

This week's *parashah*, *Vayechi*, is the last Torah portion in the book of Genesis. From Genesis 47:28 through 50:26, it deals with Jacob's preparations for death, his death and its aftermath. Chapter 49 deals entirely with what we would nowadays call his "Ethical will" – Jacob's final blessing to his sons.

Some of Jacob's blessings do not look like what we would conventionally think of as blessings. He definitively rebukes his eldest three sons, before blessing the remaining 9 with the poetic metaphors and intentions that associate with blessings. But what is remarkable is that Jacob, unlike his father, Isaac, or his grandfather, Abraham, intentionally gathers all of his children together for blessing before he dies. In each of the preceding generations, favoritism and sibling rivalry were so extreme that that brothers wound up splitting off and forming separate nations – first Ishmael from Isaac, then Jacob from Esau. And yet Jacob is determined, despite his own mistakes in parenting, to gather all of his sons together, with an ultimate message that they are all his descendants, they all receive and inheritance from him: Those whom he wants to reprove, those whom he wants to praise.

Even his reproof is very carefully worded. Of his sons Simon and Levi, he says, "Their rage is cursed." A curse in Biblical Hebrew is an intention of diminishment, as a blessing is an intention of expansion. As commentator Rashi points out, Jacob does not curse his sons; but the quality that he sees as damaging to them.

Jacob's final blessing sets the tone for our people. We are not called children of Abraham, or of Isaac. We are called Israelites, because no one was banished to start a separate tribe. And we are taught about what it is to be part of a people, a holy community: we all have different characteristics, different blessings to bring.

We will certainly disagree with each other. We may need to reprove each other sometimes. But no one gets banished – even those who have attributes we may want to curse.

This goes for holy community and for healthy coalitions today. When we stick with each other -even if we need to tell each other hard truths, we all are enriched.

On this Shabbat of the looking forward to the return of the light, I want to bless us that we be worthy of the inheritance of Israel – that we seek to create holy community in this new season, and that we have the fortitude to hang in there with each other.

Shabbat shalom.