

Parshat Vaychi

Hy Kempler

December 22, 2007

Vaychi is the final chapter in the story of the Patriarchs. It also ends the drama of Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. Highlights of the Parsha include: the blessings of Joseph's children, Manesseh and Ephraim, the last testament of Jacob, the death, burial and mourning for Jacob, the final reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers and Joseph's death. I will focus on three.

1. The blessings of Manesseh and Ephraim
2. Jacob's final testament
3. The final reconciliation between Joseph and his sibs.

1. The Blessings of Ephraim and Menasseh.

In a lead up to the blessings we read an interesting episode.

Genesis 49:5 (page 295).....

A literal interpretation of the text is that Jacob adopts his grandchildren thereby legitimizing the subsequent apportioning of territory to them in the promised land. Through his children, Joseph receives a double stake, again illustrating how special Joseph was to his father. Intra –family adoption was practiced in the ancient near east. Mordecai's adoption of Esther and Ruth's adoption of her grandson, Obed, are examples of this practice.

When Joseph brings his children to the ailing Jacob to be blessed, it's odd that he doesn't recognize them because they probably had spent sometime together. The text says it's because his failing eyesight, echoing the eyesight problem of his father Isaac and signaling another tension around blessings.

What happens next is both surprising and expected- surprising, because Jacob exercises his prerogative of ignoring the rights of seniority-expected because his action is consistent with his own history in which as the youngest he took the blessing from his brother Esau. He switches the hand placement of Joseph and puts his right hand, the preferred one, on Ephraim, the younger son and his left hand on Manasseh. This required a crossing over of his hands. (Parenthetically an early Christian interpreter saw this as a sign that Christians would become the real inheritors of the Covenant.)

Why did Jacob switch his hands? The text explains because Ephraim will be greater in number, a prediction that is not entirely accurate according to a census described in Bamidbar -Numbers. But eventually Ephraim does become the more powerful and influential, Ephraim also being identified with the Northern kingdom of Israel.

It is hard to ignore the repetitive motif in Genesis in which the younger sibling is favored over the older—God chooses Abel's offering over Cain, Isaac is favored over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. On the other hand we

learn, in Exodus 13:1 for example, of the special status accorded first-born sons. They are said to belong to God. One thought is that the privileges of birth order and child favoritism, at times a cause for sibling rivalry, were a source of ongoing conflict in ancient families. Even today birth order continues as an important influence in family life.

What about the blessing themselves?

The blessing Jacob gives to his grandsons through Joseph begins with 48:15-17 p296. “The God in whose ways my father Abraham, Isaac walked, the God who shepherded me from my birth to this day, the Angel that redeemed me from all evil, bless these lads”. The structure of this blessing, a form of prayer, starting with a recognition of God’s greatness, adoration, as experienced by his ancestors, followed by his own experience with God, thanksgiving, and ending with a request, was used by our Sages as a blueprint for our central prayers. The format for the opening paragraph of Shmonei Esreh, for example, begins with adoration. “Blessed are you Eloheinu velohe avosenu’, then enumerates each Patriarch and Matriarch separately-each generation with its own encounter with God - and then thanksgiving, ’umevi goel livnei venehem’. Petition begins with requests for wisdom, forgiveness, healing. etc.

After Joseph interrupts Jacob to get him to switch his hands Jacob continues. Verse 20 p 297. “When future generations bless their children, they will say God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh”.

This simple phrase has become a cherished tradition among observant families. Parents, hands on their children’s heads just like Jacob, recite it on Friday evening before the meal with proper modifications for gender.

Jacob’s Testament. 49:1 pg 298

Often referred to as Jacob’s blessings, however, belied by the first two statements to Reuben, Simon and Levi, this section poses problems to the reader. For moderns, a death-bed speech in which a parent chastises some of his children and predicts the ascendance of one of them, lacks social sensitivity. It’s not the way most parents would want to be remembered. But in ancient times where patriarchal authority was dominant and tribal control and competition were of major concerns the statement must have been appropriate. (Another more striking example of this genre of death-bed scenes is in our Haftorah where the dying King David, like a godfather don, instructs his son Solomon to kill Shimi and Yoav, against whom he had grudges.)

A closer look at the text shows the poetic language as difficult and composed of rather ancient Hebrew. Scholars are puzzled by Jacob’s

predictions. For example, Judah's blessing says "the scepter shall not depart from Judah" meaning that his kingship will last forever. The Southern kingdom governed by descendants of Judah, the progenitor of the Davidic line, ended with the conquest by the Babylonians.

The last line of the Simon and Levi blessing says that they will be spread among the other tribes implying that they once had their own territories. But the tribe of Levi never had its own area because they served as priests.

Some scholars noting the later history of the tribe of Reuben, its geographic isolation and severe numerical decline, suggest that the sexual encounter with Bilah was a later insertion to justify these.

The final reconciliation

After Jacob's death, the text records the following. 50:15-21 p 308. Weren't you surprised that after the tearful family reunion we read about last week that this would happen? Did the brothers think Joseph was too good to be true? There is no evidence that Jacob knew the real story about Joseph's disappearance. Guilt and or fear may have driven them to lie. Traditional commentators derive a principle from this incident. One is permitted to deviate from the Truth for the sake of peace. They debate whether it is simply permissible to do so or whether one is actually obligated to do so.

In any case in this final reconciliation the Torah shows great insight into families. Parents often are the glue that bonds family members together. Once the glue evaporates old grudges, and rivalries may surface and turn siblings against each other.

The text reveals the brothers' admission of guilt (Verse 17, 291) .. .Raah, evil, peshah, chatah ..sin ..ana sana.. words of a supplicant reminiscent of Yom Kippur prayers. Then they prostrate themselves in front of Joseph.

What a scene! Wasn't this like Joseph's dream?

Joseph response is masterful. He cries and he says, "Don't be afraid.

Hasachat elohim ani" (Am I in place of God?). These are the exact words his father used in an earlier dialogue with his mother, Rachel, when she was depressed about her infertility.

Joseph saying this to his vulnerable brothers implies that he is not the dreamer who imagined himself as a lordship to whom they bowed. And in using his father's words he is acknowledging that he identifies with his father's central belief that there is transcendent power, a God, that determines the course of his life. Joseph's message was successful...the text says they were comforted as he reached their hearts.

May we all enjoy the good fortune to have our family squabbles end well. Shabbat shalom.