

Between the Lines—Va-y'hi

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Abigail Treu

Genesis Rabbah 97:2

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה צז

ויברך את יוסף ויאמר, ר' ברכיה ואמרי לה בשם ר' יוחנן וריש לקיש, ר' יוחנן אמר לרועה שהוא עומד ומביט בצאנו, ר"ל אמר לנשיא מהלך והזקנים לפניו, על דעתיה דר' יוחנן אנו צריכין לכבודו, על דעתיה דריש לקיש הוא צריך לכבודו.

“The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked”: Rabbi Berechiah gave two illustrations in the names of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish, respectively. Rabbi Yochanan said: It was like a shepherd standing and watching his flock. Resh Lakish said: Like a prince who walks along while the elders precede him. On Rabbi Yochanan's view, we need His honor. On the view of Resh Lakish, He needs us to glorify Him.

Really? God needs us to glorify Him?

For those who are familiar with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's seminal work *God in Search of Man*, this is not an astounding claim. “All of human history as described in the Bible,” Heschel writes, “may be summarized in one phrase: God is in search of man.” According to Martin Buber, Heschel, and other “covenantal” theologians, however, our relationship with God is not unidirectional, not one in which (as Rabbi Yochanan would have it) God is a shepherd tending a flock of creatures totally dependent on divine mercy and protection. Rather, the relationship is mutual, one in which God needs us as much as we need God.

Of course, the two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In holding both visions of God together, the midrash invites us to see that God is a shepherd and a prince, and that at various times of life we experience God as one or the other. We need God's honor in order to feel our own lives imbued with meaning, in order to feel that our lives are sacred. The idea that God needs us is not only an invitation to seek the divine but also a call to fulfill our own sacred duty. Or, in the words of Rabbi Heschel: “God is in need of man for the attainment of His ends, and religion, as Jewish tradition understands it, is a way of serving these ends, of which we are in need, even though we may not be aware of them, ends which we must learn to feel the need of.”

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-y'hi

Genesis 47:28–50:26

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Rabbinic Fellow, Development Department, JTS

I am a person with an insatiable appetite for news; a serious information consumer who checks websites, Facebook, and Twitter, often hourly, for updates on what is happening in the US, Israel, around the world, and in my friends' and relatives' lives. While this circumstance may seem commonplace coming from someone of my generation, I actually find the situation challenging for just that reason. I live in a world of prose but yearn for a more poetic existence, and that has become especially difficult to find lately.

I have gotten some amusement from this December's year-end and decade-end summaries of the headlines, but only a minimum of enduring insight. Those rather banal lists reminded me, though, of my hunger for the drama of a rich text that draws me into language that requires and even defies parsing; a text that challenges me to question it and my own typical patterns of communication. These aesthetics constitute the core of this week's Torah portion. At the heart of Parashat Va-y'hi we find Jacob's deathbed speech, a testament in which he blesses or rebukes each of his sons. The poetry that composes the bulk of chapter 49 of Genesis relates both to earlier incidents in the family's life and to the brothers' future as the tribes of Israel. In order to explore *what* this Torah portion has to teach us, we ought to begin with a closer examination of *how* it conveys those ideas.

One scholar, Dr. Adele Berlin, has outlined the ways in which poetic passages like that of Jacob's Testament in Genesis 49 achieve “a type of elevated discourse.” In an essay entitled “Reading Biblical Poetry” that she composed for *The Jewish Study Bible*, which she coedited, Dr. Berlin writes that

“more than just a set of formal features or structures, poetry is sound and vision compressed for intensity and expressed with potency. Biblical poetry struggles to probe and stretch the important cultural concepts and issues of ancient Israel in exquisitely distilled Hebrew. In that sense, it is the purest, most rarefied, expression of biblical thought.”

Within the canon of the Hebrew Bible, generally known for its sparse language, this subgenre of poetic texts presents its ideas in an even more laconic and esoteric way that conceals as much as it reveals about its content.

Unfortunately, much of the beauty of this evocative yet elusive mode of expression is lost in translation. A few verses, though, demonstrate the ways in which the literary elements of terseness, imagery, and allusion in this chapter make it an outstanding example of what Dr. Berlin describes. The son/tribe of Gad receives mention in only a single verse here, Genesis 49:19, which states: *GaD G'Dud yeGuDenu / v'hu yaGuD 'akev* (“Gad shall be raided by raiders / but he shall raid at their heels”). The Hebrew transliteration portrays the alliteration that repeats throughout the verse and shows how Gad's name relates to the tribe's destiny to experience a cycle of violence and retribution. This verse holds a more subtle key to unlocking connections within this chapter and to earlier chapters in Genesis.

This idea has deeper resonance both within the chapter and throughout Genesis, as the term *'akev* (heel) appears two verses before this in highly allusive form: “Dan shall be a serpent by the road, / A viper by the path, / That bites the horse's heels (*'ikvei*) / So that his rider is thrown backward” (Gen. 49:17). An astute audience reading this or hearing the text chanted would likely notice connections between the term's usage here and in at least two other prominent verses describing the significance of *heels*. The passage's narrator himself is described at birth in Genesis 25:26 as “holding on to the *heel* (*ba-'akev*) of Esau; so they named him Jacob (*Ya-akov*.” In regard to a time many generations earlier, Genesis 3:15 describes God's curse for the serpent in the Garden of Eden: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their *heel* (*'akev*.”

While two of the greatest medieval biblical commentators, Rashi and Ibn Ezra, both mention the link between the *heel* and *'akev* references in Genesis 3 and 49, neither expounds upon the implications at any length. Knowing that both Rashi and Ibn Ezra exercised brevity in their commentaries, we can focus on the mere fact that they highlight this connection and others that turn our attention to the “cultural concepts and issues” to which Dr. Berlin refers. The verses examined above raise questions about the origin and causes of conflict and violence, whether among humans or between humankind and nature.

We learn little from Genesis or other biblical texts to suggest that such questions pertained more to Dan and Gad than to the other brothers/tribes, and perhaps that is the point. Whether we imagine all the brothers gathered together to hear Jacob's deathbed speech or a different ancient audience listening to the statements about trouble at one's heels, the verse exclaimed between those utterances has a certain power: “I wait for Your deliverance, O LORD!” (Gen. 49:18).

I pray that we can rely upon but will not wait for God's deliverance from the controversies that seem more and more likely to become *machlokot lo l'shem shamayim* (disputes not for the sake of heaven). May we find redeeming values and greater peace through the texts we encounter each day, and may the pen continue to be mightier than the sword.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 48:5–7 “. . . ‘Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the Land of Egypt, will be mine; Ephraim and Menashe will be mine no less than Reuven and Shimon . . . I do this because, when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem.”

B'khor Shor, “when I was returning from Paddan,” I buried Rachel on my way to Ephrath, for I knew that this place would be apportioned to her sons and this would be an honor to her to be buried in her sons' territory. And so it was in the area of the tribe of Benjamin. For if she would be buried in Machpelah, this would be in the territory of Judah, and this would not be an honor to her . . . and it is written concerning Saul that Samuel said to him, “When you leave me today, you will meet two men near the tomb of Rachel in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah . . .” (I Samuel 10:2)—this is a prooftext that she was buried on the border of Benjamin. “And because I know that your inheritance will be enlarged to two tribes, I knew that this place would be on the border apportioned to Rachel's children.” And we see this with many other great people that were buried on the border of tribes (Joshua, Joseph and Elazar) . . .

One of the unsolved mysteries of Tanakh relates directly to Parashat Va-y'hi. At the opening of this narrative, Jacob is on his deathbed when Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Menashe, come to him. Jacob uses this moment for blessing and burial. He extracts an oath from Joseph regarding his burial; and he blesses his grandsons, assuring them a rightful portion among the other tribes of Israel. As Jacob opens his soliloquy, he recounts the death of his beloved Rachel. Clearly, it is the presence of Rachel's son Joseph, along with their grandchildren, that reminds him of this painful moment in his life. Echoing words found earlier in Torah (Gen. 35:19), Jacob remarks, “when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died . . . when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem” (Gen. 48:7). Although these two texts agree, other verses in Tanakh suggest an alternative location for Rachel's tomb (see especially I Sam. 10:2). What is our most accurate guess based on these conflicting accounts?

Joseph B'khor Shor argues that Rachel was not buried in Bethlehem since this territory is assigned to Judah. The burial site, he believes, is “in the area of the tribe of Benjamin.” Citing Samuel's instructions to Saul in I Samuel 10:2, “you will meet two men near the tomb of Rachel in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah,” B'khor Shor convincingly advocates for an alternative site—*not the tomb that we know of today*—that is indeed on the outskirts of Bethlehem. For B'khor Shor, it is an issue of honor that she be buried in the land apportioned to one of her sons.

Modern bible scholarship supports this thesis. The identification of Ephrath with Bethlehem is a gloss that was appended later. Rather, “there is a tradition that identifies Ephrath with Kiriath-Jearim, which lay on the border between Judah and Benjamin . . . close to present-day Abu Ghosh . . .” (Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 408). During an earlier period of Israelite history, the area of Ephrath referred to an “area occupied by the clan of Ephrath” (ibid, 408) which was on the border with Benjamin. Later, when the Ephratites extended their rule to Bethlehem, it also became known as Ephrath, which accounts for the gloss appearing in both verses (Gen. 35:19 and 48:7) “now Bethlehem.” Whether it be an issue of honor or prophecy, it appears that Rachel is fittingly buried in the land of her progeny.

One final note: one cannot help but be moved by Jeremiah's prophetic words, which have been realized in our own day: “a cry is heard from a height . . . Rachel weeping bitterly for her [exiled] children . . . Thus says the Lord: ‘Restrain your voice from weeping!’ . . . ‘Your children will return to their country’” (Jer. 31:14). Jeremiah envisions Rachel welcoming her children back to their land; so may this vision continue to be realized in our days.

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