

SERVING GOD WITH OUR KNOWLEDGE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The end of the era of the Avot and the twelve brothers that created and formed the Jewish people takes place with this week's parsha. The family of seventy - the house of Yaakov - will grow and multiply and face centuries of pain and slavery in Egypt before being redeemed. None of this is yet apparent in this week's parsha.

The deathbed scene of Yaakov is one of the most poignant and inspirational in all of Torah. Yaakov wishes to tell his children and family what yet lies before them in Egypt and afterwards till the end of time. Heaven does not allow him to do so. As troubling as it is not to know the future it is perhaps even more troubling to know it. It is only the ignorance of the future that allows humans somehow to exploit the present and live a productive life.

Knowing the future makes of life an exercise of fated existence. It robs people of their God given choices in life and certainly stultifies any impulse towards creativity and discovery. Yaakov tells his children of an ultimate future - "until Shiloh arrives" - but the germane immediate future is hidden from him and his descendants.

There are many times in the Jewish story where the immediate future lurking just around the corner of time is hidden from an otherwise intelligent and seemingly practical generation. Heaven's motives in so dealing with us are unknown. But this fact of life - the future is always an unknown - governs our attitude and actions towards the present. We can only deal with the known that and not with an unknown future.

However the present can instruct us somewhat about the future. Yaakov blesses his children individually according to their present personal traits and accomplishments. Yet this assessment of them becomes the blueprint for their future as well. It is as though Yaakov analyzes the DNA of each of his sons and sees his genetic potential that will be realized in the future. Yehuda is already the king of his brothers and Yaakov is confident that this trait of leadership will continue throughout the generations of Israel.

Yissachar is now the student and the scholar and Zevulun is already the consummate commercial expert. Yaakov does not see the unknown future but he is a shrewd and perceptive judge of the present. Thus even the unknown future can be vaguely glimpsed simply by a realistic and wise understanding of the present. Heaven did not allow Yaakov to view the future through prophecy or other supernatural means.

But Heaven never interferes with the basic instinct, wisdom and analysis of the present by human beings. And this is what is clearly represented in the blessings of Yaakov to his sons. The Torah emphasizes this point when it will say to us at the conclusion of the book of Dvarim: "The hidden things belong to the Lord our God but the revealed things - the things that we ourselves can know through our own powers of wisdom and observation of the present - remain within our powers in order to fulfill all of the values and obligations of this Torah."

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com