

This week's parashah, Vayechi, is a parasha of turning points. Not only because it is the first parashah in the new year, this year.

But as I wrote in "This Week at TBI," it is the *last* parashah in Genesis, the first book of the Torah. *Vayechi* tells the story and of Jacob's final blessings to grandsons and sons, his death, and the immediate aftermath. With Jacob's death, Torah concludes the story of a single Patriarchal line, and when Exodus opens next week, it will be the story of AM Yisrael, *the people* Israel.

So how do we go from being a family to being a people?

It is not just the passage of time, although of course, it does take generations for a single family's descendants to multiply into thousands. (Though not that many generations – an average birthrate of 3 children per generation would yield over 59 thousand people in 10 generations.)

But the passage of time and increase of offspring is not enough to create a people. In each generation of the patriarchs, there were multiple offspring, but they did not multiply as a clan, according to the Torah narrative. Avraham fathered Yitzhak and Yishmael, but (sometimes to our sorrow), we are not considered altogether along with the descendants of Yishmael as *b'nei Avraham*, children of Abraham (except perhaps nowadays in certain deliberate peacebuilding circles). Certainly, the lineage of blessing only passes to Yitzhak. Avraham banished Yishmael without blessing him, though Yishmael returns to bury him. Avraham's final children, born by Avraham's third wife, Keturah, at the end of Parashat Chayei Sarah, are not counted with a definitive number or named, let alone blessed. From Avraham to Yitzhak, the lineage transmits exactly as that - from one person, to one other person in the next generation.

Yitzhak himself has two sons, and does a little better. He blesses them both, though of course that too is heartbreaking. He blesses Yaakov with the blessing meant for Esav, a blessing of dominion over his brother.

And it is clear, in Parashat Toldot, that Yitzhak never intended to bless Yaakov at all. After Yaakov sneaks away and Esav comes in, Esav implores Yitzhak, “bless me too!” Yitzhak answers, in Chapter 27, verse 35, “Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing.” Esav tearfully implores his father two more times before Yitzhak can even imagine a blessing to offer him in place of the one his brother usurped.

Now, in Our parashah, a generation later, in Genesis Chapter 49, as Yaakov considers his own death, he gathers all his sons together – those upon whom he doted, those who have gravely disappointed him, those who thought he never noticed them. With all of them together, he shares his blessing. It is not a simple blessing – he castigates his eldest, Reuben, for an act of impetuous rebellion. He distances himself from Shimon and Levi, who led the murderous rampage and pillage of the city Shechem after its leader raped their sister Dina, and says in verse 7, “Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless.”

What to make of these so called “blessings?” It may not feel like a blessing, to be on the receiving end of some of Yaakov’s commentary. But as Rashi points out, about verse 7, “Even when he was reproofing them, he did not curse *them*, but their anger.”

There are angry, harsh words here, yes. But the end of relationship is not the angry word. The end of relationship happens when no one is willing to bother with communication at all. The Talmud in Masechet Sanhedrin, page 29a, tellingly defines “hatred” as the inability or unwillingness to speak to another person. There is plenty of hatred between brothers in Torah, most recently when Joseph in his youth emerged as the favored brother, and in Genesis 37, verse 4, the brothers, “hated him and could not speak a friendly word to him.” Yaakov does not hate any of his sons; he does not banish any of them from the room, from communication.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, wrote two years ago, “Jacob blesses his twelve sons. There is discernible tension here. His blessings to his eldest three sons, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, read more like curses than blessings. Yet the fact is that he is blessing all twelve together in the same room at the same time. We have not seen this before. . . . The mere fact that Jacob is able to gather his sons together is unprecedented, and important.”

Dena Weiss even suggests that Yaakov’s angry words are what the brothers need to hear. They are still full of remorse and anxiety over their treatment of Yosef, and Yosef has not acknowledged their wrongdoing, but has offered a forgiveness so expansive as to be excruciating. The context, she writes, “may explain why Ya’akov chose to be harsh—but honest—with his children before he departed from this world. Ya’akov models the alternative approach, to be lovingly straightforward. Ya’akov doesn’t pull any punches, he tells it like it is. And by airing his grievances he allows his children to confront what they’ve done, learn from what they’ve done, and move beyond a secret and unrelenting sense of guilt.”

Communication – even difficult communication – is the essence of relationship. And at Yaakov’s deathbed, the unifying subtext of what he communicates is: ‘Whether I am pleased with you or angry with you; whether I focus on blessing your good qualities or cursing your bad habits – you are all in the family. The lineage passes to all of you, to hold it and transmit it together.’”

As Rabbi Sacks points out in another dvar Torah, just published posthumously, “The episode . . . resolves one of the central questions of the book of Genesis ... Can brothers live peaceably with one another? This question is fundamental to the biblical drama of redemption, for if brothers cannot live together, how can nations? And if nations cannot live together, how can the human world survive?”

For our story to become more than the story of a family, to become the story of a nation, we need this: all of the brothers in the room together, receiving their father's deathbed words, committing to hold them together.

And they do. One of the most telling pieces of evidence even in this parashah is that after Yaakov's death, Yosef and his brothers reiterate their reconciliation. They weren't just holding it together for him, but for all of them, for their future.

Yosef sees himself in that future, even though he is at the height of power in Egypt. Approaching his own death, Yosef's very last words to his brothers, in the very final lines of Genesis, are, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." He tells his brother that he sees his legacy as with them and their legacy, and he makes them swear that their descendants will carry his bones, too.

As we embark on a new year, may this be our blessing, too: may we see our fate as mutually entwined. May we understand that for the good and bad, the blessings that are easy to receive, and the blessings that feel almost like curses, we are bound together, facing whatever will come.