

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חזרה ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

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In a patriarchal society where primogeniture is the norm, first-borns and their younger brothers, and their sisters, grow up with very different expectations, and with very different things expected of them. These two-way expectations are enacted and enforced by the rank-and-file of that society. Most people go along with them even if they don't fully agree, because after all, what can one person do? And then the time comes when they inescapably can make a difference.

It's not the difference they dreamed of when they were younger. They can't undo the past. They can't change what each child thought would be their future, and the "children" are already adults. So even though it's very clear to them that the societal norm is unjust and all children should share equally in their estate – and it's clear that they have the power to dispose of their estate as they wish – it's not at all clear what constitute fairness now. Dividing the property equally will have radically different emotional impact on the various heirs. It will not change their educations.

Halakhah is fully aware of this dynamic. The laws of private (but not public) tzedakah are focused on maintaining social dignity, and recognize that social dignity is a function of what you expect, and of what others expect from you. Thus the great Hillel gave tzedakah by serving as a formerly rich person's footman, without demeaning himself. This was not primarily because of his inherent dignity – after all, the law allows a scholar to avoid certain obligations in order to maintain their public dignity – but because Hillel had been desperately poor for much of his life, and so his sense of self had no connection with economic class. Note that Hillel did not feel compelled to serve as footman for every family unable to afford servants, or for other footmen. Did Hillel thereby entrench the formerly rich man's sense of entitlement? Probably. And yet for all we know he also supported policies aimed at permanently eliminating class distinctions in the next generation.

There's a Hardy Boys novel in which their friend Chet is tasked with delivering a chocolate-frosted cake through heavy traffic on an unpleasantly hot day. Eventually, a combination of aroma and inactivity drives him to open the box. He sees that the frosting is slightly uneven in one place. Removing that extra and unsightly dab will only improve the cake, he thinks, and reaches out with his thumb. Oops! A

little too deep. You can deduce how the story goes from there.

I wonder whether Yaakov Avinu is playing out a Chet-type problem with regard to Menasheh and Efraim. (See what I did there?) When he and Yosef go back and forth about the blessing – establishment, disestablishment, antidisestablishment – are they disagreeing about who deserves greater privilege, or about whether/how to compensate Efraim for having grown up expecting less? Note that Yaakov tries to avoid his father's mistakes, at least as he perceived them, by giving a joint undifferentiated blessing to the boys, with only hand-placement different. But Yosef thinks even that takes too much frosting off Menasheh's side of the cake. That of course could reinforce Efraim's sense of unfair treatment, so now Yaakov has to make the compensation explicit. Maybe the cake finally evens out, or maybe Menasheh is an underappreciated an underimitated tzaddik for not developing a deadly grudge (backlash). (Note that Yosef's attempt to undo his father's positioning – ויתמר יד אביו – has a linguistic echo in the first battle against Amalek, when Yehoshua ben Nun the Efraimite first comes to prominence – ואהרן וחור תמכו בידי –.)

If I'm not imagining it, something of this tension – and of the difficulties caused by addressing it – should show up in the content of Yaakov's blessing. Let's start by noticing that 48:15 describes Yaakov as blessing Yosef rather than his sons – I take this as a homogenizing stratagem; Tzror HaMor reads is as an indication that the sons were not actually worthy of the blessing they received. Then Yaakov says:

The G-d Whom my ancestors walked before,
Avraham and Yitzchak

The G-d Who shepherded me, so long as I
have been until this very day

The Angel who redeemed me from all ill
He will bless the lads

and they will be identified with my name,
and the name of my ancestors, Avraham and
Yitzchak,

and they will be extremely fertile in the
midst of the land.

הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלְכֻוּ אֲבוֹתַי לְפָנָיו אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק
הָאֱלֹהִים הִרְעָה אֹתִי מֵעוֹדִי עַד-תַּיִם הַזֶּה:
הַמְלַאךְ הַגָּאֹל אֹתִי מִכָּל-רָע
יְבָרֵךְ אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים
וְיִקְרָא בְהֵם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבוֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק
וְיִדְגּוּ לְרֹב בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ:

Some rishonim read this as in halakhic prayer structure: one must praise the king before craving his boon. So the first two lines are praise/שבח, and the request/בקשה is that the angel bless the lads. (This raises the side problem of whether it is permitted to ask angels for a blessing. Rav Chaim Volozhin, and my wife, refuse to sing the *Barkhuni* stanza of Shalom Aleikhem for this reason.) My tendency is toward the position that reads the first three lines as in apposition, all referring to G-d, which admittedly requires some contortions in translation the word *mal'akh*. On that assumption, Yaakov's blessing contains three components: first, that they should have a relationship with G-d; second, that this relationship should be within the context of the family legacy; and third, that they should succeed in transmitting this legacy to a flourishing community.

Many commentators note that Yaakov carefully distinguishes his relationship with G-d from that of Avraham and Yitzchak. They tend to ascribe this to modesty, but it can't be entirely that, since he seems to retain the distinction in the actual blessing, which I suggest means that he sees independent value in the sort of relationship he had with G-d. We however are not required to accept his self-perception as objectively accurate.

The Targumim reflect two different understandings of what Yaakov is saying. According to Onkelos, Yaakov sees the blessings in his own life as an undeserved legacy from his father and grandfather:

Hashem before Whom my ancestors
worshiped, Avraham and Yitzchak
Hashem Who gave me sustenance from
when I came into being until this day

ה' דפלתו אבותי קדמוהי אברהם ויצחק
יה' דצן יתי מדאיתני עד יומא הדין.

The ancestors' worship counts, but Yaakov himself received blessing long before he can exercise responsibility, and still sees himself as a dependent infant.

In sharp contrast, Targum Yerushalmi presents Yaakov as living his own religious life:

Hashem before Whom my ancestors walked
in truth, Avraham and Yitzchak
Hashem Who led me from when I was a kid
until this day.

ה' די הלכו אבהתי קדמוי בקושטא אברהם
ויצחק

ה' דדבר יתי מן עלייתי עד יומא הדין.

Here the difference is that Avraham and Yitzchak walked before G-d in truth, while Yaakov has been led by Him since he first became aware. Note that here is no apparent textual basis for the insertion of “*בין/בין* in truth”. It must therefore be a consequence of *התהלכו לפני*/walking before G-d. The best explanation I have found for this is in Rav Hirsch:

"התהלך" נמצא רק בקשר שבין אדם לה';
הוא מציין הנהגה עצמית –

כלומר, הליכה מרצונו שלו החפשי והמוסרי.

The reflexive of “הלך” is found only with regard to a connection between human beings and Hashem,

and it marks self-direction –

meaning, walking of one's own free and ethical will

Yaakov understood Avraham and Yitzchak as marking out a new path, in which their free choices corresponded with G-d's Will, whereas he merely followed the path they laid out.

I suggest that Yaakov felt that the approaches of Yitzchak and Yaakov were not open to him. Avraham had no predecessor path to follow, and Yitzchak was the child of the Akeidah. Yaakov understood himself as the inheritor of a constraining privilege – he did not need to find G-d on his own, or to be convinced that G-d was ethical. That also left him without the same opportunity for self-expression in his relationship with G-d. Or at least he felt that way. But his blessing to Ephraim and Menasheh – who had the until-then unique experience of growing up Jewish but fully immersed in a non-Jewish culture – was that they should be able to have both a sense of complete freedom and of carrying on a legacy. (Perhaps Yaakov should have realized that he really grew up at Lavan's. Even after yeshiva and kollel, you always grow up when you first really have a choice.)

Religious educators – in which category I include parents – should understand that growing up from is religiously both a privilege and a constraint. Probably all privileges entail constraints. That doesn't mean that we should avoid privileging our children (except where privilege is a zero-sum game, in which case the ethical issues require extensive discussion). But we need to be sensitive to how our students experience the balance of privilege and constraint, and, with caution and a recognition that there's no perfect balance, do our best to adjust it, so that the next generation, and the next can grow up to be like Ephraim and Menasheh, and yet not exactly like either.

Shabbat Shalom!

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