

Vayechi: Arise Like a Lion
Tamar Marvin, Class of 2024

Towards the end of *parshat Vayechi*, following Yaakov's death and burial, the brothers become concerned that Yosef still harbors a grudge against them. Yosef reassures them:

Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children (Bereishit 50:19-21).

This response has always perplexed, even bothered, me. Assuredly, Yosef knows of what he speaks; the family-shattering and world-altering events surrounding Yosef's faked death are apparently necessary—they are God's will. The part that perplexes me is: How can Yosef so placidly accept the harm done to him, even knowing that it is God's will? The part that bothers me is: How can we live in such a world, a world where severe family dysfunction leads a child to be left for dead, then sold into slavery—and the perpetrators forgiven? Must we accept monstrous acts if they save lives down the road?

An existential response to such questions, I believe, lies in Yaakov's mysterious blessings, which he imparts to his sons before he dies. Nearing the end of his life, Yaakov assembles his sons:

And Yaakov called his sons and said, "*V'agidah lachem eit asher yikra etchem b'acharit hayamim*—Come together, I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come. Assemble and hearken, O sons of Jacob; hearken to Israel your father" (Bereishit 49:1-2).

This sounds very much like Yaakov is about to reveal to his sons prophecies of what will happen to them in the future, after he is gone. But it is not exactly what transpires.

The first three blessings, to Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, read more as admonitions, even curses. To Reuven, Yaakov says: "You are as unstable as water, you shall excel no longer" (Bereishet 49:3). Shimon and Levi "are a pair" (Bereishit 49:5), and their fate, Yaakov intones, is to be divided and scattered. While they make future predictions, these statements are notably vague and seem more like judgements or intentions than concrete prophecies. They certainly do not seem like blessings, like the positive and tender ones that Yaakov previously doled out to his grandsons, Yosef's children, Ephraim and Menashe.

Some of the other fates handed down are more prosaic: Zevulun is to be found dwelling by the shore, with the tribe's border at Sidon. Naftali will have a way with words. Others are generally

positive, such as the tribe of Dan, who, fittingly, will serve as judges for Israel, or Yissachar, who will be distinguished for their strength. These are more blessing-like, and they have a notable future orientation, perhaps fulfilling Yaakov's promise to reveal a bit of time to come.

Chazal were sufficiently bothered by the vagueness and at times critical nature of the "blessings" that they suggested an explanation (in Pesachim 56a), brought down by Rashi on the local pasuk. In Rashi's telling, "*bikeish l'galot et hakeitz v'nistalkah mimenu shechina v'hitchil o'mer d'varim acheirim*—He [Yaakov] wished to reveal the end of days but the Shekhina (Divine Presence) departed from him and he instead started saying other things"¹ On this reading, Yaakov's vision is clouded, the promise of prophecy is cut short, and the resulting words are only sketches deprived of future particulars. Knowing too much about the future is, perhaps, inadvisable from a Divine perspective.

And yet, Yaakov's words, if murky, appear to us laden with potential symbolism and meaning. Take, for example, the most extensive and best-known of the blessings: the blessing to Yehuda. Yehuda, as we know from our position in history, is to be the progenitor, along with a contingent of Levi'im, of all modern Jews. Our identifier Yehudi (Jew) comes from Yehud/Yehuda (Judea), the allocated area of the tribe of Yehuda (Judah). Yehuda, then, is also the ancestor who gives rise to the royal Davidic line. The future of Am Yisrael depends upon Yehuda. Here is his blessing:

Yehuda is a lion's whelp;
On prey, my son, have you grown.
He crouches, lies down like a lion,
Like the king of beasts—who dare rouse him?

The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda,
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet;
Until he comes to Shiloh [or: Until Shiloh comes],
And the homage of peoples be his.

...His eyes are darker than wine;
His teeth are whiter than milk (Bereishit 49: 9-10, 12).

¹ The *d'rash* from which this comes, found on Pesachim 56a, is in service of a larger question. What it really wants to know is why we answer *Barukh Shem* to the Shema. To get at the reason, Chazal explore *our* question: why do Yaakov's promised prophecies seem so lackluster in the prediction department? The answer, they explain, is because, as we just saw in Rashi, Yaakov was actually deprived of prophecy in the moment of blessing his sons. He interpreted this loss of prophetic insight as, possibly, a sign that one of his children was unfit. The sons' response to their father's distress is reassurance in the form of the Shema, after which they explain: "*amru: k'sheim b'libkha elah echad, kach ein b'libeinu elah echad*—Just as there is only one God in your heart, so too, there is only one in our hearts." Hearing this, a relieved Yaakov exclaims *Barukh Shem*.

Evident here are stirrings of a great future, as the line of powerful and regal rulers. The imagery of lions and wine-soaked celebration has since become embroidered upon that of the Jewish people, the language lifted for its associations with the kingly descendants of Yehuda.

There is a tension between the idea that Yaakov's prophetic ability was befuddled and the belief that there is future meaning to unpack in his blessing. This tension is, I believe, a key to understanding Yosef's reassurance of his brothers, with which we opened. Yosef, too, is blessed with future insight, particularly with regards to dream interpretation and the ability to predict discrete events. His assessment that Hashem's actions upon his life were directed for the good is thus both retrospective—the fruit of insight won by hard years of experience—and potentially a matter of prophetic knowledge. Do we understand his pronouncement as the product of befuddlement or of prophecy?

In *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes, “Posing the question of suffering, claims Judaism, is possible in two separate dimensions: the dimension of fate (*goral*) and the dimension of destiny (*yeud*)” (trans. David Z. Gordon, Yeshiva University, 2006, p. 2). *Goral* is mechanistic and elicits teleological questions: Why must Yosef be thrown into the pit? Wasn't there a better way, one we could imagine the brothers undertaking? Prophecy cuts through *goral* by offering, through Divine insight, answers not otherwise available. It bears solace not forthcoming by normal human means of understanding: *God intended it for good*. Perhaps Yosef knew. Perhaps this helped sustain him; helped him, too, in forgiving his brothers genuinely and with a full heart.

But the Rav tells us that the realm of *yeud* is to be preferred, in which a person confronts their choices actively by engaging their free will: “In this dimension, the emphasis is removed *from* causal and teleological considerations...and is directed *to* the realm of action... We do not ponder about the ineffable ways of the Holy One, but instead ponder the paths man must take when evil leaps upon him” (pp. 7-8).

If Yaakov's vision was purposely obfuscated, if Yosef's reassurance is only retrospective, then we are operating in the realm of *yeud*. Our task is not to untangle Yaakov's mysterious riddles, which may or may not have come to fruition according to the various interpretations of our sages, or to justify Yosef's difficult fate, which may or may not have been necessary. It is, rather, to take up the call to action with which Yaakov imbues Yehuda, the call to thrive and be sustained as in Yosef's promise to his brothers.

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