December 29, 2023 Volume 14 Issue 7

ויחי
Parshat Vayechi

Ashreinu | אשרינו

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

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Divine Blessings

Mrs. Tobi Wolf

Parshat Vayechi highlights the *brachot* that Yaakov bestowed on his sons before he died. The midrash (Yalkut Shimoni on Tehillim) addresses the theme of the transmission of *brachot*. It begins with the phrase מזקנים אתבונן – "From elders I will gain understanding" (Tehillim 119, 100), and continues: "Rabbi Pinchas said…when the time came to bless Avraham, Hashem said to him: 'והיה ברכה, and you shall be a blessing.' Until now, I have blessed my world… from now on, the *brachot* are given over in your hand. You will bless whomever you see fit."

A basic tenet of Judaism is ברוך השם; Hashem is the source of all *brachot*. So the question arises: How does a human being bestow a bracha on others?
Rabbi Pinchas anchored the midrash in "מזקנים אתבונן" to teach that Avraham's *bracha* was essentially the sharing of Godly knowledge from one generation to another, to facilitate the continuity of the nation. The *bracha* assured that 'ה will extend His *hashgacha* to those who use that knowledge properly.

The midrash continues: "ויתן אברהם את כל אשר לו ליצחק" – "Avraham gave all that what his to Yitzchak." Rabbi Nechemia says that this is a direct reference to the *bracha*. Rabbi Levi says that it means that Avraham gave Yitzchok material blessings, but he did not give the *bracha* that Hashem had bestowed on him. The midrash compares this to a king who had an orchard and handed its supervision to a caretaker. In the orchard were two trees whose trunks were intertwined. One bore fruits that produced a potion for life and the other bore fruits that produced a potion for death. The caretaker said: "What shall I do? If I water the Life Tree, I will be enabling the Death Tree. But if I deprive the Death Tree, how will the Life Tree survive? He decided to leave the orchard and said, "Whatever will be, will be." Rabbi Pinchas explains that the Tree of Life represents Yitzchak and the Tree of Death represents Yishmael and the children of Keturah. Avraham didn't know whether giving the *bracha* to Yitzchak in their "presence" would cause more benefit or harm. He concluded, "I will die, and Hashem will do what He wants." The Torah states: It was, after

Avraham died, God blessed Yitzchak his son…" (Bereishit 25:1).

This *machloket* is relevant to the question of how the Jewish nation should deal with its enemies. According to Rabbi Levi, Avraham worried that he could not bestow the blessing on Yitzchak without arousing the jealousy of Yishmael and Keturah's children. He recognized that they would sabotage Yitzchak and destroy the nation. He understood the complexity of sibling rivalry. By removing himself from the equation, Avraham hoped to minimize the perception that the *bracha* was a manifestation of his love for one son. He adopted the philosophy, "Do no harm," and chose to be passive. Avraham hoped that, if his other children perceived that the choice came from God, their anger would be less focused and potent. Rabbi Nechemia, on the other hand, maintained that it was critical for Avraham to unequivocally define Yitzchok's exclusive role in continuing the legacy of the nation. This is the strategy that would neutralize the enemy threat most effectively.

In general, the cautious Rabbi Levi approach, as represented by the leadership of Yosef in Mitzrayim, has served us well in exile. The assertiveness of Yehuda and the House of David, within the land of Israel, demonstrates the Rabbi Nechemia strategy. Today's situation, as Yishmael and Keturah's offspring seek to destroy us, is ambiguous. On one hand, the land of Israel is ours. Alternatively, we are still in a state of exile. For now, Israel has adopted Rabbi Nechemia's confident and bold strategy, but it is uncertain whether it will ultimately feel pressured to pivot to Rabbi Levi's philosophy: Do enough to ensure survival, but minimize the world's wrath. May Hashem bless us with the wisdom to navigate our course and with the *hashgacha* that will ensure our success.

Be a Fish!

Cobey Nadel ('27)

All humans try to seek comfort. Whether it's trying to be around people we love and want to be with, or merely just sitting on the couch and relaxing, we always want to be within our comfort zone. We crave an environment in which we find commonality and share the same views and ideas with the people around us. Parshat Vayechi exemplifies this idea perfectly.
In Parshat Vayechi, we encounter the famous Jewish song, *Hamalach Hagoel Oti*. At the end of the song, we see the words, "וידגו לרב" – "and may they reproduce abundantly like fish" (Bereishit 48:17). Besides being blessed by Hashem to reproduce abundantly like fish, we see an incredible message hidden within these words. It's so important to take time to find the right environment because our surroundings can help us bring out our best selves. In interpreting the last few words of *Hamalach Hagoel Oti*, Rashi teaches us the meaning behind the comparison to fish. He quotes a Gemara from Masechet Berachot (20a) which says that besides being a blessing to reproduce abundantly like fish, the words, "וידגו לרב" represent a blessing against the *ayin hara*. The Gemara says that just like fish in the sea, where water covers them and the *ayin hara* has no power over them, so too should the descendants of Yosef should be blessed to not have an *ayin hara* over them.

What can we take away from this? Essentially, water is a fish's comfort zone. When fish are in the water, they are protected and they are safe from the *ayin hara*. So too, we need to find environments that protect us from the *ayin hara*. We need to find places that we are comfortable in and that allows us to be the best ovdei Hashem we can be.

The world can and will always seem like a crazy, daunting place. Yet, this doesn't mean we need to always give in to anything and everything the world tells us to believe, and we don't need to be any different than our usual selves just to please everyone. We need to find our ocean, a place that protects us from all the bad, so we can feel comfortable enough to live our lives and serve Hashem. At the same time, we have to be careful not to close ourselves off. We only need to always have a safe place to go to. Just like a fish is alive in the water, so too we should feel alive in the environments we choose for ourselves. The water protects fish, it's where fish are their best, strongest selves. And just like fish, any environment we put or find ourselves in should protect us from any bad temptations – it should allow

us to be our best and strongest selves. If you're blessed to have found that environment, your comfort zone, appreciate it, and cherish what it provides for you. Good Shabbos!

The New Normal

Rachel Clarke ('24)

In this week's parsha, Vayechi, Yaakov passes away after living his final 17 years in Egypt. Yaakov calls his sons up to his deathbed to bless and assign each son their tribe's role in the nation. When the pasuk describes Yosef being told that Yaakov is sick, it sounds like the news is coming as a surprise: "הנה אביך חלה" – "Behold, your father is sick" (Bereishit 48:1).

The word "behold" makes it sound as if it was a shock that Yaakov was sick instead of a common occurrence that is often part of growing old. The pasuk says "behold" and not just "your father is sick" because Yaakov was the first person to ever get sick before passing away. Previously, when it was time to leave this world, a person would sneeze and die. Yaakov davened to Hashem that this would change, since it is proper for a person to grow weak before dying so that he can give his children and family a message before leaving the world.

As a result of this, when someone sneezes, it is customary to say, "*tzu gezunt,*" indicating that the sneeze should be for healthy purposes. Some people also take it upon themselves to pull their ear when they sneeze as a reminder. Death came to the world through Adam not listening to Hashem and choosing to sin. The pulling of the ear is a reminder that he must "listen" to Hashem so he will not be punished.

Against the Tide

Gali Kanoff ('26)

In this week's parsha, Yosef brings his two sons Menashe and Ephraim to Yaakov so that they can be blessed by their grandfather. Yaakov blessed them to multiply like fish. Rashi asks: what was Yaakov's reason for comparing his grandsons to fish? Rabbi Akiva answers with a *mashal* from Masechet Brachot: A fox was strolling along the riverbank and noticed fish swimming swiftly from place to place. He asked them why they were running. They replied by saying, "We are afraid of the net that people set up to catch us." The fox slyly said, "Perhaps it would be wise to ascend to the shore and live together with me as my parents lived with your parents." The fish responded by telling the fox that he was speaking foolishly. "If we are afraid in our native habitat, our fear will be even greater on land, where death will be certain." The *nimshal* of this is that the Torah is our source of life. Without it, we physically cannot exist. Yaakov was reminding his grandchildren that just as a fish can't live without water, we are unable to live without Torah.

The life of a fish depends to a large extent on its ability to swim against the tide. If the fish allows itself to just go with the flow, then it will put itself in danger. It is because of Hashem that fish can live. Because He gave fish the incredible ability of perseverance, they can go against the natural pull of the river, and not only survive but thrive.

So why did Yaakov bless his grandkids with the "powers of the fish"? To remind them (and us) that we have to be capable of and willing to swim upstream and resist the pull of running with the herd and swimming with the tide. May we all learn from Yaakov's bracha, and resist the pull of our *yetzer hara*. Have a great Shabbos!

Thinking Ahead

Miri Wolk ('26)

This week's parsha discusses the last moments of Yaakov's life and what he does with it. Finally, after so many years apart, all of Yaakov's sons are together. As it got closer to the end of his life, Yaakov requested Yosef to not bury Yaakov in Mitzrayim but instead to bury him in Eretz Yisrael (Cana'an). He was so set on being buried in Eretz Yisrael that he made Yosef swear on it. But why is it that Yaakov was so against being buried in Mitzrayim? Yaakov had two reasons for this.

Since Yaakov had *ruach hakodesh*, he was able to see that in the future Hashem would bring ten plagues on the Egyptians, and one of them would be the plague of lice. He saw that the lice would fill all the land of Mitzrayim and he did not want his body to be covered in lice after he

died. Yaakov was also afraid that the Egyptians would consider his body holy because they knew he was a holy person. They might bow down to his grave and make it into one of their shrines. Since Hashem was going to destroy all their idols, Yaakov did not want his body to be destroyed. He also did not want Hashem to blame him or punish him for causing the Egyptians to worship another idol.

Yaakov also had a reason for why he specifically wanted to be buried in Eretz Yisrael rather than in any other place. Yaakov knew that Hashem would make all the dead people come back to life again in the near future. At the time of *techiyat hametim*, the people buried in Eretz Yisrael will come back to life first. For those buried outside Eretz Yisrael, their bodies will roll to the land in special underground tunnels that Hashem will create. Yaakov had a feeling that rolling to Eretz Yisrael would be very painful, and he preferred to be carried to Eretz Yisrael and be buried there. This shows us the true connection that Yaakov had to the land. Even though he did not die in the land, he made sure that he would be buried there because he knew that even if it would be a struggle for his family to bury him there, in the future it would all be worth it. So too for us.

Even if in life things are really challenging and sometimes we want to give up, we have to look ahead and envision how this struggle that Hashem is giving us will only benefit us in the future.



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A KYHS Parsha Publication

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