

Learning the value of equality

Vayechi 5782/2021

We have been on a roller coaster journey with Jacob, the last of our patriarchs, from birth to death, his story has been one of deceit, exile, reconciliation, settlement, family, grief, reunification, and exile once again. This week we meet Jacob at the end of his life ready to farewell his children. In the waning moments of his life, we begin to see perhaps a deeply human side of Jacob.

He confesses to Joseph that he did not expect to see him ever again, let alone seeing his children. He proceeds to then bless his grandchildren. The occurrence is strange, emotional, and confronting. In it, Jacob ignores the fact that he Menashe is the firstborn, and crosses his hands, giving the right hand to Ephraim¹.

Rashi tells us that Jacob was overcome with emotion due to the sincere belief that he would never receive familial reconciliation². While taken at face value this makes a lot of sense, philosophically speaking, I believe that Jacob is telling us much more.

The Akeidat Yitzchak tells us that at the time of creation there was no such thing as a birthright³. The story of our forefathers and mothers is not just a story of the development of a family and the realisation of monotheism, it is also a tragedy of biblical proportions. In each generation there are familial issues that seem to not be rectified. Abraham trying to sacrifice Isaac seems to cause an estrangement that lasts to death, Isaac in his desire to prop up Esau who was displaying morally problematic tendencies, led to the deceit of Jacob and his mother, and the fracturing of a family. Jacob would favour one wife over the other causing sibling rivalry and heartbreak, and then favours one son over all the rest causing dissention, and Joseph's enslavement and exile to Egypt.

I posit, that what is finally happening when Jacob acknowledges that he truly thought he would never see Joseph and his grandchildren again, juxtaposed to the crossing of his hands, really is the realisation by Jacob, that the only way for this haphazard family to truly unite and become a nation, is to understand the equality between brothers and that parents, in order to be successful, should not play favourites. In doing so, Jacob blesses not only the grandchildren, but also the father, a blessing that one should have children who bring blessings onto them⁴.

The Kol haTorah tells us that Ephraim would become the spiritual side of the Mashiach ben Yosef, the herald of the messianic age, but only when he is aided from the value of loving kindness stemming from Menasheh⁵. The only way to gain true redemption is to understand that both brothers sat on their grandfather's lap as equals. Generations before Plato and Aristotle set down the universal understanding of what equality is, that all people should be treated with dignity and respect⁶, as equal beings to one another, Jacob learns the value of equality through the reconciliation of his family and his own familial experiences.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**