

פרשת ויחי

OVERVIEW

Yaakov is close to death. Seventeen years have passed since his family arrived in Egypt. He gathers his sons and grandsons around him and makes them promise to take his mortal remains back to Canaan for burial in the family plot that Abraham had acquired. He blesses the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Menashe, and then turns to the brothers and addresses them in ringing words of visionary eloquence.

Yaakov dies and Joseph accompanies his father's coffin to Canaan, escorted by a magnificent funeral cortege. He – Joseph – dies at the age of one hundred and ten years, after requesting of his brothers to make certain that after the exodus his coffin be taken to the promised land with the tribes of Israel.

COMMENTARY

"If I indeed found favor in your eyes, deal with me in loving kindness and truth: please do not bury me in Mitsrayim". This is not a father's usual language to a son. For the first time Yaakov appeals to his son in his official capacity to grant him a favor which actually is a slight to a land which extended its hospitality to him and his family. Until now Yaakov refused to be recognized as "father of the viceroy". In his modesty he did not wish to take advantage of his son's exalted position. In view of his approaching death he felt that he had no choice but to request Joseph to perform an act of courage that could have dangerous consequences for him. And so he asks Joseph to use his influence with the king to obtain his royal consent.

"Loving-kindness and truth". Yaakov wanted Pharaoh to know the true motives that guided his last will. This would be the final proof of filial love and compensate him for the grief and disappointment his sons had brought him. Truth and love, Yaakov's testament, will be the guiding forces for his descendants and serve them as the "leitmotif" for an eventful future.

Ephraim and Menashe

In his two grandsons Yaakov sees the triumph of an ideal for which he fought during his long life. These sons of Joseph were born on foreign soil and brought up in an environment whose values were diametrically opposed to the principles of the אבות. Ephraim and Menashe are the products of an education by a father who is himself imbued with the Jewish life ideals and who implanted them in his sons with unwavering dedication. They are the examples Jewish parents call to mind when they bless their children. "May G-d make you become as Ephraim and Menashe" is the fervent wish of every Jewish parents for his children who are the guarantors of the Jewish future.

The Blessing of the twelve sons

"Gather yourselves so that I shall tell you what will befall you in the aftermath of days". "Keep together and listen, sons of Yaakov". For Yaakov the primary condition for the realization of the blessing is unity among his sons, the unfailing solidarity of Israel's families. The past has taught him what unhappiness and havoc can be caused by strife, hatred and envy. It has taught him that Israel must form an impenetrable bulwark against the wrath of its enemies by

cultivating a spirit of brotherhood that nothing can shake. First unity, and then "Listen to Israel, your father". To draw deeply from the spiritual legacy of the ancestors; to be inspired by the lives and teachings of the forefathers - this is the last wish of the dying father. United actions by individuals requires a unifying element, the rallying around a personality endowed with unquestioned leadership qualities. Yaakov devotes the first part of his blessings to his search for such a leader. One after another, his sons "pass in review" before him. He probes each one according to his accomplishments and failures. The blessing he bestows on each represents a warning, a teaching to be taken to heart, rather than a friendly message of parental goodwill.

Reuben

It is the prerogative of the oldest son to become the head of the family for the first-born right will always be in force in Israel. But the leader must also set an example: Before ruling others he must rule himself. Reuben has shown in the past that he lacks the firmness of character essential for a leadership role. The father, in his blessings, refers to his shortcomings as "instability like water".

Shimon and Levi

"Shimon and Levi are brothers but they employ instruments of violence in their social relationships". While they had shown in the past a sense of filial responsibility, their conduct degenerated into actions marked by excessive brutality unworthy of sons of Yaakov (see Ch. 34). It is one thing to revenge the honor of a defiled sister and another to cause a bloodbath of frightening proportions. The ferocity of their behavior necessitated measures of restraint that Yaakov wisely formulates: "I will divide them in Yaakov and scatter them in, Israel".

The tribe of Levi will not have its own province in the Jewish state but the Levites, as part of their priestly functions, will live in Levite cities spread throughout Israel. Shimon's allotment in the land will be an enclave within Yehuda's province. By "neutralizing" the two tribes, the fierce temper of the brothers will be channeled into calmer waters. However, their spiritual activity will be exemplary: "Scribes and the teachers of the Mishna will be found in the Synagogues of Shimon, the study of the Torah in the schools of Levi". Thus physical force will be transformed into spiritual initiative and the strength and generosity of the two brothers will richly benefit the Jewish nation.

Yehudah

"Yehudah, to you your brothers will do homage; your hand will grasp the neck of your enemies; to you the sons of your father will bow". Reuben, Shimon and Levi will be excluded from the leadership. The fourth son, Yehudah, will become the head of the family-nation for he combines in himself all qualities required for his mandate. Political adroitness, wisdom and sensitivity, magnanimity and foresight – these are the attributes Yaakov looks for in the son to whom he can entrust the responsible guidance of his descendants. He will combine the resoluteness of youth with the experience of age, his personality will inspire respect and cause enemies to seek peace. The royal scepter will never depart from Yehudah's hand nor the law-inscribing styles –

"until the arrival of him about whom the nations will gather"
– ביאת משיח צדקינו בב"א –

His undertakings will be peaceful ("he binds his foal to the grapevine", 49:11). The grape and the foal symbolize the human constructive labor to which Yehudah dedicates himself. The kingship arising from Yehudah will never seek imperialistic goals. His glowing health and well-being (the shining eyes, the whiteness of teeth (49:12) will be the core of the national body and serve as an unconquerable bulwark against oppression and tyranny.

Zevulun and Yissachar

Zevulun's province is located along the coast, his harbors will be centers of business and international trade. His ships will travel the oceans and return laden with treasures from abroad. Yissachar, the neighboring tribe, will excel in academic professions, in science and culture. The two tribes will complement and help one another. Zevulun will provide the necessities for his brother's livelihood and comfort. Yissachar will provide for the teachers and scholars who will enrich the nation's spiritual life.

Dan

"Dan will be a serpent on the road, a viper on the path which bites the horse's heel.... For your help I do hope, o G-d". Dan., the sly one who is never at a loss to find a way out – he too, will be a valuable asset to the Jewish nation. There will be situations when Israel will be forced to resort to unorthodox methods in order to save lives, to survive. Nevertheless, Yaakov worries that this readiness of circumventing the lawful approach may become a permanent character trait of his descendants. Such methods should be employed after thorough reflection and only after all other means are exhausted. Only then will Israel be forced to become like a viper that is unable to fence off the rider head-on and must resort to the sting from the ambush. "For Your help I do hope, o G-d" that my children will always be able to live up to their father's legacy as honest and upright men.

Gad and Asher

Gad will guard the territories alongside the border. His youthful vigor and calm self-assurance will frustrate any attempt of armed attack and border violation. Gad (from אגודה or אגוד "bundler", "band") will be a model tribe, always ready to come to the defense of his brethren. Asher's landed properties will be fat, its products of superior quality. His prosperity and abundant harvests will gain him first place among the tribes.

Naphtali

"Swift as the rushing deer, he will deliver eloquent speeches". Naphtali is the artist, the "aesthete" among his brothers. His sense of beauty, the smooth flow of words, make the born diplomat who easily handles internal and general problems with adroit skill. He will serve as the

representative of the people never betraying his assignment. His penetrating mind, sure approach and disarming friendliness will turn this brother into Israel's foremost advocate in the noble sense of the word.

Joseph

Yaakov has only words of praise for the son who suffered so much in his youth. "They heaped abuse upon him and quarreled with him, and they hated him, the archers made him their target. But his bow remains firm and his arms and hands are supple. From the hands of the power that uplifts Yaakov, since then you are a shepherd of Israel". Joseph ignored a golden opportunity to destroy his brothers with their own arrows, i.e. their old hatred, abuse and murderous plot against him. At the tense moments of their meeting he showed a quality which is rare indeed: to be able to forget, to overcome one's sense of revenge. In Joseph's nobility Yaakov recognizes his true heir who, more than all the others, embodies the special qualities of a "Tzaddik".

Yaakov identifies intimately with this son, the recipient of the special blessing. They share the same hopes and aspirations. He will be the ennobled one, the "crowned one among his brothers", wearing the diadem of purity. Together with his brother Yehudah they will form the protective pillars on whom the national structure rests.

Binyamin

"Binyamin will tear the wolf to pieces". (The common translation "Binyamin is a rapacious wolf" overlooks the fact that יטרף is an active verb and זאב the object). With prophetic insight, Yaakov looks ahead to the time when righteousness will prevail among men and G-d's sanctuary be restored. Victory will not be achieved through raw power. The youngest and weakest son will triumph over the wolf, the wild beast which devoured many a sheep in the ranks of the herd.

For ten years Yaakov succeeded in protecting his herd from the beasts of prey. After outlining in his blessings the individual characteristics of each of his sons and sharing with them the vision of their future in the eventful history of the Jewish people, Yaakov reaffirms his profound belief in the survival of his nation as the champions of justice and truth.

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