

Summary

This week's parsha, Vayechi, focuses on the events before and after Jacob's death, especially the blessings he bestows on his sons and grandsons. In an allusion to earlier events, the feeble and nearly blind Israel blesses Joseph's two oldest sons, Manasseh & Ephraim. Jacob intentionally privileges the younger Ephraim over the older Manasseh by crossing his arms during the blessing. Adopted by Jacob, the two boys, born in Egyptian exile, become the example with which Jews have traditionally blessed their sons. Using Jacob's words from this parsha, we say: "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."

Vayechi closes the book of Genesis, a family drama in which our grand and spectacularly flawed patriarchs and matriarchs struggle to partner with Gd, to ensure the survival of our people and bless the children. From this parsha, and the trajectory of family life in Genesis, we learn that, while family life can be challenging, we all have the power to receive its blessings.

Power of Blessing

Blessings are powerful; with them, our children are nourished and thrive. Regardless of the words we use, our Shabbat blessings remind our children that nothing on earth is more precious than them; that they are now the leaders of an ancestral line, and that if we ask Gd for nothing else it will be that they survive, reach their potential, and know peace.

And yet, family blessings can, as we learn from Genesis, be complicated.

Parental blessings and jealousy

As Gunther Plaut notes, parental blessings are our way of seeking "Gd's help in accomplishing for our children, what we alone cannot." But problems arise when parents use blessings to influence their children's future, especially when they privilege some siblings over others. In Genesis, favoritism by all three patriarchs leads to emotional trauma and generational scars.

These problems are not surprising given what we know are the original sins of family life: insecurity and jealousy. In the beginning of Genesis Gd—the parent of all parents—reveals this fundamental human weakness in his dealings with humankind's first siblings Cain and Abel. He is pleased with the younger Abel's gift, while paying no heed to the Cain's. Gd warns the crestfallen Cain that he can be the master of his jealous urges. And we all know what happened after that.

Thus, Gd sets in motion, a narrative arc that is driven largely by jealousy.--As Rabbi Avi Geller notes, "the entire book of Genesis is a chronicle of the jealousy of older brothers toward younger ones, from Cain and Abel, to Isaac and Yishmael, to Jacob and Esau, and finally Joseph and his brothers."

And yet it continues

Considering the fraught history of parental blessings in Jacob's life, his continuing desire in this week's parsha to bless some children over others, is surprising. First, he blesses younger brother

Ephraim over older brother Manasseh. Joseph (who knows for favoritism) is alarmed by his father's actions. He tries to stop Jacob—literally taking hold of Jacob's hand—but Jacob resists, explaining, "I know my son, I know." He means that he can see the future and that Ephraim will be the greater. Jacob then goes on to bless all twelve of his sons, giving Joseph a double blessing. Through his blessings, Jacob foretells what roles his sons will play (or not) in the future of their people, based on their characters. In fact, several of blessings read more like curses.

Problematic but Inevitable/Necessary

Really, Jacob? I think it's safe to say that Jacob is not the hero of contemporary parenting. Nowhere are we advised to designate the leaders of the next generation among our children, to prescribe their futures, or foretell their future failings.

But the Torah does not mostly call us to be heroic; rather, it calls on us to examine and make the best of who we actually are. It's foolish to think that we, as parents have nothing in common with Jacob, that we will never complicate our families with the well-intentioned things we do or say in trying to secure our children's future or protect them when we are gone. That we will never misstep in our attempts to bless.

In the tradition of the matriarchs and patriarchs, we will never be perfect. Yet we want desperately for our children to feel truly blessed, to absorb the love in our blessings and avoid the perils.

So, what can be done? If Jacob cannot teach us about blessings, who can?

Unlocking the power of blessings.

The positive power of family blessings unfolds in the story of Genesis, not so much with the parents as with the children—especially Esau, Joseph, and, this week, Manasseh and Ephraim.

In Esau and Joseph we see brothers who have suffered in the aftermath of family blessings gone wrong, yet are ultimately able to choose the blessing of family. Esau's birthright is stolen by Jacob and Esau vows to kill him. In a consolation blessing, father Isaac tells Esau that he will live by his sword, serve his brother, and ultimately, when he grows restive, break Jacob's yoke from his neck. And yet, when the brothers meet later in life, Esau approaching with an army of 400 men, he responds to Jacob's supplications not with the sword, but by embracing him, falling on his neck, and kissing him. Esau does indeed break the yoke of sibling rivalry when he appears to let go of the past, saying, "I have enough my brother; let what you have remain yours." For this act, I consider Esau one of the great heroes of the Torah.

Another hero—Joseph-- was thrown in a pit and left to die by his brothers. Yet, in last week's parsha, Joseph is ultimately overcome with family feeling after he witnesses his brothers' love for younger brother Benjamin and father Jacob. He welcomes his brothers to his home and provides for them. From one of the Torah's most powerful episodes, we know that this reconciliation was not easy for Joseph. It took trials and eventual emotional release. When he finally allows family feeling to triumph over hurt, we are told that his sobs were loud enough to escape his private chambers. This narrative is resolved, finally, in this week's parsha. Upon

Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers are terrified that he will finally exact revenge. They are prepared to be his slaves, but Joseph tells them kindly that they have nothing to fear and that he will sustain them and their children.

If Cain represents our worst sibling self, Ephraim and Manasseh may represent our best. As I noted earlier, Jacob's preferential treatment of Ephraim over Manasseh in this week's parsha was surprising given the Joseph story; his blessing could have set in motion a new cycle of jealousy to last a generation. Yet, the brothers appear to make nothing of this choice; it does not even register. Each goes on to be leaders of the people.

Conclusion

With parsha Vayechi, Genesis concludes a tumultuous family saga. This saga teaches us that we all have the power to accept the blessing of family if we let go of feelings that do not serve us well. As noted by my Rabbi, David Wirtschafter, family life in Genesis begins with Cain killing Abel, though Abel did nothing wrong. It ends, in this week's Parsha, with Joseph, who has been deeply wronged by his brothers and has the power to exact revenge but instead chooses NOT to kill his brothers.

In light of this narrative, the traditional blessing is deeply moving. "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." It would indeed be a blessing for children and for the nation if human beings could, like these brothers, be apparently free of insecurity and jealousy toward each other. To my own children: it has been my greatest blessing as a parent to see that, like Ephraim and Manasseh, you freely and easily choose the blessing of family with each other.

Yet, we must forever guard against the rivalries and hurt that have been baked into the human family since Cain. When these feelings appear, we have the powerful and heroic examples of Esau and Joseph, who reopened themselves to the blessing of family by letting those things go.

And in the event that we go through periods in our life when our complicated emotions leave us, like Jacob, deeply flawed and unable to find Gd, let us remember what I consider to be Jacob's greatest blessing: the desire to struggle with the human and the divine.

After decades of guilt and his own family troubles, Jacob is alone in the wilderness, consumed with fear of his brother Esau. In others words, burdened by some deeply human emotions. He famously wrestles with a man (an angel?) who he will not let go of without a blessing. Says this other being, as a blessing "Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

It would be wonderful if we could all, like Ephraim and Manasseh, accept the blessings of family with no struggle at all. But if we find ourselves troubled by human, complicated emotions of family, let us also remember that like Esau, Joseph, and Jacob, we have the power to reconcile, and choose the divine. And even more important, let us remember that the struggle do so, the effort, is, in itself, a blessing.

With that let us say, "chazak chazak v'nitchazek".

May we be strong, be strong, and be strengthened by the blessing of family.