

Vayechi, 5777

Parshat Vayechi

Genesis 47:28-50:26

5777

1/14/2017

I read a lot about *Vayechi*. About the generational lines, about the blessings skipping generations, about the reversal of the hands during the blessings – again, about the potential irony of the name “*Vayechi*” which means “and he lived” when it’s about his death, and about the funeral processions including Pharaoh’s acolytes.

I want to focus on one thing, really: the skipping of the generation of the blessing. I feel this is one of the most critical points of our beautiful religion.

Israel, remember he’s not referred to as Yaakov at this moment, because he’s performing holy duties for G-d, asks Joseph, his son, to bring him his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh, for a priestly blessing. He states that his grandchildren will receive land like their father, and be counted as tribes, and he bestows a blessing on them.

Why is this so critical? Superficially, it’s about land ownership, property rights, and being counted as part of a greater community while maintaining your own agency. That is all well and good, and it would work if he did this as Yaakov. Simple.

He didn’t do this as Yaakov, though; he did this as Israel. He did this while under the name and tutelage of his, let’s say, superhero alias. Yaakov was the everyday father, worker, and scholar – Clark Kent. Israel was his Holy alter ego that came out when Hashem needed to make things happen. Fitting, of course, that it means “wrestled or contended with G-d”.

Israel didn't just give tribal rights to his grandkids. He gave grandparents the precedent to adopt their grandkids as their own, both spiritually and literally. He also continued the precedent acknowledging the firstborn may not always be the right one to carry the torch for the family. Even more importantly, I feel he gave a blessing which transcends all generations, if we are open to it.

How do I mean?

By blessing his grandchildren as being as impactful as his own children, he is telling us that our impact as a people does not diminish through the generations. Let me rephrase: we, as people of holiness, thought, study, and action, do not lose our efficacy through our children.

Why does this matter? As you add water to soup, it becomes thinner. The flavor diminishes, and you need to eat more to get the same nutrition. You fill up on water alone. We are not water in soup. We are not empty vessels of knowledge repeating the same message verbatim. We are taught to debate, argue, and love. We are taught to enter studying with open minds, and question, and refine.

Look at the internet, it's a recording of human thought, almost anything you could think of and many things you probably wouldn't want to. It spans from the apathetic to the zealous and from the holy to the profane.

I feel, and I believe, that our books, our texts, our thoughts, and our debates are direct representations of Israel's blessing, that his grandchildren are as important as his children to him. That was Hashem speaking; that was the duality of humanity fighting with and accepting G-d speaking to us.

G-d wanted us to know that our effectiveness as a people wouldn't diminish with generations of growth. It is critically imperative we know this. We were to continue being enslaved.

We were to be in exile. We were to be slaughtered. We were to be oppressed for centuries. We were to have our cultural identity endangered, both in ancient times and modern.

No, our strength does not diminish through time. It does not thin out through numbers. Rather our virility as a people compounds exponentially as we grow. If there are two Jews and three opinions, imagine how many opinions there are with three, or five, Jews. It compounds through thought, through debate, through *Shabbos* dinners, through accepting converts as our own blood, through fighting over every sacred rite we have.

Vayechi is not about his death. It is about the life of Israel. The life we carry on.

This *Shabbat* my prayer is that we, a people of fractured opinions and thought, stand as a mosaic of humanity and holiness. That we act on our G-d given orders to tend to our Earth and it's people. It's time we embrace and use the blessings Israel gave us.