

Parashat Vayechi: Human Blindness

Dear Friends,

This Shabbat we finish reading the book of Bereishit (Genesis). Vayechi is the last parasha in that book. In it, the family of Israel settles and sinks into the fertile and beguiling land of Egypt. The journey of the fathers which began on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates ends on the banks of the Nile.

Now we come to the parting and the blessings. This stage can be empowering, elevating, and pacifying, but it can also be the reverse. It can leave a bitter aftertaste, perhaps even pain.

At this point in his life, Yaakov is blind (Bereishit 48:10): **Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see** - the same as his father Yitzchak was when he blessed his sons (Bereishit 27:1) **When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see...**

In his blessings, Yaakov is blind in more ways than one. He does a final reckoning with his sons and perpetuates the hierarchy that so exemplified his family relations, a hierarchy of love and favoritism.

This is the closing of the book which, from beginning to end, deals with the deep existential tension which exists between siblings, and whose roots have to do with parental preferences. Cain and Abel, Shem, Cham, and Yefet, Yitzchak and Yishma'el, Yaakov and Eisav, Rachel and Leah, Yoseph and his brothers.

Cain and Abel are actually the mythological models for this tension, which is based entirely on the enormous and formative question: whose gifts are favored? (Bereishit 4:3-5) **In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell.**

In the case of Cain and Abel, the parent is the divine Father, the Creator Himself, because deep within us, parental love is a direct continuation of the Creator's love. The reverse is also true: love of our Creator is often a direct continuation of our parents' love (or compensation for its lack).

Everything is a giant, painful, blind projection.

A person who feels that his or her gift - i.e. talents, actions, choices - are not recognized, or acknowledged, will feel that reality or society does not accept his offering. This is undoubtedly a difficult experience! It creates a sense of painful self-abasement and rejection.

If we accept the rabbinic notion that “**the Torah speaks in the language of human beings**” (as is written in many places, including in the Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim, 3:A) we can understand that the sense of preference comes from an individual’s awareness, and not from the Creator. In the case of Cain and Abel, is it at all possible for the Creator to truly prefer meat to vegetables??? Of course not! A person projects onto God - as he or she does onto his parents, teachers, rabbis, or onto society - the feelings of inferiority and self-abasement he or she feels within.

There is no human relationship in which this is sharper and more painful than within a family! Jealousy and hatred between siblings is a terrible thing. T-E-R-R-I-B-L-E!

This is the reason that the relations between siblings is the central motif of all of Bereishit, the book which constitutes the spiritual foundations of human civilization. Yaakov perpetuates this motif in his final blessings of his sons.

But then a dramatic twist takes place.

Our Sages claim that the minute Yaakov began to bless his sons, Divine vision left him, and that this is the true meaning of his blindness. He promises the brothers that he will tell them what will happen to them in the future - (Bereishit 49:1) **And Jacob called his sons and said, “Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come - but actually he expresses only his personal, human preferences. “I may tell you”, explains Rashi, quoting our Sages, Yaakov wanted to reveal the future but the Shechina left him, and he began to say other things.**

Our Sages’ understanding of this verse is wonderful! Yaakov’s words were not God’s, but “other things” - i.e. his own preferences and reckonings.

The clearest example of this is in Yaakov’s blessing for the tribe of Levi: (Bereishit 49:5-7) **Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel.**

Even on his deathbed Yaakov does not forgive these two sons for what they did to the sons of Sh’chem, when they killed all of the men with whom Yaakov was intending to make a treaty through marriage. Not only that. According to our Sages, Yaakov saw them - and not Yehuda - as the most responsible for the sale of Yoseph to Egypt.

While it is true that the tribes of Levi, and later also Shimon, will be dispersed among all of the tribes, we will read shortly in Sh'mot that it is actually the tribe of Levi, though cursed by his father, who leads Am Yisrael, takes them out of Egypt and through the wilderness for forty years. It is this tribe which will reveal God's purpose in the world and bring the Torah and the commandments to Am Yisrael.

Yaakov says **Let not my being be counted in their assembly**, but exactly the reverse occurs.

Next week we will begin reading the book of Sh'mot, which will balance out the events of Bereishit. The tribe of Levi will be transformed from cursed to a new role model for family relations! It is a model that shows no preferences. Aharon, Miriam, and Moshe will lead Bnei Yisrael together. Aharon will represent the deep-seated desires of the People, its longing, fears, and sacrifices. Miriam will represent the well of life-giving water without which there is no existence. This well is a Divine grace made apparent on and within the earth. Moshe will represent the Divine command, the judgment, the "do's and don'ts."

The book of Sh'mot will reveal to us how every person brings a gift or offering to the world. There is no one without a gift, even if this is not our perception.

Sh'mot, too, will have some difficult moments of jealousy between the three Levite siblings, but these will be cut short dramatically and with a clear message: Jealousy between siblings is like a disease - like leprosy ("tzara'at", which can be understood as "tzara" and "ra'a", meaning a bad misfortune, or "hotza'at-ra", meaning bringing forth evil), which requires immediate treatment.

God, please heal her! Moshe will cry to God when he sees the leprosy that infects his beloved sister Miriam. Heal the jealousy! Heal the basic evil which creeps into our souls! Heal our sense of inferiority! Heal our sense of inadequacy and invalidation!

Let's not be naive... healing such a basic feeling is not simple. Much blood has been spilled because of it since the dawn of time. Moshe's prayer is not answered. Instead, Miriam is placed in quarantine for seven days - a time-out for self-evaluation - through which she is healed.

But we can be consoled by our Sages' interpretation, that preferring one sibling to another or one offering to another is not Divine. It is human, and it is simply projected onto Creation and onto reality.

Our sense of inferiority is only the result of our blindness.

God, please heal her, please heal the terrible mistake we make in preferring one offering over another. Open our blind eyes. Give us the knowledge - even when we are unable to perceive it - that every person brings a gift to the world, and there is no one without a gift to give.

Tomorrow morning, after reading Parashat Vayechi, we will all stand up and say “Chazak, Chazak, V’nitchazek” (may we be strengthened by the completion of the book). We definitely need that strength!

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha