



Partners In Torah
San Diego Study Guide

Parshat Vayechi
תשפ"ג

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Partners Detroit

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Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome.

Thank you for coming.

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

This week's portion is the portion of blessings. In it, our forefather Yaakov bestowed blessings upon Yosef's two sons, Ephriam and Menashe, and on all of his own sons, the 12 Tribes of Israel.

It is striking how much attention and value that the Torah places on "blessings." First, we had the story of Yitzchak who wanted to bestow a blessing for dominion and prosperity on Esav. Yet due to the involvement of his wife, Rivka, he instead gave the blessing to Yaakov. We suffer still today from the scream that Esav emitted when he found out that Yaakov had taken *his* blessing from his father.

Yaakov's blessing to Ephraim and Menashe established Ephriam, Yosef's younger son, to be superior to Menashe, and elevated both of them to the status of their uncles, Yaakov's very own sons, the Holy Tribes of Israel.

Later in the Parsha, Yaakov bestowed a unique, deeply insightful blessing upon each of his sons.

What is the meaning of a blessing from a holy person, and what is its power?

We can divide blessings into three categories:

1. A blessing from Hashem to people, which always includes an increase of prosperity and goodness from Hashem in all areas of the person's life.
2. A blessing from people to Hashem, which "gives" nothing to Hashem, because He can receive nothing from us; on the contrary, we are all recipients of Hashem's goodness. Therefore, it is an expression of thanksgiving and praise to Hashem for all the goodness that He has bestowed upon us.

3. A Blessing from one person to another. Unlike the above two blessings, this is a prayer to Hashem that He heed my request of Him to bestow the wishes of my blessing upon this individual.

We thus easily understand how the holier the person bestowing the blessing, the greater the chances of it coming true. Hashem listens to the prayers of His holy people. A blessing, however, despite its bestower may not be fulfilled if the recipient is unworthy, or if Hashem sees that it would not really be a blessing for that person.

We note, that Yitzchak and Yaakov both gave their blessings at the end of their lives. Our Sages explain that this was because at that stage in their lives, they were less materialistic and more spiritual. Their bodies, having lost some of their vitality, no longer exerted as strong an influence on them, making the blessings as spiritual as possible.

Yitzchak's and Yaakov's blessings, not only came true, rather, the essence of their blessings actually created the reality for their children. Once their words had been spoken, they could not be changed.

The Midrash (Bereshit Rabba 98:1), based on the verse in Psalms (57:3) informs us:

(ג) אֶקְרָא לְאֱלֹקִים עָלְיִן לְקַל גֹּמֵר עָלַי

3) *I will call upon Hashem, Most High, to the G-d who fulfills for me.*

(א) אֶקְרָא לְאֱלֹהִים זֶה יַעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ לֹא לְגֹמֵר עָלַי שֶׁהִסְכִּים הַקָּב"ה עִמּוֹ לִיתֵן לְכָל
אֶחָד וְאֶחָד לְפִי מֵה שֶׁהוּא

I will call upon Hashem, this refers to Yaakov Avinu, to the G-d who fulfills for me, that Hashem agreed with him to give each son (the blessing) according to who he is.

This Midrash teaches us that this verse applies to Yaakov Avinu when he bestowed the blessings upon his sons. Yaakov called upon Hashem in prayer to bestow the blessing he designed for each of his sons, and Hashem agreed with him, giving each son the requested blessing.

Yaakov's blessings set the place and parameters for each of the tribes in their roles as Hashem's servants in the Jewish nation. As Yaakov was about to leave the world, he looked with his spiritual vision deeply into each of his sons' souls, and determined the special way in which he would serve Hashem. According to that vision, he was able to see with absolute clarity the destiny of each of the tribes. He then blessed each son with the blessing appropriate for his unique essence.

Because Yaakov's vision was razor sharp, and he hit the mark each time, Hashem agreed with all of his blessings, which became "set in stone" and could not be changed.

There is a very dramatic example of this in Jewish History.

Yaakov blessed Yehuda with royalty. All kings of Israel were to come from the tribe of Yehuda. Service to Hashem was the domain of the tribe of Levi. They did not receive a portion in the land of Israel, as they were dispersed amongst the other tribes. They were the mentors for the Jewish people who studied Torah and taught it to the people, who supported them with their tithes.

It was thus very befitting that the Chashmonai family (Kohanim, descendants of Levi, of Channukah fame) was so valiant and courageous and could single handedly defeat the mighty Greek army and secure the Holy Temple once again for service to Hashem. This was their domain, and they excelled at it.

We celebrate the Chanukah holiday to recognize their valor and selflessness on behalf of the Holy Temple. What heroes!

Unfortunately, this great and holy family met a tragic end; every last member of that family was killed. The Talmud teaches us that Herod, a slave in the palace, rose up, and slaughtered every member of the Chashmonai family and posed as one of them.

Nachmanides poses the obvious question. Where is the justice? How could such a holy and valiant family just perish?

He answers that they made a grave mistake by not turning over the kingdom to a member of the tribe of Yehuda. Yaakov had determined that “The scepter will not leave Yehuda,” and that kingdom in the Jewish nation is strictly in their domain. The Chashmonai dynasty did not respect this. Yaakov’s blessing to Yehuda was not a wish; it established a reality. So, when the Chashmonaim from the tribe of Levi overstepped their bounds and did not return the kingdom Yehuda, they met their unfortunate end.

Yaakov’s prophetic blessing for each of his sons was the greatest blessing that they could receive. Each knew clearly what his role in life was, and what it was not. They trusted their father’s judgment and accepted his word as law.

This is why Yaakov gathered them all and blessed them in the presence of each other. The late Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky ז"ל asks a very important question: If Yaakov intended to give each of his sons a unique and specially tailored blessing, why did he call them all together? Why not call each one separately into his room and give him his own specific blessing?

R. Kamenetsky answers that Yaakov wanted them each to see how they were an essential part of the whole and that each of them has his specific and unique role to play. The whole is incomplete and will not function unless each of its parts does what it needs to do. Similarly, the “whole” will not function if one part tries to play the role of another and neglects its own role in the process.

With these blessings, Yaakov established the Jewish Nation on a rock-solid foundation with the greatest chances of survival. When each component knows, and focuses upon, its function, it can do its job happily without doubt or jealousy.

Having done this, Yaakov Avinu, the greatest of the forefathers, had accomplished his mission in the world. He has completed the mission that Avraham Avinu had started: to create a nation to serve as Hashem's ambassadors to the world. Yaakov can now leave the world in peace, knowing that the legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov will endure forever.

The book of Bereshit concludes with Yaakov's death and his burial in Kiryat Arba, Israel, and the death of Yosef. There is moreover something prophetic about Yaakov's burial.

I heard this lesson from my Rebbe, Harav Moshe Shapiro זצ"ל, who heard it from his Rebbe, Rav Elyahu Dessler זצ"ל.

In his last comment to the book of Bereshit, Nachmanides writes (49:23):

רמב"ן על בראשית פרק מט פסוק לג

השלים הכתוב ספר בראשית שהוא ספר היצירה בחדוש העולם ויצירת כל נוצר, ובמקרי האבות כולם שהם כעין יצירה לזרעם, מפני שכל מקריהם ציורי דברים לרמוז להודיע כל העתיד לבא להם

*This concludes the book of Bereshit, which is the book of Creation of the world and everything in it, and **the events** that occurred to the forefathers, which **are like a creation** for their children. This is because all of the events that happened to them (the forefathers) create a template that hints to what will occur to their progeny in the future.*

This is the concept called *The deeds of our forefathers are a template for their children*. Throughout his commentary on Bereshit, Nachmanides points out examples of this phenomenon, revealing to us that this final chapter of Bereshit corresponds to the last chapter in Jewish history, the chapter that we are writing now – the end of days. When Nachmanides' commentary to the Torah was first printed, the following quote (on Genesis 47:28) was censored by the gentiles, and has only been recently restored.

(כח) ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים שבע עשרה שנה. כבר הזכרתי (לעיל מג יד) כי רדת יעקב למצרים הוא גלותינו היום ביד החיה הרביעית (דניאל ז ז) רומי הרשעה, כי בני יעקב הם עצמם סבבו רדתם שם במכירת יוסף אחיהם, ויעקב ירד שם מפני הרעב, וחשב להנצל עם בנו בבית אוהב לו, כי פרעה אוהב את יוסף וכבן לו, והיו סבורים לעלות משם ככלות הרעב מארץ כנען, כמו שאמרו (לעיל מז ד) לגור בארץ באנו כי אין מרעה לצאן אשר לעבדיך כי כבד הרעב בארץ כנען והנה לא עלו, אבל ארץ עליהם הגלות, ומת שם ועלו עצמותיו, וזקני פרעה ושריו העלוהו, ועשו עמו אבל כבד

28) I have already mentioned that Yaakov's going down to Egypt set the precedent for our current exile in the hands of the "fourth beast" (a reference to Daniel 7:7), viz, Rome –because (1) Yaakov's sons were the ones who caused Yaakov to go to Egypt by selling Yosef their brother; (2) Yaakov went down because of a famine and thought to save himself with his son Yosef who was beloved to Pharaoh like a son ; (3) They also thought to leave Egypt as soon as the famine in Israel ended, as it says in the verse (47:4), "We came to sojourn in the land (Egypt), for there is no grazing for our cattle because of the famine in Israel." But, in the end, they never left; rather, the exile continued on and on; (4) Yaakov died there; (5) Pharaoh's elders and officers took him to Israel; and (6) mourned heavily for him.

וכן אנחנו עם רומי ואדום - אחינו הסיבנו ביאתינו בידם, כי כרתו ברית עם הרומיים ואגריפס המלך האחרון לבית שני ברח אליהם לעזרה, ומפני הרעב נלכדו אנשי ירושלים, והגלות ארץ עלינו מאד, לא נודע קצו כשאר הגליות ואנחנו בו כמתים אומרים יבשו עצמותינו נגזרנו לנו, ויעלו אותנו מכל העמים מנחה לה', ויהיה להם אבל כבד בראותם כבודנו ואנחנו נראה בנקמת ה', יקימנו ונחיה לפניו

*The same applies to our exile in the hands of Rome - Edom: (1) Our very own brothers caused us to fall in their hands by making a treaty with the Romans (Yehuda the Maccabee and his brother Yonatan who renewed it) and Agrippa II, the last king of Israel, who ran to the Romans for help; (2) Jerusalem was captured because of a famine; and (3) the exile continues unabated with no end in sight, unlike the other exiles, which had a limited length. (4) In this exile, we are **like dead**, saying that our bones are dry, we are cut off (Ezekiel 37:11). (5) But they (the other nations of the world) will eventually exalt us above all the other nations – an offering to Hashem, and at that time, when the nations of the world see our honor, they will mourn greatly, and we will see Hashem’s revenge against them, may Hashem keep us alive.*

Based on the concept that *the deeds of our forefathers are a template for their children*, Nachmanides reveals that the final events that transpired with Yaakov in Egypt would be a model for how events will transpire when Mashiach comes and this exile comes to its end.

The similarities shared by the exile to Egypt and the exile that we are in now are striking. The return of Yaakov’s body to Israel and his burial by the “elders and officers of Pharaoh” is predictive of the return of the Jewish nation to the land of Israel after the long exile. We were also returned to Israel by the other nations; a vote in the UN. Yaakov being “dead” symbolizes that, when that happens, the Jewish nation will resemble a body without a soul. They will appear to be dead - dry bones. Mashiach’s coming and restoring Hashem’s kingdom to the world will bring great honor to Hashem’s nation and cause the nations of the world great mourning.

Although we have not merited to see the fulfillment of the entire prophetic passage of Nachmanides, the complete redemption by the Mashiach, and Hashem’s revenge against our enemies, we are struck by how much of it *has* come true, some of which we have ourselves witnessed.

Who would have thought that the Jewish people would ever return to the land of Israel after so many years of exile? It seemed so impossible that the New Testament's sole prophecy is that the Jewish Nation is destined to wander the face of the earth, never to return to their land. It seemed so sure that they could predict it without worry that it would be contradicted, but it has been proven false. The Jewish people have returned to the Land of Israel, and they prosper there. This is why the Vatican would not recognize the State of Israel. This was an absolute contradiction to the one prophesy in their bible and it still causes problems for their theologians.

The Jewish nation received permission to return to Israel right after the Holocaust. After losing 6,000,000 of its children in such a horrific, sadistic, and dehumanizing way, an emaciated, crippled, and seemingly broken Jewish nation looked and felt like it was dead. We were dry bones - down and out, with seemingly no hope for a future. Like Yaakov, the Jewish Nation was a soulless body.

There seems, however, to be a contradiction here. When Yaakov was taken to Israel to be buried, he was indeed dead; whereas when we will return to Israel, Nachmanides says we will only be *like dead*. Why the difference?

The Talmud treats us to an intriguing discussion (Taanit 5b).

אמר רבי יוחנן יעקב אבינו לא מת. אמר ליה, וכי בכדי ספדו ספדנייא וחנטו
חנטייא וקברו קברייא אמר ליה מקרא אני דורש שנאמר ואתה אל תירא עבדי
יעקב נאם ה' ואל תחת ישראל כי הנני מושיעך מרחוק ואת זרעך מארץ שבים
מקיש הוא לזרעו מה זרעו בחיים אף הוא בחיים

Rabbi Yitzchak quoted Rabbi Yochanan who said, "Yaakov our forefather never died!" Rabbi Nachman responded. "Was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him, the embalmers embalmed him, and the buriers buried him?" (The Torah reports that Yaakov was eulogized,

embalmed, and buried.) Rabbi Yitzchak said, “There is a clear verse in scripture that teaches this (Jeremiah 30:10).

(י) וְאַתָּה אֵל תִּירָא עַבְדִּי יַעֲקֹב נֹאֵם יְדֹד וְאֵל תַּחַת יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי הִנְנִי מוֹשִׁיעֶדָּ
מִרְחוֹק וְאֵת זֵרְעֶדָּ מֵאֶרֶץ שְׁבִיִּים

10) ‘But as for you, do not fear, My servant Jacob,’ says Hashem, ‘and do not be afraid, Israel; for behold, I am saving you from distant places, and your descendants from the land of their captivity,’

The verse equates Yaakov to his descendants, just as his descendants are alive, so too Yaakov is alive.”

Because the verse in Jeremiah refers to Yaakov/Yisroel and his descendants in one breath, we see that Yaakov is equated to his children, and that he lives-on through their existence. Avraham and Yitzchak did not comprise the entire Jewish nation, for Avraham had Yishmael and Yitzchak had Esav, both of whom went off to start other nations. Only Yaakov contained the entire Jewish nation because all of his children were completely righteous and carried his legacy into the Jewish nation that came forth from them. Together, they embodied the essence of Yaakov their father.

What is the essence of Yaakov? For what did he stand? Yaakov’s quality was אמת - *truth*. He was the one who spent his life studying Hashem’s truth, the Torah. The love of Torah and Hashem burned intensely within his soul. This is embodied in Yitzchak’s statement about Yaakov, הקול - *“The voice is the voice of Yaakov”* – Yaakov’s voice studying the Torah and praying to Hashem are his forté and the essence of his life. Yaakov’s strong voice in Torah and prayer is the product of the fire of Torah that burns strongly within his soul.

All of Yaakov's children shared this love of Torah and dedication to Hashem. Thus, through his children, Yaakov's legacy continues. Hence, although when Yaakov was taken to Israel for burial in מערת המכפלה - Kiryat Arba to be placed with Leah, Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, and Yitzchak and Rivka, it *looked* as if he was dead; in reality, though, he was still very much spiritually alive. It requires a discerning eye, but although it was just his body, Yaakov was alive then, and continues to live today, in the Jewish nation that carries his name.

Unfortunately, a cursory look at the Jewish nation today reveals that so many Jews carry the name "Jew" in body only, yet lack a soul. This is also what Nachmanides referred when he said that the final redemption will come to Yaakov's body, which will be missing its soul. The Jews who represent Yaakov today are those who have the fire of Torah burning in their souls, as did Yaakov's.

Our task at this time is to restore Yaakov's soul to him, to give life to Yaakov's seemingly dead body. The sole way to accomplish this is to ignite the fire of Torah in the souls of our brothers and sisters, to teach and study Torah with them so that the voice of Yaakov becomes stronger as we infuse him with life. As long as his voice is strong, he is alive and well.

We saw this in action after the Holocaust where many holy learned rabbis who miraculously survived the Holocaust with the fire of Torah burning in their souls who went on to establish yeshivot (high level academies) to teach Torah. These yeshivot were established primarily in Israel as well as in our wonderful country, the United States of America, and groomed the next generation of Torah teachers and rabbis. Yaakov is very much alive today, and Judaism thrives in great part because of the proliferation of Torah study. These teachers have succeeded in igniting the fire of Torah in their students who have carried the torch forward and are doing the same.

As we await the conclusion of Nachmanides' prophetic commentary, the coming of Mashiach and the complete redemption, restoring Hashem's honor through the Jewish nation, we now know what will hasten his coming: We must restore the soul to the body of Yaakov by teaching Torah to every Jew.