

וַיְחִי

VAYECHI/AND HE LIVED Bereshith/Genesis 47:28-50:26

“**Seventeen years**” after Ya’acov and his family moved to Egypt, Ya’acov’s life is drawing to a close:

Bereshith 47:28 And Ya’acov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. So the length of Ya’acov’s life was one hundred and forty-seven years.²⁹ When the days drew near (קָרַב) that Israel must die, he called his son Yosef and said to him, “Now if I have found favor in your sight, please put your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me. Please do not bury me in Egypt,³¹ “but let me lie with my fathers; you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.” And he said, “I will do as you have said.”³¹ Then he said, “Swear to me.” And he swore to him. So Israel bowed himself on the head of the bed.

Quoting **Rabbi Joseph Tzarfati** in *Yad Yosef* (1617) (slight editions):

“It is the nature of everything to ‘*draw near*’ (קָרַב) and to cleave itself to its root and its source. For this reason the time of ‘*death*’ of the righteous ones is described as a ‘*drawing near*,’ (קָרַב) as if they had a desire to return to their root and to ‘*draw themselves near*’ (קָרַב) to their source. Our parents and their parents before them had a great yearning to be ‘*brought near*’ (קָרַב) to the Land of Israel, for there was the root and the source of where they were formed.”

Tzarfati explains that **righteous people** are always **eager to return to their roots**, that is, the **Source of Life**, itself. A **righteous person has no fear of death** because **death** is simply seen as an **opportunity to transfer from this world to the Olam Haba** – the world to come. The **root of the Hebrew** for “*draw near*” is **karav** (קָרַב) which is also the root of “*korban*” (קָרְבָן), the word describing **ritual sacrifices**. The **korban sacrifices** helped the Israelites “*draw near*” to יהוה, picturing that it was **through a substitute death**, that they were able to “*draw near*” to the **life-giver**.

So Ya’acov, (his name switches to “*Israel*” in verse 29), expresses to Yosef his **insistence in “drawing near”** to his **roots** - the **Land of Promise** and the **place where his ancestors are buried**. He wants to **go home** and he wants his **family to maintain a personal link** with the **Land**.

Did you notice something interesting about **how Israel asked Yosef to swear to follow through** with his **wishes for burial**? **When** was the last time you saw **someone taking a pledge by placing their hand under the thigh of another person**? What was the **context**?

Bereshith 24:1 Now Avraham was old, well advanced in age; and יהוה had blessed Avraham in all things.² So Avraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had, “Please,

put your hand under my thigh,³ *"and I will make you swear by יהוה, the Elohim of heaven and the Elohim of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell;*⁴ *"but you shall go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son Yitzchak."*

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Avraham did not want to mix the blood line with the surrounding pagan culture. If Yitzchak would have married a Canaanite, there would not have been a set-apart covenant family. Ya'acov (Israel) had the same zeal for protecting the future descendants of the chosen family. Ya'acov's family had been in Egypt for seventeen years and Ya'acov noticed how successful the family was becoming in the exile, outside of the Land of Promise:

***Bereshith 47:27** So Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the country of Goshen; and they had possessions there and grew and multiplied exceedingly.*

What was the message Israel gave to his family by insisting his body be returned to the Promised Land? The family was unaware that the Egyptian culture was beginning to penetrate and influence them. He did not want them to desire Egypt. In fact, he wanted them to know that **HE** didn't even want to be buried in the land of exile. There was a mission for this family as they turned into a nation, and it was crucial for purposes of the covenant, that they return to the Land. Thus we can understand the importance of requiring an oath for his burial arrangements.

Ya'acov's adoption of his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, was another effort to stem this tide of Egyptian assimilation. By effectively adopting them as his own sons, he gave their future descendants the status of tribes with an inheritance.

***Bereshith 48:5** "And now your two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine.*

To this day, "***May Elohim make you like Ephraim and Manasseh***" are the words used in the traditional blessings over sons on Shabbat.

***Bereshith 48:20** So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will bless, saying, 'May Elohim make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh!' "...*

Daughters are blessed in the names of Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah – the matriarchs. So why not bless our sons on Shabbat in the names of the patriarchs? Surely we're not blessing our sons to be like princes in Egypt. Ephraim and Manasseh were raised in comfort and prosperity. We don't actually know much about these young men growing up, but we can assume they led a very privileged life. They were children of the Diaspora, born and raised in Egypt, with no connection to the Land.

But **blessings are about more than prosperity and privilege. Igra DeKallah gives some insight (emphasis mine):**

“Why should Jacob have wanted all his descendants to bless their children with the examples of Ephraim and Manasseh rather than with that of some other two of the tribes of Israel? Because the two young sons of Joseph had conducted themselves in accordance with the fundamental Law of the Torah; namely, that one should neither consider oneself greater than another nor envy another. Even though Jacob had set Ephraim, the younger son, before Manasseh, the first born, Ephraim did not become arrogant and Manasseh did not become jealous. Seeing this, Jacob expressed the hope that all the children of Israel would be like Ephraim and Manasseh, free of arrogance and envy.”

So...**Manasseh was blessed** because he did **not get upset or vengeful** when his younger brother receives the blessing of the **first born** over him. And **Ephraim**, the younger who is set **over his older brother**, in **no way flaunts it or becomes prideful**. The **blessing we do over our sons** is all about the **absence of jealousy and arrogance**. **Both of those characteristics have plagued the chosen family from the beginning**. These feelings are **prophesied to be eliminated** along with the **restoration of all of Israel**:

Isaiah 11:12 He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, And gather together the dispersed of Yehuda From the four corners of the earth. ¹³ Also the envy of Ephraim shall depart, and the adversaries of Yehuda shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not envy Yehuda, And Yehuda shall not harass Ephraim.

Hopefully, our **future generations will receive this blessing** and be **free of such negative emotions!**

Psalms 133:1 ... Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!

Chapter 49 begins with Ya’acov’s invitation to all his sons to **“gather”** for his parting message, a mixture of praise, critique, and blessing:

Bereshith 49:1 And Ya’acov called his sons and said, "Gather together (ha’asfu - הִאָסְפוּ), that I may tell you what shall befall you in the end of days:² "Come together (hekavstu - הִקְבְּצוּ) and hear, you sons of Ya’acov, and listen to Israel your father.

Ya’acov focuses on a future time when the tribes must purposely **“gather together”**. He uses two Hebrew verbs that represent coming together. He tells them - **“become a single group...reconcile yourselves.”** There **must not be any inner jealousies, hatred, or rivalries**. Following the call to unity, he goes on to **speak of their uniqueness – prophesied diversity within a unified Israel**. This is a picture of the **chosen people in the “end of days.”** The **nation cannot function unless these tribes are all unified**.

Mark 3:24 "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.²⁵ "And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

Unity is crucial for the end times. Thus Ya'acov begins with a strong call to come together, and follows with blessings:

Bereshith 49:28 All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them; he blessed each one according to his own blessing.

Not everything that Ya'acov says appears to be a "*blessing*". We might evaluate Ya'acov's words as part blessing, part prophecy, and part settling of scores. Rabbi Ralbag notes, however, that blessings are not like possessions, which have an objective value independent of their bearers. Rather, a blessing is defined by what a person makes of it. We are familiar with the idiom, "a blessing in disguise." Consider a person who missed their plane, only to hear later that the plane crashed. Or to be rejected by a job offer, only to be offered a much better job a few days later. Ya'acov speaks to the strengths and weaknesses of each of his sons. In doing so, each son has the choice of working with these known tendencies. How each son receives the message and applies it will determine whether or not it is a blessing.

The Or Hachayim comments on Bereshith 49:28 (emphasis mine):

"According to his own blessing" – a blessing, which matched the inner traits of his soul and his actions. For every soul has a particular virtue. It may be the priestly service or the majesty of a monarch, the crown of Torah or physical strength, wealth or simple good fortune. Ya'acov wanted his blessing to bring out the inner nature of every son. "He blessed them" – He blesses them as a collective, for the particular blessing of every one of the brothers will help all the brothers. When one brother has a particular virtue....a small amount of that virtue will reach each and every one of the brothers."

Every brother has something unique. Every brother has something to contribute to the family as a cohesive unit. Even Ya'acov's "*curses*" can be understood as "*blessings*" from this perspective. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch explains this concept in the "*curse*" over "*Simeon and Levi*":

Bereshith 49:5 "Simeon and Levi are brothers; Instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place.⁶ Let not my soul enter their council; Let not my honor be united to their assembly; For in their anger they slew a man, And in their self-will they hamstrung an ox.⁷ Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Ya'acov and scatter them in Israel.

These are the sons who killed the men of Shechem. Ya'acov "*curses*" them, but then adds "*I will divide them in Ya'acov*". Rabbi Hirsch describes the motives which prompted Simeon and Levi to action – family pride, a sense of the dignity of the Israelites, and an unwillingness to see their sister disgraced or to be taken advantage of.

Rabbi Hirsch explains that these motives can be good, but only when applied in moderation. In its extreme form, these feelings of family pride (or nationalism) can become dangerous, even leading to murder. For this reason, Simeon and Levi must be split up or “scattered in Israel”. Then these feelings can be toned down with the help of the other tribes and can become a valuable asset to the nation.

Other commentators supply another reason for the blessings. Since all of the brothers would multiply greatly, it was only appropriate that Ya’acov should point out the tribe to inherit leadership. Thus the purpose of mentioning each brother’s qualities was not to rebuke them, but rather to determine whether or not they were worthy of assuming a position of leadership. The nature of their children will be a product of the basic pattern set by their ancestor.

Quoting Rabbi Yaakov Beasley (emphasis mine):

“How was Yehuda determined to be the rightful choice? Reuven was the firstborn, but his instability disqualified him from serving at leadership. Because “*their anger was strong and their wrath was fierce,*” Shimon and Levi were also deemed unsuitable. In his commentary, the Abrabanel also alludes to events in the future – Reuven’s abandonment of the land of Israel and their settlement on the other side of the Jordan, Shimon’s involvement in the Shittim incident, Levi’s sins during Korach’s rebellion. In addition, since both of the latter tribes would be scattered among the others, the monarchy would not be suitable for either.

The other tribes were rejected, continues the Abrabanel, not because they didn’t possess leadership qualities but for practical reasons. The people of Zevulun were traders who dwelled by the seashore, not the center of the country, and for that reason traders could not serve as rulers. Yissachar tended towards agricultural pursuits, awhile Asher preferred material comforts. The people of Naftali, exemplary in strength and swift as a hind, would make great servants, but not leaders. Dan, Gad, and Binyamin were brave fighters – but not at the head of an army. They were not the brave lion, but the cunning snake and ravenous wolf. Yosef was blessed materially with everything, but not the obedience of his brethren. This, suggests the Abrabanel, left Yehuda, destined to rule due to his strength, generosity, and sense of filial responsibility.” (end of quote)

The Messiah is really the focus of Ya’acov’s blessing over Yehuda. Remember Ya’acov had received an earlier vision from יהוה:

Bereshith 28:14 ...in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

יהוה promised Ya’acov that through his “seed” (singular) would come the “blessing”:

Galatians 3:16 Now to Avraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Messiah.

This “seed”, who is “Messiah”, is what Ya’acov is most interested in now that he has reached the end of his life. This “seed” is the great hope for the world and it is through this “seed” that the unity of Israel will be accomplished. In his blessing over Yehuda, Ya’acov refers to this seed as “Shiloh”:

Bereshith 49:10 The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.

Shiloh...this is the **Messiah** who shall achieve the “*obedience of the people*” to יהודה. Yehuda’s rule over the **nations** will last till **Messiah** comes, and then the **nations** will follow him. The result of “*obedience of the people*” is connected with the meaning of the **Hebrew root of “Shiloh”** – shalah (שָׁלַח), meaning “**to enjoy rest**”.

Matthew 11:28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."²⁹ ***"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."***³⁰ ***"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."***

Gematria also makes an interesting **connection**:

Shiloh comes - יבא שילה

$$5(\text{ה}) + 30(\text{ל}) + 10(\text{י}) + 300(\text{ש}) + 1(\text{א}) + 2(\text{ב}) + 10(\text{י}) = \underline{\underline{358}}$$

Messiah – משיח

$$8(\text{ח}) + 10(\text{י}) + 300(\text{ש}) + 40(\text{מ}) = \underline{\underline{358}}$$

All the **ancient scholars** recognized that “**Shiloh**” spoke of **Messiah** (LXX, Targumim Onkelos, Yonathan, Jerusalem; the Talmud, Zohar, Bereshith Rabba and Yalkut). **Rashi** wrote, “**until Shiloh comes, that is King Messiah, whose is the Kingdom.**” **Modern Jewish** and **liberal scholars** hesitate to **admit** that this is a **reference to Messiah** because it will **open** the door to the **idea** of a **personal Messiah**, i.e. **Yeshua!**

Okay, one last comment. In the **middle** of all the **blessings** we have a verse that seems to appear **out of context**:

Bereshith 49:18 I have hoped (qavah - קָוָה) for your salvation (Yeshua - יְשׁוּעָה), O יהודה!

At the time this was said, **Ya’acov** was **under no threat requiring deliverance/salvation** from his enemies. The word translated as “**salvation**” is **Yeshua**. We know that **Ya’acov** was a man who **already knew** something of the **Almighty’s promise of “salvation”**. Now he is **about to die**, and it is not surprising to see he is **focused** on “**salvation**”...i.e. **forgiveness of sin, victory over death, and the inheritance of everlasting life**.

So **what** in particular **triggered Ya’acov** to **cry out** at **this moment**? Read **what he** had just **said** to the **tribe of Dan**:

Bereshith 49:17 Dan shall be a serpent by the way, A viper by the path, That bites the horse's heels So that its rider shall fall backward.

Do these words...**serpent, heel, suffering**...bring another verse to mind? How about **Bereshith 3:15**?

Bereshith 3:15 And I will put enmity between you (serpent) and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."

This **Bereshith** verse gives the **promise of overcoming the evil one** through the **promised "Seed"**. The **"Seed"** will **suffer**, for the **"heel is bruised"**. As **Ya'acov blessed Dan**, he was **overwhelmed** with the **promise of "salvation"** (Yeshua).

The **ancient sages understood Ya'acov's exclamation** to reflect his **longing for the Messiah**. **Three times a day, based upon this passage in Bereshith 49:18, observant Jews pray** with **"hope"** for the coming of **"your salvation"** (Yeshua). Read the words they pray from **Blessing 15** of the **Amidah**:

The **Branch of your servant David** may you speedily cause to flourish and may You exalt in your **salvation** (Yeshua). For **we hope** (qavah - חָוָה) **for your salvation** (Yeshua) all the day. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who brings forth the **Horn of our salvation** (Yeshua).

Orthodox Jews have a passionate longing/hope (qavah - חָוָה) for the **Messiah**. May it also be said of us!

Shabbat Shalom,
Ardelle

Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!

חזק חזק ונתחזק