

PARSHAT VAYECHI

Blessings - we find so many of them in Sefer Breishit, particularly in Parshat Vayechi. What are they all about?

In our shiur, we will first distinguish between three different types of blessings that we have encountered thus far in Sefer Breishit ('bechira', 'bechora' and 'bracha'). Based on these distinctions, we will then attempt to better understand what transpires when Yaakov blesses Yosef in the first chapter of Parshat Vayechi.

INTRODUCTION

Recall (from our shiur on Parshat Toldot) that we identified two categories of blessings to explain the nature of Yitzchak's blessings to Yaakov and Esav. Those were: (1) 'bechira' and (2) 'bracha'.

We used the name 'bechira' to classify God's special blessing to Avraham Avinu that his offspring ('zera') would inherit the 'promised' land ('eret'). God first bestowed this blessing upon Avraham Avinu at the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha (see 12:1-3) and subsequently repeated it numerous times not only to Avraham, but also to Yitzchak and Yaakov. By tracing these blessings, we were able to show how the 'bechira' process emerged as a primary theme in Sefer Breishit.

In contrast, we used the more general term 'bracha' to classify a blessing of personal destiny bestowed by a father onto his son [or sons]. As examples, we cited Noach's blessings to his three sons (see 9:26-27), and Yitzchak's blessing of prosperity and leadership that were intended for Esav, but 'stolen' by Yaakov [see chapter 27].

Now, in Parshat Vayechi, as the 'bechira' process nears its conclusion, we find how Yaakov bestows blessings of prosperity and success upon his children. Even though these would seem to fall under our category of 'bracha', when we take a closer look at these blessings, we will need to add an additional category to better appreciate their meaning.

YAAKOV'S BLESSING TO YOSEF - BECHIRA or BECHORA?

Before Yaakov blesses all of his children in chapter 49, he first bestows a special blessing upon Yosef and his two children, as described in chapter 48.

To understand the purpose of this special blessing, we must consider not only its content, but also its context.

We begin our study by examining Yaakov's opening statement to Yosef, when he arrives with his two sons (see 48:1-2). We quote this pasuk in Hebrew in order to highlight its textual parallels to earlier blessings to the Avot:

[And Yaakov said to Yosef]: "KEL SHAKAI nir'ah eilai [appeared to me] be-Luz be-eret Canaan va-yevarech oti, va-yomer eilai, [and blessed me saying:] 'Hineni MAFRECHA ve-HIRBITICHA u-netaticha li-khal amim, ve-natati et ha-ARETZ ha-zot le-ZAR'ACHA acharecha achuzat olam'" (see 48:3-4).

At first glance, this blessing appears to resemble the blessings that we have defined thus far as 'bechira'. To show how, let's quote the almost identically blessing of 'bechira' that Yitzchak had bestowed upon Yaakov prior to his departure from Eretz Canaan (when running away from Esav):

[Textual parallels are highlighted by CAPS.]

[And Yitzchak said to Yaakov]: "ve-KEL SHAKAI yevarech otcha ve-YAFRECHA ve-YARBECHA ve-hayita li-khal amim - va-yiten lecha et birkat Avraham lecha u-leZAR'ACHA itach, le-rishtecha et ERETZ megurecha..." (see 28:3-4).

Similarly, we find an additional parallel blessing when God officially confirmed this 'bechira' (to Yaakov) upon his return to Eretz Canaan (again at Bet El):

[And God spoke to Yaakov saying] "ani KEL SHAKAI, PREH u-RVEH, goy u-khal amim yhiyeh mi-meka... ve-et ha-ARETZ asher natati le-Avraham u-leYitzchak lecha etna, u-leZAR'ACHA acharecha eten et ha-ARETZ" (35:11-12).

Considering these parallels, Yaakov's opening statement to Yosef in Parshat Vayechi would appear to convey this same message, i.e. that Yaakov is now bestowing the blessing of 'bechira' upon Yosef - and hence, possibly to the exclusion of his brothers! [If so, this would be quite problematic, for it implies that the 'bechira' process will now continue only through Yosef.]

However, when we consider the context of these psukim (i.e. 48:3-5), it becomes quite clear that Yaakov is not blessing Yosef with the 'bechira'. [Recall that only God can confirm 'bechira', and not the Avot themselves.] Rather, Yaakov first **informs** Yosef about his own 'bechira' as background for the new blessing that is about to bestow - a blessing which we will now categorize as 'bechora':

'BECHORA' - TO THE SON OF RACHEL

To explain this point, let's take a careful look at what Yaakov now states concerning the status of Yosef's two children:

"Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt... shall be mine; Ephraim and Menashe are to me like Reuven and Shimon" (48:5).

For some reason, Yaakov decides to grant Yosef a special status. Indeed, all twelve brothers are 'chosen'; nonetheless Yosef receives a DOUBLE portion ("pi-shnayim"). Ephraim and Menashe are to be considered 'shvatim' (tribes) - a status equal to that of Reuven and Shimon. In 'Torah terms', we conclude that Yaakov has awarded Yosef the 'bechora' - for "pi-shnayim" [the double portion] is the special Biblical rights of the firstborn son. [See Devarim 21:17 re: 'mishpat ha-bechora'.]

This neatly explains why Yaakov prefaces this blessing of 'bechora' by first quoting God's blessing of 'bechira'. Before bestowing the 'bechora', Yaakov must first explain to Yosef that his special status of 'bechor' is being granted within the framework of the 'bechira' process (see 48:4). It is because the 'bechira' process has reached its completion (with God's choice of Yaakov and all of his children), that it is now incumbent upon Yaakov to grant the 'bechora' to one of his twelve children.

Yaakov thus neither chooses nor rejects any of his children. He simply awards Yosef with the 'bechora', even though Reuven was born first. In essence, Yaakov has chosen the first-born child of Rachel over the first-born child of Leah.

To prove that Yaakov's blessing is 'bechora' (and not 'bechira'), simply note Yaakov's next statement:

"But children born to you after them shall be yours; their inheritance shall be included under the name of their brothers" (48:6).

Should Yosef have any additional children, their portion must be included within the portions of Menashe and Ephraim. Had Yosef been the only chosen son; then all of his children should have received special status. However, since he has now become the family 'bechor', he receives a double portion, but no more. Any other children that he may have must be included within this double portion.

[See Rashbam 48:5 & Ibn Eza 48:4-6!]

A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH

This interpretation also neatly explains the reason for Yaakov's next statement concerning Rachel's death (which otherwise would seem to be totally unrelated):

"When I was returning from Padan, Rachel died suddenly during that journey, while we were still some distance from Efrata [and thus even farther away from Chevron!], and therefore I buried her on the road..." (48:7).

This mention of Rachel's burial most probably relates directly to Yaakov's choice of Yosef as the 'bechor'. By choosing Yosef over Reuven, Yaakov has essentially chosen Rachel over Leah as his primary wife. However, this may come as a surprise to Yosef, for not only was Reuven born first, but Yosef's own mother (Rachel) was buried along the roadside, while Reuven's mother Leah was buried in Ma'arat Ha-Machpela - in the same burial spot where Yaakov himself wishes to be buried! [See 47:29-30.]

Therefore, Yaakov now explains to Yosef that Rachel's burial on the roadside (rather than in Ma'arat Ha-Machpela) was due to unforeseen circumstances, and thus should not be interpreted as an indication of a lower status. On the contrary, despite Rachel's somewhat disrespectful burial, Yaakov still considers her as having been his 'primary' wife.

[Note then when Yaakov had earlier expressed his concern about sending Binyamin to Egypt, he had made a similar statement: "And your servant, my father, said to us: As you know, MY WIFE bore me two sons, but one is gone..." (Yehuda quoting his father in 44:27).]

Therefore, even though Reuven is the firstborn of Leah, Yosef is awarded the **family** 'bechora', since he is the firstborn of Yaakov's primary wife, the "isha" whom he had originally intended to marry.

A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT TOLDOT

At this point in the narrative (i.e. after 48:7), we find an interesting transition. Now that Yaakov has completed bestowing the 'bechora' upon Yosef, the focus of his blessing now shifts to his grandchildren, Efraim and Menashe - who consequently have now attained the status of 'shvatim' (tribes). As such, they also deserve blessings of personal destiny from Yaakov (i.e. 'bracha'), just as he will later bless all of the tribes (in chapter 49).

However, when we read how Yaakov grants these blessings (in 48:8-20), we find several rather obvious 'flashbacks' to the blessings of Yitzchak in Parshat Toldot (see chapter 27).

For example, both narratives describe an aging father who can barely see (48:10 vs. 27:1), and the 'switching' of blessing between two sons to the consternation of their father (48:17-19 vs. 27:6-9). Furthermore, in both narratives, we find the use of many similar verbs.

One could suggest that the manner by which Yaakov grants these blessing to Menashe and Efraim reflects his own traumatic experience, when he was instructed by Rivka to 'steal' the blessing that Yitzchak had intended for Esav. Even though Yaakov understands that Efraim may reach higher levels than Menashe, he insists upon blessing both of them together. Yaakov does not want these slight differences between Efraim and Menashe to cause strife between them in the future (as was the case between Yaakov and Esav). At this initial stage, he places both children together, bestowing upon them a joint blessing, while providing a small indication (by switching his hands) regarding the potential prominence of Efraim. Despite their different destinies, Efraim and Menashe will need to work together, as they will be part of the same nation, and Yaakov would like this unity to begin already at this initial stage.

'HA-MAL'ACH HA-GOEL'

Now that we have discussed the general framework of Yaakov's blessing to Efraim and Menashe, let's take a closer look at the blessing itself (familiar to us from "kriyat shema al ha-mita"). To appreciate this blessing, we must consider the fact that Efraim and Menashe had grown up with no contact with their uncles and cousins. To facilitate their integration with the rest of the family, Yaakov adds a special blessing:

"ha-mal'ach ha-goel oti mi-kol ra - yevarech et ha-nearim"
[God's angel who protected me (Yaakov) from all those who wanted to harm me, He should bless these children (to help them 'blend in')],
"ve-yikare ba-hem shmi, ve-shem avotai - Avraham ve-Yitzchak..."
[And they should be known by my name, and by the

names of Avraham and Yitzchak (for they are part of the chosen family.)
"ve-yidgu la-rov be-kerev ha-aretz"
[and they should multiply within the land...]
(see 48:15-16).

Yaakov very much wants Yosef's two sons to be identified with the rest of his family name; he therefore blesses them so that God should look over them with the same providence that helped Yaakov survive his confrontations with Esav and Lavan.

A TIME WILL COME...

Yaakov concludes his blessing to Yosef by reminding him that a time will come when the 'chosen family' will return home: "And Yisrael said to Yosef: I am about to die, but God will be with you and return you to the land of your fathers..." (48:21).

Now that Yosef has been appointed as 'bechor', it becomes his responsibility to inform the future generations of this Divine promise. Yaakov is not sure how long it will be until God will lead them back to Eretz Canaan. Nevertheless, his children must transmit this tradition to THEIR children, so that when the time comes, they will be prepared to meet their destiny.

It is precisely this message that Yosef repeats to his brothers and family on his deathbed, at the conclusion of Sefer Breishit: "And Yosef told his brothers, behold I am about to die, 've-Elokim pakod yifkod etchem' [God will surely remember you] and bring you from this land to the land which He promised by oath to give to Avraham, Yitzchak..." (50:24).

[Compare with 48:21, 46:3-4 & Shmot 13:13-22.]

Yaakov concludes this blessing with one last 'cryptic' statement to Yosef (that obviously requires some explanation): "And I am granting you one - SHCHEM - over your brothers, that I [will] have taken from the Amorites with my sword and bow" (see 48:22).

The commentators argue in regard the meaning of the word SHCHEM in this pasuk. Some understand that Yaakov is now giving the city Shchem to Yosef as an inheritance, but most explain that 'shchem' in this pasuk refers to an extra portion of inheritance that will be given to Yosef AFTER the conquest of the land.

According to the latter interpretation, this final blessing forms an appropriate conclusion. After mentioning that God will one day return his offspring to Eretz Canaan (fulfilling 'brit bein ha-btarim' - 48:21), Yaakov explains that when that time comes, Yosef will receive an extra portion in the inheritance of the land, for the simple reason that he is the 'bechor' - congruent with the opening section of this blessing to Yosef.

THE BLESSINGS OF PERSONAL DESTINY

As the family 'bechora' has been awarded to Yosef, Yaakov now summons his entire family (see 49:1) in order to give a personal blessing to each of his sons. Although each son receives what the Torah describes as a 'bracha' (see 49:28 / "ish asher ke-virchato beirach otam"), not all these 'brachot' appear to be what one would call a 'blessing'.

For example, Reuven is told: "You are unstable as water, you shall no longer excel..." (49:4).

Shimon and Levi are rebuked: "Let not my person be included in their council... For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger..." (see 49:6-7, note that Yaakov is cursing their anger, not his sons!).

On the other hand, Yehuda and Yosef are emphatically blessed with both prosperity and leadership. Other brothers also receive blessings, albeit less promising than those of Yosef and Yehuda, but blessings nonetheless, as opposed to the sharp criticism hurled upon Shimon and Levi.

What is the meaning of these 'brachot'? Will the personal traits of the brothers predetermine the fate of their offspring? Do Yaakov's blessings reflect the principle of determinism and negate the concept of 'bechira chofshit' (free will)?

One could suggest that Yaakov assumes the role of a 'father' (in his blessings to his children) more than the role of a 'prophet'. Let's explain:

As a parent, and the last forefather of God's special Nation, Yaakov must blend the goals of his family destiny with the realities of his life experience. His blessings, therefore, reflect the potential he sees within each of his children.

The fulfillment of life-long goals requires a person to recognize his potential by considering both his good qualities and shortcomings. As Yaakov recognizes his children's varying strengths and weaknesses, he blesses them according to their individual capabilities and talents. Although these blessings do not necessarily guarantee the final outcome, they form a guide that can provide each son with a proper direction that can help achieve his potential.

Yaakov does not intend his harsh castigation of Reuven, Shimon and Levi to result in ultimate condemnation. Rather, he hopes that they will recognize their weakness of character and work towards its improvement. [Note that Yaakov curses Reuven's **anger**, but not Reuven himself.]

Similarly, Yaakov's sharp rebuke of Levi turns later on into a blessing, as the Tribe of Levi later assumed an important leadership position (see Devarim 33:8-12!).

In contrast, Yehuda and Yosef possess a potential for leadership that should be recognized by their offspring. However, this blessing does not guarantee that every descendant of Yehuda or Yosef will become a great leader. Even the kings of the House of David must be constantly conscious of their conduct, in order that they be worthy of exercising their leadership (see Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!).

[This idea can help us understand most blessings (even 'birkat kohanim'!). A 'bracha' is not a simply mystic chant that determines a future set of events, rather it serves as a reminder to a person that he carries the potential to achieve a certain goal.]

Undoubtedly, the 'brachot' of Yaakov contain additional prophetic and metaphysical significance as well. Nonetheless, they do not negate the basic principle of 'bechira chofshit' [freedom of choice].

UNITY OR HARMONY

In conclusion, our discussion can help us understand the underlying reason why God wanted Am Yisrael to consist of twelve distinct tribes. After all, if this nation's goal is to represent the ONE God, it would have been more logical that there be simply one tribe - thus forming one homogenous society! Furthermore, why must there continue to be friction between Yosef and Yehuda throughout the entire Tanach?

To explain why, recall our explanation of God's purpose in choosing a special nation (in wake of the events at Migdal Bavel). It was God's hope that this special Nation would lead all Seventy Nations towards a theocentric existence. For this purpose Avraham Avinu was chosen, and for this purpose the existence of 'shvatim' can serve as a model. Let's explain why:

People, by their very nature, tend to group into individual societies, each developing its own national character, personality, goals and aspirations. These societies eventually develop into nations who may occasionally fight over opposing goals, or cooperate in working towards the realization of common goals.

Through His agent, Am Yisrael, God hopes that all nations, while remaining distinct, will recognize God's purpose in His creation of mankind - and hence cooperate with each other towards the achievement of that goal.

As we see in Yaakov's 'brachot' to his sons, each 'shevet' possesses its own unique character and singularity. The composite of all these qualities can be harnessed towards a common good. As God's model Nation, the cooperation between the 'Twelve Tribes of Israel' in the fulfillment of their Divine and national goals can serve as an archetype for the Seventy Nations to emulate. Through harmonious cooperation and the unifying

force of a common goal (and with help of some good leadership), the Nation of Avraham becomes a 'blessing' to all nations (see 12:1-3). Mankind thus realizes its potential, and Am Yisrael fulfills its Divine destiny.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. In his blessing to Efraim and Menashe, "ha-mal'ach ha-goel...", Yaakov makes reference to a "mal'ach Elokim" who consistently saved him from all 'ra' (evil). Explain this reference in light of 31:7,24,29! (note the use of the word "ra").

Why do you think that this blessing is appropriate specifically for Efraim and Menashe (based on the above shiur)?

Modern commentators have suggested that the word 'ra' in this blessing may actually be alluding to the Egyptian god "raah" - If so, then Yaakov is stating that Hashem who has saved him during these final years of his life from the influence of this primary Egyptian god named 'ra' should bless these 'grandchildren' Efraim & Menashe in a similar manner, and save them from Egyptian influence, to the point that they should be known as Yaakov's offspring, and not as Egyptian princes [hence "v'yikareh bahem shmi, v'shem avotei..."]!

B. HA-TACHAT ELOKIM ANI?

After Yaakov's death, the brothers beg Yosef to forgive them for their animosity towards him. Yosef assures them that they need not worry, for whereas he is not God, he has neither the responsibility nor the right to punish them. [This is the simple and standard explanation]. Yet, if we examine those psukim carefully, we may uncover an added dimension to Yosef's response, "ha-tachat Elokim ani"? Let's explain:

When the brothers ask Yosef's forgiveness, they explain that their father instructed them to say as follows (50:17):

"Forgive the offense and guilt of your brothers... Please forgive the offense of the SERVANTS OF THE GOD of your father..."

Immediately thereafter, the brothers suggest their own punishment, that they be SLAVES to Yosef. Yosef refuses this offer by explaining, "Do not fear, for am I IN THE PLACE OF GOD?" Yosef's answer responds directly to his brothers' comments. First, they ask to be forgiven on account of their being the SERVANTS of GOD. Then, they offer themselves as SERVANTS to YOSEF. Yosef answers them accordingly: should they become his servants, they will no longer be servants of God. Therefore, Yosef tells his brothers - "ha-tachat Elokim ani?" - should he consider himself a replacement or 'substitute' for God? The brothers must remain God's servants, not Yosef's!

C. "PAKOD YIFKOD" AND SEFER SHMOT

An obvious question that arises when studying Parshat Vayechi is, why didn't Yaakov's family return to Eretz Canaan once the famine ended? One could suggest that although they could and should have returned, they opted instead for the 'good life' in Eretz Mitzrayim (see the story of Avraham and Lot, 13:4-14). One could even suggest that their enslavement in Egypt was a punishment for this 'unzionistic' attitude.

Nevertheless, it seems as though Bnei Yisrael felt it their Divine destiny to stay in Egypt. This conception most likely evolved as a result of God's promise to Yaakov prior to his departure to Egypt: "Do not fear going down to Egypt, for you will become a great nation there. I will go down with you, and I will bring you back..." (46:3-4).

1. Compare these psukim, as well as 48:21, 50:24 and the psukim of Brit Bein Ha-btarim (15:13-19), with God's revelation to Moshe Rabeinu at the 'sneh' in Shmot perek 3.
2. Note God's Name in the various psukim in Sefer Breishit noted above, and relate it to Shmot 3:13-22.
3. At what point did it become unrealistic for Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt and return to Eretz Canaan? Had they returned, to what area would they have returned? Who owned the land, etc.?