this means that in the future, from אפרים shall come יהושע to lead us into ישראל and teach us תורה. The גמטריה בעל הטורים further proves this by using גמטריה, as the phrase וזרעו יהיה מלא adds to the same as יהושע. אבן עזרא explains that אפרים shall have many nations descend from him, making אפרים greater than מנשה. After this, יעקב continues and says that in future generations, people will bless that their offspring should be like אפרים and מנשה. רש"י states that when one wishes to bless his son a man will say to his son, "יְשִׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכַמְנָשָׁה" make thee as אפרים and as מנשה. This is the blessing given every Friday night by parents to bless their children.

From this, we learn that the person who is currently at the top will not always be the best, and that we do not know our true potential. מנשה was supposed to receive the better ברכה because he was the בכור, but because he would not be as great as אפרים, the hands were switched. We do not know who will be the greatest from us, so may we all strive to be the best version of ourselves possible and be able to reach our full potential.

A Note From The Editors

We have just reached an amazing milestone. It's an incredible achievement to have students reading and writing דברי תורה every week, not because they have to, but because they want to. For all of ספר בראשית, we have published תורה ביסל every week. Whether there be school or break, students have stepped up to write דברי תורה, and we are making a huge achievement by learning לשמה every week. We have published double the דברי תורה we usually do to celebrate this milestone we have achieved. May we keep publishing א ביסל תורה and learning לשמה for the rest of this year and for years to come.

Your Editors,
Binyamin and Ephraim

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