

פרשת ויחי תש"ע

שיחות רב עוזר

של"ט"א Insights into Torah and Halacha from Rav Ozer Glickman

ר"ם בישיבת רבנו יצחק אלהון

The Union of Love and Discipline: Family as Formative Experience

ויקרא יעקב אל-בניו ויאמר האספו ואניידה לכם את אשר-יקרא אתכם באחרית הימים:

and his sons never cease to intrigue, inspire, disquiet, and disturb. They exemplify after all the most fascinating social construct the universe has ever seen: a family. פרשת ויחי gives us this year's last glimpse of them as a family; with the end of they are transformed from a clan into a people.

We leave the patriarch and his sons with many unresolved questions. That, too, is the nature of a family. The complexity of intimate relationships may never be resolved. Siblings often revert to patterns established in childhood in their adult interactions. Sons can spend their entire lives in pursuit of paternal validation that always eludes them. And what man is foolish enough to step into the middle of a woman's relationship with her mother? The power of family in the formation of our characters and the patterns of our human interactions may be the single most determinant factor in our adult lives. As the late social critic Christopher Lasch wrote in *Haven in a Heartless World: the Family Beseiged*, "The family instills modes of thought and action that become habitual. Because of its enormous emotional influence, it colors all of a child's subsequent experience."

As a parent has premonitions of mortality, children must be prepared for a future alone. Father of a entire people, יעקב אבינו summons his sons to his bedside to recount what will befall them at the end of days. The men doubtless listen intently as the patriarch announces his intention:

הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב ושמעו אל-ישׂראל אביכם:

Gather so you may hear, sons of Yaakov, and harken to Yisrael your father.

And then how does he begin?

ראובן בכרי אתה כחי וראשית אנכי יתר שאת ויתר עז:

Reuvain, you are my first born, my strength, the first fruit of my vitality, with exceptional bearing and power.

פחו כמים אל-תותר כי עלית משכבי אבין אז חללת יצועי עליה:

But as erratic as water, you do not act excellently- for you ascended to your father's bedchamber.

You then defiled it ascending to my couch.

יעקב אבינו promises predictions of the future then recaps family history. The shift in focus startles and confounds.

The discontinuity between יעקב's promised revelations and his retrospective on the past is so jarring and unexpected that it prompts an aggadic response:

רבנן אמרי: בא לגלות להם את הקץ ונתכסה ממנו.

The rabbis say: he came to reveal to them the date of the redemption but it was hidden from him.

The sudden shift of topic from the future to the past is explained by positing a temporary change in the prophetic abilities of יעקב אבינו:

יעקב תלה עיניו וראה שכינה עומדת על גביו. אמר להם: הווי זהירין בכבודו של הקב"ה.

Raising his eyes, Yaakov saw the Divine Presence standing over him. He said to them: be cautious with the honor of the Holy One Blessed be He.

And yet there may be something more subtle in יעקב's peoration. Perhaps יעקב recounts the history of his family because it forms the foundation for their future history. There will be some as tempetuou as ראובן, seizing the moment when temperance is required. Others as majestic as יהודה, born to greatness. There will be captains of commerce like זבולון and princes of the Torah like יששכר.

Why reflect on their future by recounting the past? I am reminded of a talk given by Dean Allen M. Spiegel of Yeshiva University's Albert Einstein School of Medicine at a YU Shabbaton a few summers ago. Dean Spiegel gave an overview of Einstein's path-breaking research in Jewish genetic diseases. Dr. Spiegel characterized genetics as a collective set of predispositions but not necessarily pre-ordained destiny. Diet and exercise can and do overcome genetic predispositions to cardiac problems in many individuals, a truth I have come to know well. A predilection toward lung cancer may not result in the disease if a person never smokes.

Dr. Spiegel's talk that Shabbos afternoon made an enormous impression on me, not only because of the world-class research conducted in the University but because of the moral lesson I drew from it. If the hard-wired coding in our own molecular structures need not determine our physical conditions, how much more our social environment? יעקב recounted the sins of the past in order to counsel his descendants toward avoidance of the sins of the future.

Our tradition has always understood how difficult it is to grapple with one's own inclinations, be they genetic or environmental. Did not זמא say,

איזהו גיבור? הכובש את יצרו.

Who is truly heroic? One who conquers his own inclination.

It is, of course, easier said than done. Ask me when I am learning late at night and the refrigerator beckons. Ask me when it is dark and cold and the early morning path to *shul* is covered with snow. Ask me when someone criticizes me and the instinct to respond with anger seems overwhelming. We all of us wrestle with our humanity.

רגזו, ואל-תִּחַטְּאוּ: אִמְרוּ בְּלִבְבְּכֶם, עַל-מִשְׁכְּבְּכֶם; וְדַמּוּ סֵלָה:

Rage, and sin not; commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still Selah.

אייר לוי בר חמא אמר ריש בן לקיש: לעולם ירגז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע שנא' רגזו ואל תחטאו.

R. Levi bar Chama said in the name of Reish Lakish: One must always incite his good inclination against his evil one.

אם נצחו- מוטב; ואם לאו- יעסוק בתורה שנאמר: אמרו בלבבכם. אם נצחו- מוטב; ואם לאו- יקרא קריאת שמע שנאמר על משכבכם. אם נצחו- מוטב; ואם לאו- יזכור לו יום המיתה שנאמר: ודמו סלה.

If successful, good; but if not, he should study Torah, as it is said: commune with your heart; if successful, good; but if not, he should recite the Shema, as it is said: upon your bed. If successful, good; but if not, he should remember the day of his demise, as it is said: and be still Selah.

We are each of us headed to the same end. What we do on the way is what constitutes our destiny. Genetics and social environment exert strong pulls and the struggle against them can be intimidating. But we are the descendants of יעקב אבינו who, though his days were מעט ורעים, never lost sight of the mission, handed down from grandfather to father to son and vouchsafed to עם ישראל until the end of days.

שבת שלום

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