

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayechi
January 2, 2021 ** 18 Tevet, 5781**

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Vayechi in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3228/jewish/Vayechi-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Jacob lives the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Before his passing, he asks Joseph to take an oath that he will bury him in the Holy Land. He blesses Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of his own sons as progenitors of tribes within the nation of Israel.

The patriarch desires to reveal the end of days to his children, but is prevented from doing so. Jacob blesses his sons, assigning to each his role as a tribe: Judah will produce leaders, legislators and kings; priests will come from Levi, scholars from Issachar, seafarers from Zebulun, schoolteachers from Simeon, soldiers from Gad, judges from Dan, olive-growers from Asher, and so on. Reuben is rebuked for "confusing his father's marriage bed"; Simeon and Levi, for the massacre of Shechem and the plot against Joseph. Naphtali is granted the swiftness of a deer, Benjamin the ferociousness of a wolf, and Joseph is blessed with beauty and fertility.

A large funeral procession consisting of Jacob's descendants, Pharaoh's ministers, the leading citizens of Egypt and the Egyptian cavalry accompanies Jacob on his final journey to the Holy Land, where he is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron.

Joseph, too, dies in Egypt, at the age of 110. He, too, instructs that his bones be taken out of Egypt and buried in the Holy Land, but this would come to pass only with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt many years later. Before his passing, Joseph conveys to the Children of Israel the testament from which they will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come: "G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Haftarah in a Nutshell: I Kings 2:1 - 2:12

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/611890/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In this week's haftarah, King David delivers his deathbed message to his son and successor, Solomon, echoing this week's Torah reading that discusses at length Jacob's parting words and instructions to his sons.

King David encourages Solomon to be strong and to remain steadfast in his belief in G-d. This will ensure his success in all his endeavors as well as the continuation of the Davidic Dynasty. David then goes on to give his son some tactical instructions pertaining to various people who deserved punishment or reward for their actions during his reign.

The haftarah concludes with David's death and his burial in the City of David. King Solomon takes his father's place and his sovereignty is firmly established.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Moving Forwards (Vayechi 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
<https://rabbisacks.org/vayechi-5781/>

The book of Bereishit ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Jacob's sons.

Joseph's brothers were afraid that he had not really forgiven them for selling him into slavery. They suspected that he was merely delaying his revenge until their father died. After Jacob's death, they express their concern to him. But Joseph insists:

"Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21)

This is the second time Joseph has said something like this to them. Earlier he spoke similarly when he first disclosed that he – the man they thought was an Egyptian viceroy called Tzophnat Pa'aneach – was in fact their brother Joseph:

"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45:3-8)

This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have suffered. But it also establishes another important principle: the idea of Divine Providence. History is not, as Joseph Heller called it, "a trash bag of random coincidences blown open in the wind."^[1] It has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is at work behind the scenes. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends," says Hamlet, "rough-hew them how we will."^[2]

Joseph's greatness was that he sensed this. He saw the bigger picture. Nothing in his life, he now knew, had happened by accident. The plot to kill him, his sale as a slave, the false accusations of Potiphar's wife, his time in prison, and his disappointed hope that the chief butler would remember him and secure his release – all these events that might have cast him into ever-deeper depths of despair turned out in retrospect to be necessary steps in the journey that eventuated in his becoming second-in-command in Egypt and the one person capable of saving the whole country – as well as his own family – from starvation in the years of famine.

Joseph had, in double measure, one of the necessary gifts of a leader: the ability to keep going despite opposition, envy, false accusation and repeated setbacks. Every leader who stands for anything will face opposition. This may be a genuine conflict of interests. A leader elected to make society more equitable will almost certainly win the support of the poor and the antagonism of the rich. One elected to reduce the tax burden will do the opposite. It cannot be avoided. Politics without conflict is a contradiction in terms.

Any leader elected to anything, any leader more loved or gifted than others, will face envy. Rivals will question, "Why wasn't it me?" That is what Korach thought about

Moses and Aaron. It is what the brothers thought about Joseph when they saw that their father favoured him. It is what Antonio Salieri thought about the more gifted Mozart, according to Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*.

As for false accusations, they have occurred often enough in history. Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and burned at the stake. A quarter century later she was posthumously declared innocent by an official court of inquiry. More than twenty people were put to death as a result of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692-3. Years later, as their innocence began to be perceived, a priest present at the trials, John Hale, admitted, "Such was the darkness of that day... that we walked in the clouds, and could not see our way."^[3] The most famous false accusation of modern times was the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent who was accused of being a German spy. The Dreyfus affair rocked France during the years 1894 and 1906, until Dreyfus was finally acquitted.

Setbacks are almost always a part of the life-story of the most successful. J. K. Rowling's initial Harry Potter novel was rejected by the first twelve publishers who received it. Another writer of a book about children suffered twenty-one rejections. The book was called *Lord of the Flies*, and its author, William Golding, was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

In his famous commencement address at Stanford University, the late Steve Jobs told the story of the three blows of fate that shaped his life: dropping out of university; being fired from Apple, the company he founded; and being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Rather than being defeated by them, he turned them all to creative use.

For twenty-two years I lived close to Abbey Road in North London, where a famous pop group recorded all their hits. At their first audition, they performed for a record company who told them that guitar bands were "on their way out." The verdict on their performance (in January 1962) was: "The Beatles have no future in show business." All this explains Winston Churchill's great remark that "success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

It may be that what sustains people through repeated setbacks is belief in themselves, or sheer tenacity, or lack of alternatives. What sustained Joseph, though, was his insight into Divine Providence. A plan was unfolding whose end he could only dimly discern, but at some stage he seems to have realised that he was just one of many characters in a far larger drama, and that all the bad things that had happened to him were necessary if the intended outcome was to occur. As he said to his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God."

This willingness to let events work themselves out in accordance with providence, this understanding that we are, at best, no more than co-authors of our lives, allowed Joseph to survive without resentment about the past or despair in the face of the future. Trust in God gave him immense strength, which is what we will all need if we are to dare greatly. Whatever malice other people harbour against leaders – and the more successful they are, the more malice there is – if they can say, "You intended to

harm me, but God intended it for good," they will survive, their strength intact, their energy undiminished. [1] Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 74. [2] Hamlet, Act 5, scene 2. [3] Quoted in Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present*, vol. I (Pearson, 2001), 94

In Every Place by Rafi Cohen

<http://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online?search=&genre=2046¶shah=&holiday=&theme=&series=&author=>

Just about anyone who has moved homes will agree that sometimes one place will take on outsize influence in our lives. Indeed, even environments in which we've only briefly resided can have a resounding impact on our upbringing and outlook.

I was born in Charleston, South Carolina, and lived there until I was nine years old, at which point my family moved to West Palm Beach, Florida. After three years in Florida, we moved to Overland Park, Kansas, where I had my bar mitzvah and completed middle school and high school. Following high school, I moved again to go to college in Boston. Ask someone who knows me well where I'm from and they will likely answer *Kansas*. To this day, I root for Kansas City sports teams and maintain an affinity for all things Midwest. Though the number of years I lived in Kansas City is less than my time in Charleston or in my current home, New York, my Kansas experiences and connections shaped me in ways that my other homes did not.

Parashat Vayehi opens with an invitation to recognize that Jacob's sojourn in Egypt was not insignificant, even if he lived in Egypt for only a small fraction of his entire lifespan. "And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years" ([Gen. 47:28](#)). What is the text trying to impart to us with the distinction between the 17 years he lived in Egypt and the total 147?

Vayehi begins in a way that is unique among the weekly parshiyot: between every two other parshiyot in the Torah we can see a break—either a *parashah petuhah*, an "open" line break, or a *parashah setumah*, a "closed" extended mid-line space. Vayehi is the exception: it begins without any clear demarcation of the end of the parashah that comes before it, Vayiggash.

Rashi's very first comment on Vayehi addresses this, explaining that the difficulties of the Israelite slavery began when Jacob passed away. Rashi points out that the *totally closed* nature of the text, with no extra space, shows that "the hearts and eyes of Israel were closed because of the misery of the bondage which [Egypt] began to impose upon them." Rashi wants us to take note of the continuation of the story of the people of Israel even in Jacob's death. I'm reminded of my wife's late *bubbie* who was fond of saying: "I try to live every day with my eyes wide open." It's as if Rashi wants us to read the text with *our* eyes wide open, finding meaning in every detail, despite the closing of the hearts and eyes of the people of Israel.

Hizkuni (Hezekiah bar Manoah), a 13th-century French rabbi and Bible commentator, gives further reasoning for understanding Vayehi as inextricably interwoven with what preceded it in Vayiggash. Jacob's provisional move to Egypt due to economic pressure and famine turned out to be anything but temporary. Once Jacob arrived in Egypt and was re-united with Joseph, the previous anguish and trouble of his life were closed.

Therefore, the later commentator Keli Yakar notes, immediately after telling us that Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years the text says, "The years of Jacob's life were 147" ([Gen. 47:28](#)). It is almost as if these final years were so good to Jacob and his family that the past was forgotten and it was as if his whole life had been enjoyable. He may have intended his time in Egypt to be short-lived, but in the end it was more than a blip of his life. Jacob's family took root in the land and prospered.

Hizkuni further suggests that "all the years of Jacob until he settled in Egypt could not truly be described as **דָּבָר**—life—seeing that they were all clouded by different kinds of anguish". It was only during his last 17 years in Egypt that his mind was at rest and not beset by worries of one kind or another. According to Hizkuni, this verse was inserted in the Torah as a compliment to Joseph, who was the cause of Jacob's last years being happy ones. During those years he repaid his father who had sustained him for the first 17 years of his life, by providing for him during the last 17 years of Jacob's life.

As someone who has moved around, there are times when I am nostalgic for past experiences. I am at times compelled to try to piece things together and see how one place I lived, or one life experience, can directly link to another. I see the merit of each place and aspire to enjoy it to the fullest. Part of moving and settling in new places means determining what to keep with you and to leave behind. It means remembering your background while also paying attention to the present and the future.

As such, my Midwestern association contributes to who I am as a person and as a rabbi. When I first lived in New York following college, I would periodically visit my parents in Kansas, and on my return flight to NYC I used to feel a little anxious about the pace of life I would reencounter. Nowadays, more than ten years later, while my time in Kansas City has had a lasting impact on me, I am accustomed to the New York way of life.

Jacob's story shows us that life is fluid, and it can change course at any time. How we manage the changes and the people around us is one way to determine a life well-lived. The "closed opening" of Vayehi reminds us of the need to pay attention because, as the saying goes, "life is in the details." (*Rafi Cohen is the Director of Admissions at the Rabbinical School and H.L. Miller Cantorial School at JTS*)

Some Reflections on the Year 2020 by Rabbi Jay Kelman

<https://www.torahinmotion.org/discussions-and-blogs/some-reflections-on-the-year-2020>

"Ezra enacted for the Jewish people that they should read the curses that are recorded in Vayikra before Shavuot and [the curses] of Devarim before Rosh Hashanah. What is the reason? Abaye, and some say it was Reish Lakish, said: In order that the year may end together with its curses" ([Megillah 31b](#)).

While the above is said regarding the lead-up to Rosh Hashanah, there are few who would argue that it is most relevant as the year 2020 comes to an end.

The year 2020 began with such fanfare. On January 1, 2020, over 95,000 people packed MetLife Stadium—if only the name had symbolized the year!—to celebrate the Siyyum HaShas of the 13th cycle of Daf Yomi. Alas, by the time we were

finishing masechet Brachot, the bracha of dayan haemet was all too common. Masechet Shabbat brought little rest, as the numbers of sick and dying climbed exponentially.

How fitting and hopefully prophetic that as we enter 2021, we will read parshat Vayechi, and he lived. There is life after death. Ironically, most of the parsha focuses on death, detailing the dying days of Yaakov—the first person in the Bible that we are told gets sick before he dies—with the last few verses detailing the death of Yosef. Sadly, unlike Yaakov, so many COVID victims did not have the opportunity to offer a deathbed blessing to their children! Yet, “Vayechi Yaakov—and Yaakov lives”. Incredibly, our Sages suggest that “Yaakov Avinu lo met, Yaakov, our forefather, did not die”. While he was buried and mourned over, he lives on, as do his descendants, in the eternal people of Israel.

Yet 2020 was a year with too much illness and death. With 20/20 hindsight, I share a few very incomplete, subjective, and personal thoughts on the lessons I believe we should take away from this past year.

“The pre-eminence of man over animals is nil” (Daily siddur). The coronavirus, originating in an animal, powerfully displayed the weakness of man. It proved that we are but a higher-functioning animal, always at risk of being attacked by those stronger than us. Despite all our advances, an invisible virus can turn our lives upside down keherf ayin, in the blink of an eye.

“And he is just a little less than G-d” (Tehillim 8:6). Yet at the same time man, created in G-d’s image, has accomplished amazing feats, conquering the earth, harnessing nature, and bringing life to so many. Man is truly great. The ability to develop a vaccine—itself a remarkable feat—in record time is nothing short of amazing. When we put our collective minds to something and work together on a common cause, there is little man cannot accomplish, taking our rightful place alongside G-d.

“Olam hafuch ra'eetee, I saw an inverted world” (Bava Batra 10b). While our society honours the corporate elite, the premier athlete, the movie star, those with wealth, it is the minimum wage earner, taken advantage of for too long, who is most essential. The debt of gratitude we owe these people, often risking their lives by showing up to work, is incalculable. Next to our exhausted health care workers, who put their lives on the line, working non-stop to heal the sick, no one is owed more.

Without the efforts of our grocery clerks, truck drivers, personal care workers, and foreign workers doing what Canadians won’t do, we literally could not survive. They have been underappreciated and underpaid for far too long. That many of these same workers are not entitled to sick pay is morally unjustifiable and bad policy, helping to ensure the continued spread of the virus.

“And charity will save from death” (Mishlei 10:2). While the stock market hits all-time highs and the housing market is on fire, the inequities of society grow—with not enough being done to help the suffering. On December 1, USA Today reported that, “Over a roughly seven-month period starting in mid-March—a week after President

Donald Trump declared a national emergency—America's 614 billionaires grew their net worth by a collective 931 billion dollars.” But it is not only billionaires who are better off. A combination of government handouts and lowered personal spending has actually led to the bizarre fact that average Canadians have seen their net worth rise during the pandemic. Yet in a recent report, The Globe and Mail noted that 69% of charities have seen a drop in donations, and only 6% have seen an increase. Something is terribly wrong here. We have witnessed tremendous acts of kindness during the pandemic, yet where it matters most, we are failing.

“And all who toil for the sake of community b’emunah, in faith, may the Holy One Blessed be He reward them, may He remove from them all illness and grant them complete healing” (Shabbat siddur). This pandemic has highlighted why our tradition teaches that the most important quality of a leader is moral leadership and integrity. It is not for nothing we ask G-d week in and week out to bless those leaders who work for the community b’emunah, for the sake of others, subjecting their will to the needs of the community. Sadly, hardly a day has gone by when some of our “leaders” have not flouted the very rules they put in place. And then they wonder why so many don’t follow the rules!

“And one shall guard themselves very well” (Devarim 4:15). I have often been at a loss to explain how a small but noticeable segment of the Jewish community has been so derelict in the most basic of Jewish laws, those of pikuach nefesh. Jewish law makes it abundantly clear that, with the exception of the three cardinal sins of adultery, idolatry and murder, saving a life takes precedence over everything, and surely over the rabbinic mitzvah to daven with a minyan. Even a farfetched danger requires violation of Jewish norms. I was raised on the model of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik who, when asked why he was so lenient in requiring mildly sick people to eat on Yom Kippur, responded that he is not lenient regarding the laws of Yom Kippur; rather, he is strict regarding the laws of pikuach nefesh. Somehow, those most basic laws have been ignored by so many, with tragic results.

“Who is the wise person? One who sees what will be” (Tamid 32a). Thankfully, it has been 100 years since the last major pandemic. But we have had many lesser “pandemics” that should have ensured we were always on guard. This is especially true of the Province of Ontario, which suffered greatly from SARS back in 2003. Yet the advice received after that experience was ignored. Funding was cut and cut, and departments set up to monitor for potential health crises (Canada was the world leader in this area) were eliminated (see here). No wonder we were unprepared. And when the cases dramatically dropped in the summer very little was done to prepare for the inevitable second wave. Our inability to prepare—and put money aside for such—came at the cost of many lives.

“Who is strong? One who conquers his inclinations” (Pirkei Avot 4:1) . Are the health guidelines really so hard to follow? Wearing a mask, social distancing, no movie theatres, no restaurants, no Shabbat guests are major inconveniences. While I can

understand why those who have lost their income might want to flaunt the rules a little, for others a bit of perspective is in order.

I recently paid a shiva visit (sitting, masked and socially distanced, on the porch in the cold) to the daughter and son-in-law of a Holocaust survivor. The son-in law related how he told his father-in-law how frustrating he found all these restrictions. The terse response? "I would have been happy with Netflix in Auschwitz".

Oseh shalom bem'romav: 2020 was not all bad. Who would have believed that in 2020, Israel would make peace with four Arab countries with, please G-d, more to come? This was no less unexpected than the pandemic, and there is reason to hope that a conflict lasting since before the Spanish flu epidemic may come to an end. There is good reason we can hope for a brighter future for Israelis, Arabs, Jews, and Muslims.

Acharon, acharon chaviv. Despite all the pain in society as a whole, most people are pretty much carrying on with their lives. The marvels of technology have allowed so many to continue working. People are buying homes, shopping online, watching television, ordering take-out. The amount of increased Torah growth is a joy to behold, as Zoom has made the Jewish world a little village where opportunities for learning abound. With many children back at home, families are spending more time together, davening together, eating together. Zoom family meetings have brought together cousins who can go ten years without being in touch. We have reoriented our schedules, allowing more time for the more important things in life.

The pandemic has (hopefully) taught us to appreciate the many blessings we do have. We must never take our health, our family, our livelihood for granted. Let us pray that 2021 will be a year of good health, filled with joy and blessings. Happy New Year!

Objects in Mirror May Be Closer Than They Appear by Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/objects-mirror-may-be-closer-they-appear>

My car is a philosopher; yours is too. I am certain I am not the first person to look into my passenger side-view mirror and ponder the existential meaning of the message inscribed at the bottom of the frame, "Objects in (the) mirror may be closer than they appear." In this week's Torah portion, Va-y'chi, Joseph does essentially the same thing. The midrash imagines the moment:

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they grew frightened and said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!' (Gen.50:15). What did they see that made them afraid? As they returned from burying their father, they saw that Joseph had turned off the road and gone to look at the pit into which his brothers had cast him." (Tanchuma, Va-y'chi 17; B'reishit Rabbah 100:8)

His brothers thought that Joseph was dwelling on the terrible deed they had done to him years before. But what was Joseph thinking as he peered into that fateful hole? In what way did he remember that bleak moment? The midrash answers:

"Joseph stood up and prayed, 'Blessed is God who performed a miracle for me in this place!'" (ibid.)

There, gazing into a barren crater, the place he experienced great danger and fear, Joseph sees his life reflected in that pit. We can imagine the hole filled with water to provide an actual reflective surface. Joseph stares into the abyss and sees, indeed, that the harrowing moment is much closer than time and circumstance would suggest. It looms large over everything that has happened in his life, the life of his family, and that of his people. We certainly would excuse him for thinking it cast a dark shadow, but instead, Joseph sees rays of light that herald a new dawn.

In retrospect, he is able to piece together the harrowing events of his life into a story that reveals God's intent:

"Though you intended me harm, God intended it for good, in order to accomplish what is now the case, to keep alive a numerous people." (Gen. 50:20).

How many of us have lived through desperate and confusing moments only to look back years or days later and see within them blessing, or the seeds of who we've become? The episodes become steps in a journey we could not have predicted.

None of us likes to fall. None of us likes to find ourselves at the bottom of a pit. The Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, wrote:

"The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected. ... What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment." (Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1963], p. 157)

We stand on the cusp of not only a secular new year, but also a new decade. As we look back in the mirror our memories are close and poignant. We greet those that brought obvious blessing with appreciation. But what about those whose lessons are more painful, the blessing — if it is to be found at all — hidden or delayed? We can't help remembering those too — and we are fools if we force ourselves to forget.

Mark Twain is credited (perhaps erroneously) with the maxim, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Similarly, writer and philosopher George Santayana wrote, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (*The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress*, 1905). Both statements suggest that we would be wise to heed the lessons of history so we won't repeat the failures of the past.

The objects in our mirror of memory are closest when we allow them to teach us how to see what is right before our eyes or, maybe, looming over the horizon. That is Frankl's point and Joseph's great example: Joseph didn't allow the bleak memories of the past to be destructive or corrosive, but rather he found blessing and insight in them. For Joseph, the past was prologue. He looked into the pit and, remembering his past, he appreciated the present and dreamed of a future.

With the insight of our own history as daughters and sons of Joseph, we have to ask, "What is our meaning in this moment? What are we here to do?" As Mordechai said to

Esther as he spurred her to action at the brink of disaster, "Who knows if it was just for this moment that you arrived at majesty?" (M'gillat Esther 4:14)

The Jewish people, like all human beings, are products of a collection of experiences, some desired and many foisted upon us. The strength of our people and of all resilient human beings is to look in the rearview mirror and learn from the past, but not be consumed by it. If Joseph's imaginary car had a bumper sticker, perhaps this phrase would be displayed proudly on its fender, "Yesterday's history, tomorrow's a mystery, but today is a gift. That's why it's called the present" (based on a cartoon in *The Family Circus*, 8/31/1994).

In this new secular year — and decade — we can look back with curiosity and the wisdom that comes only from experience. But we can also drive forward with purpose, as Mordechai teaches, "Who knows if it was just for this moment that you arrived at majesty?" (*Rabbi Dan Moskovitz is senior rabbi at Temple Sholom in Vancouver, BC, and author of "The Men's Seder"* (MRJ Publishing).)

Breaking the Chain and Becoming a Blessing by Rabbi Kenneth Carr

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/objects-mirror-may-be-closer-they-appear>

In his teaching about Parashat Va-y'chi, Rabbi Moskovitz discusses the importance of remembering our history. The lessons of the past should inform our perspective on the present, shaping how we feel and how we act.

Surprisingly, earlier in the portion, our patriarch Jacob seems to ignore this wisdom. Many of the stories of Genesis are characterized by strife between siblings, catalyzed by parental preferences. In the world of the Bible, the firstborn child ordinarily received special blessings and privileges, including a larger inheritance and the leadership of the family. But throughout Genesis, parents elevate a younger child over an older one. Abraham chooses his younger son Isaac to carry on the family legacy over his older son Ishmael; Isaac gives the preferred blessing to his younger son Jacob instead of the older son Esau; Jacob loves his young son Joseph more than any of his ten older brothers. The younger child repeatedly takes precedence over the elder. In each generation, this displacement of older siblings leads to strife, dissension, and tragedy. Ishmael is banished from his family's camp; Esau vows to kill Jacob, causing Jacob to run away from home; and Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. Over and over, we see the choice of one sibling over another leading the family down a painful and destructive path.

In this week's portion, we come to the end of the book of Genesis. Joseph and his brothers have finally reconciled, and they and their families all live in Egypt together with Grandpa Jacob. As the portion begins, with Jacob about to die, Joseph brings his children Manasseh and Ephraim to visit him, so they can receive a final blessing from Zaydie (Grandpa, in Yiddish). Joseph positions them properly, so that Manasseh, the firstborn, can get the appropriate blessing. He places Manasseh on Jacob's right side and Ephraim on Jacob's left, so that Jacob's right hand, the good hand of blessing, will

go on Manasseh's head. Reading about this setup, we might breathe a sigh of relief, as it seems like the pattern of usurping younger brothers leading to sibling conflict is finally going to be broken.

But then we watch as Jacob — like a car crash in slow motion — crosses his hands and places the right one on Ephraim's head! He intentionally puts the younger Ephraim before the elder Manasseh. Then, he formalizes his choice in the words of the blessing. He says to the boys, "By you shall [the people of] Israel give [their] blessing, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.'" (Gen. 48:20)

To this day, that's how the blessing goes. On Friday nights and holy days, when Jewish parents ask God's to bless their children, they say "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." Jacob insures that Manasseh, the elder, will always be second to Ephraim, the younger. He has forgotten, or ignored, the lesson of his own personal history and that of his family.

As much as this scene could make us fear the future of the relationship between these two children, a related question arises: "Why does Jacob say that Jews should ask God to bless their children by making them like Ephraim and like Manasseh?"

Why these kids? We know very little about them: they do not seem to be extraordinary; there is nothing special about them in Torah; there are no further stories at all about these children. So why would we want our children to be like them?

I believe that it is exactly because there is nothing else written about them that we make them the model of the blessing. Every other sibling pair has had other stories — descriptions of their quarrels, distrust, and hatred. But Ephraim and Manasseh do not: they are the ones who break the chain. Even though there is preference for one over the other, they do not let it sever their relationship. They rise above their history of family favoritism to create a new present and future, an apparently peaceful, loving sibling bond.

What better blessing could there be for us? Every family has its dysfunction; every family has its patterns of problematic behavior; every family has its baggage that gets passed from generation to generation. But Ephraim and Manasseh show us that it does not have to be that way; we can create new, improved, peaceful, healthier stories in our families too. Let us begin, this week, to move past our own history, to break our own chains, and to become our own blessings. (*Rabbi Kenneth Carr is the rabbi at Temple Chayai Shalom in Easton, MA.*)

Yahrtzeits

Treasure Cohen, Rachel Rose-Siwoff, and Rebecca Lubetkin remember their father Abraham I. Levin (Avraham ben Tzvi Mordechai haCohen v'Rivkah) on Tuesday January 5th (Tevat 21).