

“Blessings For All Time”

The traditional rabbinic approach as to why this portion of the Torah is titled “vayechi Yaakov” even though the subject matter of this Torah portion concerns itself with the death of Yaakov is that as long as his descendants – the Jewish people – are alive and functioning, then Yaakov is still considered to be alive.

The message here is one of immortality and continuity, family and generations. Like life itself and its counterpart, death, these words mentioned immediately above are difficult to define. Other nations and empires that are long ago extinct in terms of presence and participation in current world events, also have biological descendants alive and present in today's world population.

Nevertheless, we think of Rome and Babylon, Greece and Persia, the Holy Roman Empire and even the Soviet Union as being swept into the dustbin of history, never to rise to power again. So, the rabbis must be telling us a deeper message than mere biological and genetic survival from the past until today.

I have often thought that a great part of the secret of Jewish survival lies in the fact that different – completely different – generations are able to bond together, recognize each other and have the same common goals, values and lifestyle. My father was born before the Wright brothers flew an airplane and he lived to see human beings walk on the moon.

In spite of the difference in age, background and even language, he had close contact with and a great influence on his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They somehow recognized who he was in his essence and beliefs and easily responded to his presence and later treasured his memory. So, to a certain extent we may say that he lived on through his descendants.

Yaakov recognized the different personalities, qualities and talents of each of his children and grandchildren. His blessings to his children and grandchildren, as recorded for us in this week's Torah reading, clearly indicate this fact. He had no one-size-fits-all blessing to bestow. And it is perhaps that fact that guarantees that as long as his descendants are alive, Yaakov also lives.

For every one of his descendants could say in response to the blessing that each one received – all of them different and personal – that their old father and grandfather understood them and recognized them for what they were. And because of that, they treasured his memory and championed his cause throughout the ages.

Relationships that bridge time and space, generations and world upheavals can only be forged upon the recognition and acceptance of the uniqueness of the parties involved. There is no blessing ultimately in national and personal life that is brought about by conformity. The pithy remark of the great Rebbe of Kotzk was: “If I am I and you are you, then I am I and you are you; but if I am you and you are me, then I am not I and you are not you.”

The blessings of Yaakov to his future generations reflect the wisdom of this truism. (*Rabbi Berel Wein*)