

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Email address: office@etzion.org.il)

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYECHI

In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise,
Miriam bat Yitzchak Ve-Rivka z"l,
whose yahrtzeit is on 9 Tevet
by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

Yaakov's "Vision of the End of Days"¹

By Rav Gad Eldad

In our *parasha*, we read about Yaakov's desire, before passing away from this world, to reveal to his sons what awaits them at the end of days:

And Yaakov called to his sons, and said, "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days. Assemble yourselves, and hear, you sons of Yaakov; and hearken to Israel your father." (*Bereishit* 49:1-2)

This initiative sparks our interest by the very fact that it is something new. Over the course of the book of *Bereishit*, we have witnessed the mantle of leadership being transferred from Avraham to Yitzchak and from Yitzchak to Yaakov. But on no occasion did a father see a need to reveal to his son what would happen with him at the end of days.² Yaakov's conduct is exceptional, and we must try to understand his motive for this move. In order to highlight the difference, we will examine the transitional events in the lives of his forefathers.

"For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you"

Avraham waited many years for a son, and in the end he had two sons. It would appear that he had difficulty favoring one son over the other, though in the end the choice was made very clearly. God Himself guided him and instructed him as to the path that he was supposed to take:

And Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, making sport. And she said to Avraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son..." And the thing was very grievous in Avraham's sight on account of his son. **And God said to Avraham, "Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad and because of your bondwoman; in all that Sara says to you, hearken to her voice; for in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you..."** And Avraham arose up early in the morning and took bread and a bottle of water, and gave

it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away; and she departed, and strayed in the wilderness of Beer-Sheva. (21:9-14)

Accordingly, on the eve of his death, Avraham leaves Yitzchak as his sole heir:

And Avraham gave all that he had to Yitzchak. But to the sons of the concubines, that Avraham had, Avraham gave gifts; **and he sent them away from Yitzchak his son**, while he yet lived, eastward, to the east country... And Avraham expired, and died in a good old age... And Yitzchak and Yishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpela... And it came to pass after the death of Avraham, **that God blessed Yitzchak his son; and Yitzchak dwelt by Be'er-Lachai-Ro'i.** (25:5-11)

Since the choice was made by God, Avraham sees no need to bless Yitzchak, but rather skips over this stage and focuses on the practical side of implementing his choice. At the same time, God, who had chosen Yitzchak, appears immediately afterwards with his "appointee" and confirms His choice with a blessing.

"And the elder shall serve the younger"

Yitzchak as well waited many years for progeny, and in the end he too was blessed with two sons, but from the same woman. Here too the choice between them was made by God, but this time the matter was not brought to Yitzchak's knowledge:

And the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it be so, wherefore do I live?" And she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; **and the elder shall serve the younger.**" (25:22-23)

Scripture attests to Yitzchak's love for Esav:

Now Yitzchak loved Esav, because he did eat of his venison; and Rivka loved Yaakov. (25:28)

Accordingly Yitzchak wished to bless Esav:

It was necessary to tell us in advance about Yitzchak's love for Esav, and that of Rivka for Yaakov, to explain what is written before us: Yitzchak wished to bless Esav, and Rivka engaged in deception in order to bless Yaakov. (Rashbam, ad loc.)³

The course of events is well known. Yitzchak wished to bless Esav, but in the end he blessed Yaakov. Even when he understood that he had been deceived, he ruled that the blessing should not be removed from the one who received it:

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical references are to the book of *Bereishit*.

² Yitzchak blessed his son with respect to the future in a very general manner, and the same is true of Yaakov. Just as he was blessed by his father, so he blessed his children: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is it that their father spoke to them and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them" (49:28). However, in addition to this, Yaakov wished to reveal to them what would happen in the end of days. It is precisely for this reason that this initiative of his draws our attention.

³ The other commentators offer other explanations of this verse. Some suggest that Yitzchak loved Esav, and certainly he loved Yaakov (Radak). Others propose that only at that time did Yaakov love Esav (Chizkuni). Yet others say that he loved him only because of the food that he offered him, but he did not exaggerate the importance of this matter (Rabbeinu Bachya).

And Yitzchak trembled very exceedingly, and said, "Who then is he that has taken venison, and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before you came, and have blessed him? **Yes, and he shall be blessed.**" (27:33)

If this were not enough, before Yaakov leaves his parents' home for Charan, Yitzchak adds to his blessing the blessing of Avraham:

And Yitzchak called Yaakov, and blessed him, and charged him, and said to him, "You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan-Aram, to the house of Betuel your mother's father; and take you a wife from there of the daughters of Lavan your mother's brother. And God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, that you may be a congregation of peoples; **and give you the blessing of Avraham**, to you, and to your seed with you; that you may inherit the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Avraham." (28:1-4)⁴

Yitzchak hands over the mantle of leadership by means of a blessing. We see a "lowering of the level" regarding the way the mantle is transferred. This is not done by way of a direct revelation to the father about the identity of his chosen son; rather, the father decides according to the information that has been accumulated by him over time.

We can certainly understand Yitzchak's decision to transfer the blessing of Avraham by way of a blessing, since he, too, was appointed by God through a blessing. Since he did not witness God's command to his father to choose him, all he knew about the manner of his selection was God's blessing to him after his father passed away.

"But his father kept the matter in mind"

The legacy of selection over the course of history, from the creation of the world to the sons of Yaakov, includes within it the rejection of those who are left behind and are not chosen. The knowledge that in each generation a certain figure is chosen to continue the chosen line undoubtedly caused tension between Yaakov's sons. In the wake of the "lowering of the level" of the selection process that was noted above, it would have been expected that their father would identify the chosen one, rather than there being a Divine declaration regarding the matter.

There are two sides to this point. On the one hand, Scripture updates us regarding the strained relations between the brothers, especially concerning their father's attitude toward them, which for them was an ominous sign with regard to their historical future:

These are the generations of Yaakov. Yosef, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers, being still a lad even with the sons of Bilha, and with the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives; **and Yosef brought evil report of them to their father.** Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat of many colors. **And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.** (37:2-4)

⁴ For the purpose of our discussion, there is no need to consider the relationship between the blessing that Yitzchak wished to give Esav and the blessing that he intentionally gave Yaakov. The commentaries (ad loc.) deal with this issue at great length.

There is, however, another aspect to this matter. The fact that a Divine revelation is not expected imposes a heavy responsibility upon Yaakov. Yaakov did not necessarily know on the basis of what his father had decided to choose him. The text does not mention that his mother ever told his father that she knew that he had been chosen from on high; perhaps it was precisely the fact that he had finally managed with his cunning to receive his father's blessings that tipped the scales in his favor. It is even possible that Yaakov justified his having been chosen based on the difference between his own character and that of his brother. But these are all hypotheses, and they will not help him at this time. One thing is clear to him – that his father had made the correct choice, for in the end, God revealed Himself to him. Now, Yaakov is faced with a difficult task; he must identify the heir of his ancestors. This time the task is all the more difficult, since the choice is not between two brothers, but between twelve. It is against this background that we must read the continuation of the passage:

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, "Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me." And he told it to his father, and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow down to you to the earth?" And his brothers envied him; but his father kept the matter in mind. (37:9-11)

Scripture notes that his father kept the matter in mind. Yaakov loves Yosef, but he is aware that this does not suffice to draw conclusions about the identity of his successor. He seeks any sign whatsoever from above that would help him in his decision. Suddenly, Yosef reports about dreams, the interpretation of which leaves no room for doubt.

This passage ends with references to the two points that we noted above. The brothers are jealous of Yosef, and the tension between them deepens. On the other hand, their father considers the possibility that perhaps there is a hint here confirming the identity of his successor, and he therefore keeps the matter in mind.

"Your father's sons shall bow down before you"

The course of events that follows is known to all. Yosef disappears from his father and reappears to him many years later as the viceroy of Egypt. Ostensibly, this is enough to verify the clues that followed from his dreams. During the period of his absence, however, Yehuda revealed himself to be the leader of the brothers with respect to his conduct concerning Binyamin, both in relation to his father and in relation to Yosef.⁵ It turns out that at the end of Yaakov's life, both Yosef and Yehuda remain candidates for the leadership. Indeed, in Yaakov's words to his sons in our *parasha*, they are the only ones concerning whom a reference to leadership is made, one that Yaakov connects to the story of Yosef, and its implications for the other brothers.⁶ Thus,

⁵ The first sign of his leadership was evident at the time of Yosef's sale, but there is no reason to assume that Yaakov ever knew about the sale of Yosef until the day he died. The brothers' appeal to Yosef after Yaakov died, according to which Yaakov asked Yosef to forgive his brothers, was a fabrication.

⁶ Yaakov's words to Dan also relate to his role in relation to the rest of his brothers: "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel" (49:16). But Dan did not stand out at all at the time of the sale of Yosef, and so it is not clear to what Yaakov is referring. The Rashbam makes the interesting suggestion that here too we are dealing with a public role,

he turns to Yehuda with words that dictate to his brothers how they will relate to him:

“Yehuda, **you your brothers shall praise**; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; **your father's sons shall bow down before you**. Yehuda is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you are gone up. He stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lioness; who shall rouse him up?” (48:8-9)

Similarly, in his words to Yosef, Yaakov notes his standing among his brothers and bestows upon him the blessings of his forefathers:

“Yosef is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain; its branches run over the wall. The archers have dealt bitterly with him, and shot at him, and hated him; but his bow abode firm, and the arms of his hands were made supple, by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, **from there, from the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel**. Even by the God of your father, who shall help you, and by the Almighty, who shall bless you, with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that couches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. **The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my progenitors to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills; they shall be on the head of Yosef, and on the crown of the head of the prince among his brothers.**” (49:22-26)

This joins the fact that Yaakov had given Yosef an extra share over his brothers:

“Moreover, I have given you one portion above your brothers, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow.” (48:22)

It turns out that Yaakov does not really decide the question of his chosen successor. He gives Yosef the blessings of his forefathers, which express certain aspects of primacy and preference, but at the same time, he confers upon Yehuda the authority to govern. It is clearly evident that Yaakov understands that none of the tribes will be rejected, as he includes them all in his "end of days" vision, but he still leaves the identity of the leader vague.

We will now attempt to clarify why Yaakov did not explicitly designate a single heir. In order to do so, we must go back to the review with which we began concerning the transfer of the mantle of leadership up until the days of Yaakov.

"I am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak"

In our review, we found that the selection of an heir was made by Yaakov's father, with Divine guidance present in the background. Yitzchak's selection was made by a Divine command, Avraham merely obeying it. Yitzchak was given a

which constitutes in essence "the flip side of the coin" with respect to leadership. The tribe of Dan was chosen to serve as the rearward of all the camps, and therefore was responsible to watch the back of the entire people marching before them. The leader marches in front and is responsible for directing the course of the journey, but Dan also bears responsibility for the success of the journey, as he covers the back of the people. In any case, we are not dealing with leadership at the fore of the stage, but precisely from behind. Even the language of the verse indicates that Dan is not the leader. The description of "Dan shall judge his people **as one of the tribes of Israel**" merely likens his conduct to another tribe, which is apparently the leader to whom Dan is likened.

Divine hint, in the form of Yaakov's successful deception in connection with the blessings, which directed him to the right choice. Then, upon his departure for Charan, the selection of Yaakov was given explicit Divine confirmation when God appeared to him in his father's lifetime:

And Yaakov went out from Beer-Sheva, and went toward Charan. And he lighted upon the place, and tarried there all night... And he dreamed... And, behold, the Lord stood beside him, and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak. The land whereon you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed. And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in you and in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go... for I will not leave you, until I have done that which I have spoken to you of." (28:10-15)

Yaakov expected such a move. History shows that candidates grow up side by side until a confrontation between them ensues. Through this confrontation, the picture becomes clarified, and a successor appears who will continue the family dynasty. Yaakov apparently wished to choose Yosef, his beloved son from his preferred wife,⁷ but the cards got all mixed up. The confrontation was indeed created, but it was precisely the future heir who disappeared in the course of it. When things settled down, the conflict between the brothers also became settled. Yaakov hopes for Divine confirmation of his selection of Yosef, but in the end not only did Yosef not receive a Divine revelation, but in the course of events, another candidate arose to succeed Yaakov – namely, Yehuda the leader of the brothers.

This absence of a revelation confirming or rejecting Yaakov's selection of an heir prevented him from reaching an absolute decision, and it also stirred up in him a much greater and more significant concern.

"A prophet will the Lord your God raise up to you, from the midst of you, of your brothers, like me"

Before Moshe left this world, he wanted to know the identity of his successor, and he was answered in the form of Yehoshua. But the Torah itself saw no need to inform him of the precise identity of his heir. On the other hand, Moshe clearly knew that the institution of prophecy would continue, since the Torah emphasizes this in the ears of the people through him:

When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that uses divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer... You shall be whole-hearted with the Lord your God. For these nations, that you are to dispossess, hearken to soothsayers, and to diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not suffered you so to do. **A prophet will the Lord your God raise up to you, from the midst of you, of your brothers, like me; to him you shall hearken.** (*Devarim* 18:9-15)

⁷ This is reflected in the fact that in the course of his words, Yaakov conceals the bestowal of the blessings of his forefathers upon Yosef, these blessings always having been the sign of selection. Since Yosef is no longer the only candidate, this is done in "low profile" and in a general manner.

Now we must understand Yaakov's thinking at the time. He expected a Divine signal to confirm his choice, but it did not come, so he did not reach an absolute decision. But it is possible that this was just "the tip of the iceberg." The last revelation he experienced was on the eve of his arrival in Egypt, and since then he experienced nothing. Fear creeps into his heart that the "lowering of the level" has become a steep slope. In the absence of any sign or revelation to him or to any of his descendants, God may not intend to reveal Himself again to his offspring. He revealed the grand plan for the history of the people in the *Brit Bein Ha-Betarim*, and now it is beginning to be realized as they live in a land that is not theirs. Who can guarantee to Yaakov that the direct connection between God and his children will continue as it had been until now with his forefathers and with him? After all, there is no clear successor, nor is there any Divine sign.

It is perhaps precisely because of this feeling that he decides to reveal to his sons what will happen in "the end of days" – so that they not sink into despair with the cessation of the direct connection between them and their God, and that they know with certainty that a vision of "the end of days" indeed awaits them in the Promised Land. In the *Brit Bein Ha-Betarim*, God revealed the happy ending to Avraham; Yaakov similarly wishes to do regarding the end of days.⁸

"I had not thought to see your face"

Further examination may deepen our proposal.⁹ Yaakov knew difficult periods in his life, and he himself defined the days of his life as "few and evil" (47:9). His beloved wife was taken from him, her beloved son was devoured, the tension among his other sons worsened, and Yehuda left the family home and was visited by disasters. There was a worldwide famine, and for some reason the Egyptian ruler persecuted his family when all they wanted was to survive. Suddenly, the fog was removed from the sequence of events; retroactively, they appeared in a different, more optimistic light. Standing before his sons shortly before his death, Yaakov cannot foresee the coming events, but he knows that it will not be an easy time for them, that it will entail bondage and suffering for an extended period. In order to avert possible crises of faith, he sees a need to strengthen them and promise that "a vision of the end of days" will indeed surely come!

(Translated by David Strauss)

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⁸ The commentators disagree as to the meaning of the "end of days" to which Yaakov is referring. Some propose that the reference is to the people of Israel's inheritance of the land after they leave Egypt. This raises a difficulty, as Yehuda did not enjoy any authority before David, in which case it is not clear at all to what Yaakov is referring.

⁹ This idea is derived from the words of R. Elchanan Samet, "*Parashat Vayechi – Efrayim U-Menasheh*," *Iyunim Be-Parashat Ha-Shavua*, 2nd series (2009), esp. pp. 226-227.