



## Does This Devar Torah Have Your Blessing?

*By Rabbi Shaya First*

Parashat VaYechi's Haftarah, a poignant selection from the second chapter of Sefer Melachim, tells the story of David HaMelech delivering his final instructions to his son and successor, Shlomo. In reading this story, one cannot help but think of the parallel image of Yaakov Avinu, delivering his own set of deathbed instructions, messages, and Berachot for his sons and family. There can be little doubt that this similarity played a role in Chazal's decision to choose this particular Haftarah for Parashat VaYechi.

However, a closer look at David's choice of final words reveals that they seem to have a somewhat different style than Yaakov's. David HaMelech focuses on advice and instructions to Shlomo. Be strong, be a man. Take care of those who treated me well, the Bnei Barzilai. Make sure to follow the Torah and Mitzvot. Act wisely in dealing with those who cannot be trusted, and who may pose a threat to your kingship. Blessings do not seem to be David's focus, except to the extent David quotes Hashem's earlier promise to grant Shlomo prosperity and an extended kingship should Shlomo follow in the ways of the Torah.

Yaakov Avinu, by contrast, devotes the majority of VaYechi his attention to giving "Berachot," blessings, to his children and grandchildren. But what is meant by the term Berachot, both in the Torah in general and, more specifically, when describing what Yaakov did in this week's Parashah? Although it is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the term Berachah as used in the Torah, it seems there are at least three elements to it. First, as is the case with any modern blessing, a Berachah is an expression of hope and desire for a certain positive outcome. Second, and perhaps unique to the blessings found in Tanach, a Biblical Berachah comes with a

predictive element. This can be seen here as Yaakov gathers his children, saying, "ויקרא יעקב אל־בניו ויאמר האספו", "Gather, and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days" (BeReishit 49:1). Third, it seems there is some level of commandment and instruction contained within a Berachah, as Yaakov at times seems to divide up roles and inheritances among his children and grandchildren within these blessings. One powerful example of this can be found in the Ramban's commentary on Yehudah's blessing, in which he asserts that the Levite Hasmonean Kings who ruled over the Jewish people during Bayit Sheini were punished for "violating" Yaakov Avinu's blessing to Yehudah, in which Yaakov had declared that the leadership of the Jewish people was Yehudah's dominion. In any case, it seems clear that while David HaMelech and Yaakov Avinu may have both delivered powerful parting words to their offspring, the manner in which they conveyed them was not quite the same.

Despite this difference in style between David and Yaakov, both the commandments of David and the Berachot of Yaakov may have at least share one underappreciated element. After describing Yaakov Avinu's Berachot to the Shevatim, the Torah concludes with the seemingly unnecessary phrase, "ויברך אותם איש ואיש", "Each one according to his blessing, he blessed them" (49:28). What is the Torah adding with this phrase? Rashi and many others explain that Yaakov saw the future and blessed each of his children according to what was destined to happen to their descendants. However, Rav Yerucham Levovitz is cited as presenting an alternate approach that may add a fourth element to the meaning of Berachah. Rav Levovitz states that Yaakov blessed each child in accordance with their unique individual talents, "each one according to his blessing." The Berachot that Yaakov Avinu gave to each son were not chosen in a vacuum but were reflective of the special

talents and capabilities that each son already had. In delivering his blessings, Yaakov sought to bring to light those talents, and help each tribe, both emotionally and metaphysically, to see what special talents they could contribute to the Jewish people.

Upon closer inspection, David HaMelech's instructions to Shlomo emphasize a similar theme. In discussing how to approach Yo'av, David tells Shlomo, "ועשית כחכמתך," "And you should act in accordance with your wisdom," a statement both acknowledging and expressing hope and confidence in Shlomo's wisdom and talent for political acumen (Melachim 1 2:6). A few verses later, in describing how to treat Shimmi Ben Gera, David again expresses to Shlomo, "כי איש חכם אתה וידעת את אשר-לך," "תעשה-לו," "You are a smart man, and you will know what to do with him" (ibid. 2:9). In both these places, David didn't just give instructions to Shlomo, but reminded Shlomo of his abilities and talents, and expressed confidence that he would use them for the sake of his kingdom and the Jewish people.

Often, the greatest blessing that one can give to another person is to help them realize the talents and abilities that they already have. This was emphasized by both Yaakov Avinu and David HaMelech and remains true today for parents, educators, and anyone looking to help us all become the best versions of ourselves that we can be.

## The Berachah of Anger

*By Kivi Davis ('23)*

Parashat VaYechi, the last Parashah in Sefer BeReishit, marks the culmination of the story of the Avot and springs forward into the story of Yaakov Avinu's children. Before Yaakov dies, he gives a Berachah to his descendants, first to his grandchildren Ephraim and Menasheh and then to his sons. Although most of Yaakov's Berachot seem to be wonderful blessings, some of them appear to be rebuke more than a Berachah. However, it is challenging to believe that Yaakov's final words to his children would be harsh. Therefore, we must take an in-depth look at his words to understand the deeper meaning of his Berachot.

Especially when looking at the Berachot of Shimon and Levi, Yaakov seems to be scolding his sons. A particularly troublesome part of their Berachah is when Yaakov tells them, "Achalekeim BeYaakov," "I will separate them throughout Yaakov" (BeReishit 49:7). Although this phrase seems to be a blatant curse, Rashi (ibid. s.v. Achalekeim BeYaakov) interprets this phrase to be a complement by which Yaakov is informing

Shimon and Levi that their descendants will be great people in Eretz Yisrael, and therefore, they will scatter throughout the land to have a positive influence on the rest of the Jews. Why do Shimon and Levi deserve to merit this great Berachah, especially after Yaakov cursed their bad tempers?

The meaning of Yaakov's words to Shimon and Levi is a bit misleading at first. Although one might erroneously conclude that Yaakov Avinu is cursing them for their anger, he is really cursing the attribute of anger, not his sons. He tells his sons, "Arur Apam Ki Az," "Anger should be cursed, for it is mighty" (ibid. 49:7). Perhaps Yaakov is trying to teach his sons about the importance of avoiding rage.

Whereas Levi's temper is apparent early in his life when he wipes out the city of Shechem, it seems that he did Teshuvah and learned to use his anger positively. After the Cheit Ha'Eigel, Shevet Levi uses their "anger" to exact justice upon all who sinned. Although we can see that Yaakov's words to Levi became a Berachah, it is not apparent that Shimon took his father's words to heart. Why is there such a drastic difference between Shimon and Levi's outcomes if they both received the same message from their father?

Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky explains that Yaakov's Berachot to his children were not just blessings, but they also pointed out his children's strengths, weaknesses, and uniqueness. Each of his children had a choice to use his talents to serve Hashem or for other destructive purposes. When Yaakov granted his Berachah to Shimon and Levi, he praised their passion in everything they did. The question was whether they would use their passion and zeal for good or bad. We see that Shevet Levi successfully controlled their rage and used it for good, but we do not see the same regarding Shevet Shimon.

We can learn a very important lesson from the Berachah of Shimon and Levi. Each of us is given different attributes, which can be used for good or bad. We must try to limit our bad characteristics and try to develop our good characteristics. More importantly, we must train ourselves to use our negative attributes for good. Hopefully, in doing so, we will fulfill the wish of Yaakov Avinu and merit many Berachot.

## Berachah on Friday Night

*By Gavi Kilimnick ('24)*

Every Friday night, before the meal, many have the common practice of children receiving a Berachah from a parent. In this Berachah are the words from our Parashah: "ישמך אלהים כאפרים," "Hashem should guard you like Ephraim and Menasheh" (BeReishit 48:20). The question arises: why do we wish to be like Ephraim and Menasheh, as opposed to any of the Avot or Shevatim? What was so special about Ephraim and Menasheh?

Perhaps we can see what was so special about them by looking into their background. Being born into a debased Egyptian society is very hard, especially as a Jew. Yet, Ephraim and Menashe prevailed. Living in Egypt put much pressure on any Jew, but Yaakov Avinu saw the good in Ephraim and Menasheh. These grandchildren could overcome all the pressure and still be Bnei Torah. Their passion for Hashem and Bnei Yisrael is apparent. Ephraim and Menasheh were also the first siblings in the Torah not to have a rivalry. They maintained their relationship and respected each other in every way. In the Pesukim it says, “וישלה ישראל את־ימינו וישת על־ראש אפרים והוא הצעיר, ויא־ת־שמאלו על־ראש מנשה שכל את־ידיו כי מנשה הבכור” “But Yaakov stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Menasheh’s head—thus crossing his hands—although Menasheh was the first-born.” (BeReishit 48:14).

Even though Menasheh was the firstborn, he wasn't on the right side of Yaakov—he was on the left. Despite being placed on the inferior side, Menasheh let it go and didn't cause any trouble. This shows the brothers' respect for each other; they did not fight after what happened.

Now we can understand why Yaakov chose Ephraim and Menasheh for the Berachah our fathers give us on Shabbat. No matter what happened, they never forgot about Hashem and their Yiddishkeit and did not buy into Egyptian culture. This attitude, in turn, is transferred to us by our parents giving us a Berachah to avoid what society puts in our way and to commit our life to Hashem and Torah, and do everything we can to represent Him to our fullest.

## The Tragedy of the Four Hundred Children

*By Rabbi Chaim Jachter*

### The Tragedy of the Four Hundred Children

The heartrending episode of the four hundred children who jointly committed suicide to avoid being used as sex slaves by the Romans in the wake of Churban Bayit Sheini is seared into the Jewish memory. The lingering question that haunts us is whether they acted properly.

#### **Gittin 57b vs. Avoda Zara 18a**

The Gemara (Gittin 57b) relates: (William Davidson edition of the Talmud)

Rav Yehudah says that Shmuel says, and some say that it was Rabbi Ami who says this, and some say that it was taught in a Baraita: There was an incident involving four hundred boys and girls who were taken as captives for the purpose of prostitution. These children sensed on their own what they were expected to do, and they said: If we commit suicide and drown in the sea, will we come to eternal life in the World-to-Come? The oldest child among them expounded the verse: “The Lord said, I will bring back from Bashan, I will

bring them back from the depths of the sea” (Psalms 68:23). “I will bring back from Bashan,” i.e., from between the teeth [bein shen] of the lion, and “I will bring them back from the depths of the sea” is referring to those who drown in the sea for the sake of Heaven.

When the girls heard this, they all leapt and fell into the sea. The boys then drew an a fortiori inference with regard to themselves and said: If these girls, for whom sexual intercourse with men is their natural way, act in such a manner, then we, for whom sexual intercourse with men is not our natural way, should all the more so conduct ourselves likewise. They too leapt into the sea. Concerning them and others like them the verse states: “As For Your sake we are killed all the day long; we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter” (Psalms 44:23).

The conclusion of the Gemara seems to endorse the children’s drastic actions. However, Rabi Chanania ben Tradyon forcefully rejects prematurely ending one’s life in another unforgettable tragic episode, presented in Avoda Zara 18a:

The Sages said: Not even a few days passed before Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma died of his illness, and all of the Roman notables went to bury him, and they eulogized him with a great eulogy. And upon their return, they found Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, who was sitting and engaging in Torah study and convening assemblies in public, with a Torah scroll placed in his lap.

They brought him to be sentenced, and wrapped him in the Torah scroll, and encircled him with bundles of branches, and they set fire to it. And they brought tufts of wool and soaked them in water, and placed them on his heart, so that his soul should not leave his body quickly, but he would die slowly and painfully.

His students said to him: Our teacher, what do you see? Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon said to them: I see the parchment burning, but its letters are flying to the heavens. They said to him: You too should open your mouth and the fire will enter you, and you will die quickly. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon said to them: It is preferable that He who gave me my soul should take it away, and one should not harm oneself to speed his death.

The Halachah, following Rabi Chanania ben Tradyon, strongly condemns suicide, even defining it as murder (Rambam Hilchot Rotzei’ach 2:2 refers to suicide as “Shofeich Damim,” murder). In Hilchot Teshuvah 3:6, Rambam writes that a Shofech Damim is denied a share in Olam Haba. In Hilchot Avel 1:11, Rambam writes that we do not mourn for one who has committed suicide. Moreover, the grave of one who commits suicide is separated at least eight Amot (12-14 feet) from other Jews (Gilyon Maharsha Yoreh Dei’ah

345:4). Why, then, does the Gemara seem to approve of the mass suicide of the four hundred children?

### **Rabbeinu Tam's Answer**

Tosafot (Avodah Zara 18a s.v. Ve'Al) cites Rabbeinu Tam's explanation that the children feared that under torture, they would violate Aveirot, for which they are required to sacrifice their lives. Under such circumstances, Rabbeinu Tam says that not only is it permitted to commit suicide to avoid violating such terrible sins, but it is also a Mitzvah.

This matter was not a theoretical discussion for Rabbeinu Tam, who lived in the throes of the Crusades. There were, sadly, Jews who killed themselves during the Crusades lest they worship Christianity under torture by the marauding Crusaders<sup>1</sup>.

### **A Variation on Rabbeinu Tam**

In a variation to Rabbeinu Tam, we suggest that the children feared that they would eventually fall under the influence of the Romans and willingly violate terrible Aveirot. Psychologists refer to this as "Stockholm Syndrome," where the kidnapped victims eventually adopt the ideology of their captors. In a preemptive move, the children wished to die in a pure state rather than be spiritually contaminated later.

Binyamin Jachter compares this to the Ben Sorer UMoreh, which the Gemara (Sanhedrin 72b) explains that it is better if he dies while still innocent to avoid committing terrible Aveirot later on.

### **Saul Miranda/Rambam**

Shaarei Orah's Saul Miranda suggests that perhaps the children acted wrongly. After all, the Halachah regards minors as not having Da'at, the ability to make reasoned decisions. Nevertheless, the Gemara does not condemn poor youngsters because they did their best without adult guidance. An adult, though, would have advised them to live and to try to escape after they reached their destination. Moreover, an adult would have guided them to think in the long term<sup>2</sup>.

I responded that Rambam seemed to agree with Saul's approach. Rambam (both in Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah Perek 5 and Hilchot Rotzei'ach Perek 2) makes no exceptions to the prohibition of committing suicide. He does not make the allowance and exception made by Rabbeinu Tam. Rambam likely interprets Gittin 57b as Saul does.

### **The Spiritual Survival of Am Yisrael**

My final suggestion is that the children sacrificed themselves in the act of resistance to the Romans to discourage them from kidnapping Jewish children and using them as sex slaves. The children fought back in the only way they could. They refused

to allow themselves and the Jewish people to be severely degraded<sup>3</sup>.

The most prominent of the children realized that the only way Jews would return from Bashan, meaning their places of exile, was if there were those willing to die in their resistance to their captors. Indeed, the only way we have survived as a minority community so often persecuted physically and verbally in our long Galut is through our willingness to sacrifice.

The girls were willing to sacrifice first, as Chazal (Niddah 31b) teach that women have an added measure of wisdom. The females intuited that their deaths were necessary to preserve the Jewish future. The boys then followed the example set by their female counterparts. For this, they all achieved an honored place in Olam Haba.

### **Conclusion – Suicide is Never an Option**

It is interesting and enlightening that during the Holocaust, suicide was very rare, especially amongst religious Jews<sup>4</sup>. However we explain the actions of the four hundred youngsters, suicide remains an anathema to be avoided at all costs, following the view of Rambam<sup>5</sup>.

Nonetheless, the children set a model for our survival in Galut. They remind us that our remaining as Jews requires courage, commitment, and grit. May we all merit being worthy successors, in a positive sense, to these four hundred heroic children.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Da'at Zekeinim MiBa'alei HaTosafot to BeReishit 9:5.

<sup>2</sup> Children, Saul noted, often cannot see over the proverbial "next hill." They see a terrible immediate future for themselves but did not envision a better time beyond what currently faced them.

<sup>3</sup> The children were seemingly successful in their resistance, as we do not find other Jewish children being taken by Romans to such an awful fate. Perhaps these children taught the Romans that their efforts to so degrade the Jewish people would be futile.

<sup>4</sup> As reported by Rav Ephraim Oshry, Teshuvot MiMa'amkim 1:6.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that the story of these children does not appear in the Sephardic or Ashkenazic Kinnot suggests that while the four hundred children's behavior was heroic, their example is not to be emulated.