Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vayechi

Famous Last Words

This week's portion, Vayechi, marks the end of the Book of Genesis and the end of Jacob's life. Before he dies, Jacob gathers all of his sons around his bedside and blesses them one final time.

בראשית מט:א–ג וַיִּקְרָ֥א יַעֲקֹ֖ב אֶל־בָּנָ֑יו וַיֹּ֣אמֶר הֵאָסְפ֡וּ וְאַגִּ֣ידָה לָכֶ֣ם אֵ֣ת אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרָ֥א אֶתְכֶ֖ם בְּאַחֲרִ֥ית הַיָּמִֽים׃ (ב) הִקָּבְצ֥וּ וְשִׁמְע֖וּ בְּנֵ֣י יַעֲקֹ֑ב וְשִׁמְע֥וּ אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל אֲבִיכֶֽם׃ (ג) רְאוּבֵ֤ן בְּכֹרִי֙ אַתָּ֣ה כֹחִ֔י וְרֵאשִׁ֖ית אוֹנִ֑י יֶ֥תֶר שְׂאֵ֖ת וְיֶ֥תֶר עָֽז׃	**Genesis 49:1–3** And Jacob called his sons and said, "Come together that 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: Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and first fruit of my vigor, exceeding in rank and exceeding in honor…

- **Jacob gives each of his sons an individual blessing, but he also requires that they all come together. Why do you think it is important that they be together while receiving their individual blessings?**
- **Have you ever received an individualized blessing, whether in a religious context or otherwise? What were the circumstances, and what did it mean to you?**

Close readers of the biblical text may notice something unusual in these verses: Jacob tells his sons that he will reveal the future to them, but instead gives each of them a personalized blessing. Why does he not do as he originally intended and tell them about the "days to come"? Rashi, the influential medieval Torah and Talmud commentator, offers an answer in his commentary on the verse.

רש"י בראשית מט:א **ואגידה לכם.** בִּקֵּשׁ לְגַלּוֹת אֶת הַקֵּץ וְנִסְתַּלְּקָה מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁכִינָה וְהִתְחִיל אוֹמֵר דְּבָרִים אֲחֵרִים׃	**Rashi Genesis 49:1** **That I may tell you**. He wished to reveal to them the end of Israel's exile but the Divine Presence departed from him and

	he began to speak of other things

- **What does this source suggest about Jacob's relationship with God?**
- **Have you ever had something you wanted to share but were unable to? What held you back?**

In his commentary, Rashi often draws on earlier sources, which he then edits or condenses. In this case, he draws on *Genesis Rabbah*, a work of rabbinic commentary composed around 400 CE that provides verse-by-verse interpretations of the book of Genesis.

בראשית רבה צח:ב **רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אַתָּה.** מְלַמֵּד שֶׁבָּא לְגַלּוֹת לָהֶם אֶת הַקֵּץ וְנִתְכַּסָּה מִמֶּנּוּ. מָשָׁל לְאוֹהֲבוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ שֶׁהָיָה נִפְנֶה מִן הָעוֹלָם וְהָיוּ בָנָיו סוֹבְבִין אֶת מִטָּתוֹ, אָמַר לָהֶם בּוֹאוּ וַאֲגַלֶּה לָכֶם מִסְטוֹרִין שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ, תָּלָה עֵינָיו וְהִבִּיט בַּמֶּלֶךְ, אָמַר לָהֶם הֱיוּ זְהִירִין בִּכְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ. כָּךְ יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ תָּלָה עֵינָיו וְרָאָה שְׁכִינָה עוֹמֶדֶת עַל גַּבָּיו, אָמַר לָהֶם הֱווּ זְהִירִין בִּכְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא.	**Genesis Rabbah 98:2** **Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and first fruit of my vigor, exceeding in rank and exceeding in honor. (Genesis 49:3).**"Reuben, you are my firstborn" – this teaches that he came to reveal the End, but it was concealed from him. This is analogous to a king's confidant who was passing from the world, and his sons were surrounding his bed. He said to them: 'Come and I will reveal to you the secrets of the king.' He lifted his eyes and gazed at the king. He said to them: 'Be vigilant regarding the honor of the king.' So Jacob our patriarch lifted his eyes and saw the Divine Presence standing over him. He said to them: 'Be vigilant regarding the honor of the Holy One blessed be He.'

- **What do you think this source means when it refers to God's "honor," and how does this relate to Jacob's blessing?**
- **Why do you think Rashi might have chosen to leave out the metaphor of the king? What does the metaphor add to this version?**

While the explanation offered by Rashi and *Genesis Rabbah* helps answer some questions, it also raises others – among them, how Jacob might have responded to the departure of the Divine Presence. The Talmud, a record of generations of rabbinic debate

about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the third and eighth centuries, explores this question.

פסחים נו. דְּאָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ: ״וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֵאָסְפוּ וְאַגִּידָה לָכֶם״. בִּיקֵּשׁ יַעֲקֹב לְגַלּוֹת לְבָנָיו קֵץ הַיָּמִין, וְנִסְתַּלְּקָה מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁכִינָה. אָמַר: שֶׁמָּא חַס וְשָׁלוֹם יֵשׁ בְּמִטָּתִי פְּסוּל, כְּאַבְרָהָם שֶׁיָּצָא מִמֶּנּוּ יִשְׁמָעֵאל, וְאַבִּי יִצְחָק שֶׁיָּצָא מִמֶּנּוּ עֵשָׂו? אָמְרוּ לוֹ בָּנָיו: ״שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, ה׳ אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה׳ אֶחָד״. אָמְרוּ: כְּשֵׁם שֶׁאֵין בְּלִבְּךָ אֶלָּא אֶחָד, כָּךְ אֵין בְּלִבֵּנוּ אֶלָּא אֶחָד. בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה פָּתַח יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ וְאָמַר: ״בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד״.	**Pesachim 56a** As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said that [it is written:] “And Jacob called his sons and said, Gather around and I will tell you [what will occur to you in the end of days” (Genesis 49:1).] Jacob wanted to reveal to his sons the end of days but the Divine Presence abandoned him, [rendering him unable to prophesy.] He said: Perhaps [the Divine Presence has abandoned me because,] heaven forfend, one of my descendants is unfit, as [was the case with my grandfather] Abraham, from whom Ishmael emerged, and [like] my father Isaac, from whom Esau emerged. His sons said to him: Hear Israel, [our father,] the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. They said: Just as there is only one [God] in your heart, so too, there is only one in our hearts. At that moment Jacob our father said [in praise:] Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.

- **The call and response in this source (“Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” and “Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever”) is repeated by many Jews twice a day as part of the recitation of the *Shema*. What about this exchange do you think makes it important enough to occupy such a central place in Jewish prayer?**
- **Jacob’s fears about his children are directly shaped by his family’s past. Have you ever brought fears or assumptions from your past into new situations?**

Rabbi Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, takes this idea one step further, arguing that Jacob’s inability to tell his sons about the future reflects a fundamental Jewish value.

***Studies in Spirituality; A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*, Vayehi: “On Not**

Predicting the Future"
Rashi, following the Talmud, says that "Jacob wished to reveal what would happen in the future, but the Divine Presence was removed from him." He tried to foresee the future but found he could not.
This is no minor detail. It is a fundamental feature of Jewish spirituality. We believe that we cannot predict the future when it comes to human beings. We *make* the future by our choices. The script has not yet been written. The future is radically open.

- **What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he writes that "the future is radically open" rather than simply "open"? What does the word "radically" add to his meaning?**
- **In this source, Rabbi Sacks challenges the idea that anyone's future is predestined. Can you think of something in your life that turned out differently from what you expected or assumed?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. In the final source, Rabbi Sacks offers a positive interpretation of Jacob's inability to foretell the future. Looking back at the other sources – Rashi, Genesis Rabbah, and the Talmud – do you think their perspectives align with Rabbi Sacks' interpretation?
2. What do you think motivated Jacob to share his vision of the future with his sons as one of his final acts before his death?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayechi, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayechi page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vayechi topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Jacob, Blessings, and the Tribes.

When reading through Jacob's blessings, you may note the fact that Simeon and Levi's seem more like reprimands than blessings. Many commentators address this tension – some to start off with are Ibn Ezra, Or HaChaim, and Genesis Rabbah, all of which are available on Sefaria in the Hebrew original and English translation.

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