

YOSEF AND YAAKOV AGREED ON THE PURPOSE OF THE BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayechi

Yosef and Yaakov Agreed On the Purpose of the Blessings

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD# 927 - Yissocher/Zevulun Revisited. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Vayechi begins with the story of Yosef coming to Yaakov with his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim. "And Yosef saw that his father placed his right hand on Ephraim's head and it was evil in his eyes. And Yosef said, 'This is not correct my father, for this one is the first born. Place your right hand on his head.'" [Bereishis 48:17] We are familiar with the sequence of events. Yosef purposely put Menashe close to Yaakov's right hand and Yaakov purposely crossed his hands to place his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left hand on Menashe's head.

Yaakov refused to accept Yosef's "correction" and responded: "I know my son, I know. He (Menashe) too will become a nation and he too will be great; however his younger brother will be greater than him and his descendant's (fame) will fill the nations." [Bereishis 48:19]

Rav Yeruchum Levovitz provides an interesting insight into this 'dispute' between father and son. Later on in the parsha, the pasuk says: "All these are the tribes of Israel - twelve - and this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them; each according to his blessing he blessed them." [Bereishis 49:28] What does this last phrase - "each according to his blessing he blessed them" mean? Rashi interprets "the blessing that is destined to come upon each one."

Rav Yeruchum elaborates: People make a mistake when they go to a Tzaddik for a blessing. They think that this righteous person has a box full of blessings and they ask him to give him one of the blessings from his box. This is not how it works. A bracha can only accomplish what the person already has within his own potential. A bracha cannot create something that does not exist.

Let us give an analogy. There is plant food. There is a plant food that is custom made for roses. When a person applies these nutrients to a rose bush, one will be able to grow lush and beautiful roses. If a person uses the same plant food (designed for roses) on daffodils, it is not going to work

because this food is only designed to bring out "rose potential", not "daffodil potential".

Likewise, explains Rav Yeruchem, a Tzaddik cannot bless a person with blessings that he does not already potentially have within him. The bracha will simply not work! If someone does not have a good voice and he goes to a Tzaddik and says, "I want to be a world class chazzan like Helfgot," he should not expect miracles. No Tzaddik can give a bracha to make a person who cannot carry a tune into a world-class chazzan. This is what it means when it says Yaakov blessed his sons "each according to his blessing he blessed them." He only expressed the blessings -- as Rashi remarks - that each one was destined to already potentially have within themselves. It would not work to give Zevulun the bracha that he should become a Yissacher or vice versa.

The purpose of a bracha is that the recipient should become what he already potentially is destined to become, no more and no less.

Yosef looked at his two sons and protested, "Menashe is the first born. He should get the predominant blessing." Yaakov said, "I know my son, I know" -- meaning I know something by Divine Inspiration (Ruach haKodesh) that you do not know. I know that despite their birth order, the younger son will become the greater of the two. I know by Ruach haKodesh that Ephraim has the greater potential. Therefore, I need to bless them in this fashion. It will simply not work to try to give the predominant bracha to Menashe.

Yosef and Yakov both realized that a bracha works only to bring out the potential. Yosef naturally assumed that being the first-born, Menashe automatically had the greater potential and should receive the predominant bracha. However, Yaakov realized prophetically that the greater potential resided with the younger brother, Ephraim.

"As This Day": A Beautiful Interpretation of an Ambiguous Expression

Following his father's death, when Yosef saw that his brothers were afraid that he would now take revenge upon them, he tried to reassure them: "Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good; in order to accomplish - as this day - that a vast people be kept alive." [Bereishis 50:19]

In this speech to his brothers, what do the words "Kayom hazeh" [as this day] mean? It does not really seem to fit in smoothly! The commentary Be'er Moshe gives a fantastic interpretation.

We are now finishing the Book of Bereishis and as we have mentioned several times during these last twelve weeks, the predominant theme of Sefer Bereishis is: "Ma'aseh Avos siman l'Banim" [the actions of the fathers foreshadow those of their children]. Whatever was accomplished by our

forefathers allowed us to become the nation and people we are today.

Chazal say that during the entire time the Jewish people were in Egypt, not one woman was ever (knowingly) unfaithful to her husband. Considering the depravity and amoral nature of Egyptian society, this was truly an amazing feat.

How was such a feat accomplished? It came about through the power of "Ma'aseh Avos siman l'Banim." When the Matriarch Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's palace and did not succumb to the sin of infidelity to her husband, it gave her descendants, generations later -- the entire time they were in Egypt -- the spiritual strength to avoid sins of infidelity.

Furthermore, in Parshas Vayeshev the pasuk says [Bereishis 39:10-11] "And it was when she (Potiphar's wife) spoke to Yosef day after day and he did not listen to her to lie with her, to be with her. And it was like this day (k'yom ha'zeh) that he entered the house to do his work and not one of the men of the household was in the house..." She literally tried to seduce Yosef on that day.

The Be'er Moshe links the expression "k'yom ha'zeh" in the story of Yosef and Potiphar's wife with the exact same expression found in Vayechi, when Yosef speaks to his brothers. The reason the men of Israel -- for hundreds of years -- were able to withstand sins of a sexual nature was because of Yosef's self-control on that "k'yom ha'zeh".

This insight puts the pasuk in Vayechi in an entirely different light: "Your intentions towards me were bad, but G-d had something else in mind. He did not only put me in Egypt to be able to sustain the world physically. He put me in Egypt so that I should be in a place of temptation with a married woman and be able to overcome that temptation in order to accomplish k'yom hazeh (like this day) l'ha'chayos am rav (that a vast people be kept alive)." L'ha'chayos am rav does not merely mean that the masses should have what to eat. It also means to sustain Klal Yisrael in Egypt that they should not stumble before the temptation to sin (sexually). This was part of G-d's "Grand Plan". Because of that which happened "on that day" (with Potiphar's wife), the Jewish people throughout their sojourn in Egypt had the spiritual strength to never falter in matters of sexual immorality.

This is yet another example of "Ma'aseh Avos Siman L'Banim," which we have seen throughout Sefer Bereishis and which we conclude this week with the reading of Parshas Vayechi.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah 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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