

THE BLESSING OF NOT FOLLOWING THE PATTERN OF GENERATIONAL DESCENT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayechi

The Blessing of Not Following The Pattern of Generational Descent

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 663 - Belief in the Coming of Moshiach. Good Shabbos!

In Parshas Vayechi, Yaakov blesses Yosef's children: "And he blessed them that day, saying: 'By you shall Israel bless, saying: G-d make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.'" [Bereishis 48:20] Our patriarch models the way future generations of Jews will bless their own offspring. The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel interprets this as referring to the appropriate blessing to give one's son on the day of his bris milah [circumcision], rather than as a reference to the blessing parents give their children on Friday night or on Yom Kippur eve. (Both are widely practiced customs.)

There is much discussion among the commentaries as to why Ephraim and Manasseh are the prototypes by which we bless our children in future generations.

In general, there is a concept of the degradation of the generations (yeridas haDoros) - the further we get away from Sinai the weaker we become spiritually. We are not what our parents were, the Torah scholars of today are not like the Torah scholars of one hundred years ago, the scholars of 100 years ago were not like those of 500 years ago, and so forth. The Talmud describes this inevitable rule: "If the prior generations were like angels then we are human, and if the earlier generations were human then we are like donkeys" [Shabbos 112b].

There is only one exception to this rule: Yaakov made Ephraim and Manasse on par with Reuven and Shimon [Bereishis 48:5]. He declared them equivalent to the generation that preceded them. They were not merely like his grandchildren. They were like his children.

The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel is highlighting the appropriateness of this blessing on the day of the circumcision. When we welcome our son into the covenant of the patriarch Avraham, and the new generation comes online, so-to-speak, the blessing that we give our children is exactly this -- that they not be on a lower level than ourselves but that they should hopefully be (at least) on the

same level as their parents. Just as Ephraim and Menashe were equivalent to the previous generation (Reuven and Shimon), so too may this son be equivalent to that of his father's generation and not experience Yeridas haDoros.

When Hashem Nixes "Plan A", Yaakov Implements "Plan B"

Later in the Parsha, the pasuk says, "And Yaakov called his sons and said: 'Gather, yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days.'" [Bereishis 49:1] Rashi elaborates that Yaakov wished to reveal that which would happen at the End of Days, but this knowledge departed from him and he then began speaking about other matters.

Millions of Jews over thousands of years have wondered about the End of Days. When will redemption come? Why did Yaakov wish to tell his children when the End of Days would come and why - if in the end was Yaakov unable to accomplish this - does the Torah need to mention it at all? Why was it so important for them to know the 'ketz' ('end')?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky writes that Yaakov had a terrible fear. His fear was that if the Jews would go down to Egypt and need to be there hundreds of years, they would give up hope. As the years and generations go by it is only natural for people to give up hope. When one gives up hope, one throws in the towel and ceases to maintain his Jewishness and his Jewish identity. This was Yaakov's mortal fear.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky uses this concept to explain the Medrash in Parshas VaYigash that before leaving Eretz Canaan Yaakov chopped down cedar trees planted by his grandfather Avraham and brought the wood with him to Egypt. Yaakov wanted his descendants to have - throughout the Egyptian exile - a tangible reminder of the "old country." Yaakov wanted them to have a tangible artifact to remind them of the "old grandfather," that would serve as a constant source of hope that those boards would one day yet house a holy Tabernacle, which would be a home for the Divine Presence in their midst on the way back to their homeland.

So too, Yaakov's agenda in revealing to his children the whole of Jewish history was to give them encouragement not to give up hope in the darkest of times and to have faith that the end would be bright. The Almighty however intervened and suppressed Yaakov's prophetic knowledge of this information. Hashem told him that if his sons would learn the extent and severity of the Jewish exile, they would indeed throw in the towel.

"Plan A" was nixed by Hashem, but what was "Plan B"? Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that when the Patriarch called in his sons and started telling them who they are and about their strengths and weaknesses, he had an agenda. The agenda was to let them know that their descendants would each return to Eretz Yisrael and each one would fulfill a specific function (tachlis): "This is your job." He thereby gave his children a future to look forward to and a hope for a light at the end of the tunnel.

The prophet Zecharia used an expression "Asir Tikva" [Zecharia 9:12], meaning "a prisoner with hope". Without hope, one cannot survive. [Natan Sharansky was in solitary confinement in Russia for some 15 years. On the wall of his prison cell, he wrote the words "Asir Tikva." He was a prisoner, but a prisoner with hope. One who has hope can stand up to the KGB. Without hope, one will crumble.]

When "Plan A" of giving hope by revealing the End of Days was nixed by the Almighty, a "Plan B" was put into effect with the same ultimate goal. He told each of his sons what their future would be in Eretz Yisrael as part of Klal Yisrael. Each one received guidance towards his appropriate future contribution to the nation, commensurate with his own specific talents.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains: according to Yaakov Avinu, Klal Yisrael was not destined to be a uniform nation without differences of opinion amongst themselves. The Jewish people are not monolithic. We are not a single nation with one approach and one way of doing things. On the contrary, our destiny is to live together as 12 distinct tribes. We can each have our own opinions and approaches based on our own personalities. Moreover, when Yaakov Avinu called in his 12 sons; they were all there at the same time. He did not talk to each son individually. Yaakov talked to each son in front of everyone else.

Yaakov Avinu did that for a reason - so that each son should know that each of his 11 brothers also has a role that fits in with the larger needs and destiny of the nation. The patriarch validated each of the different future jobs of his sons and wanted to make sure that all of them knew that none of them had the exclusive claim to being on the "correct path set out for them by the patriarch of the family". We are all part of a bigger group and we should respect the talents and strengths of each other and not try to usurp the individualized roles of one another or try to delegitimize the contribution of one another.

We may not always agree, but we should respect legitimate diverse opinions within Klal Yisrael. From his deathbed, Yaakov gave his sons the hope for such a destiny and the hope and aspiration that allowed them to survive the Egyptian exile.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas VaYechi are provided below:

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