

In order to look forward, we must look backward. This paradox is a fact of life. As 2020 has made painfully clear, the unforeseen wiles of forest fires, storms, and pandemics can easily derail the best laid plans. None of us are prophets, and few of us are visionaries. But the past can teach us how to proceed through uncertainty into the future.

In this last parashah in the Book of Genesis, Jakob looks both backward and forward as he blesses his descendants. As *Israel* – literally, the God-Wrestler, he adopts, and then blesses his grandsons Menashe and Ephraim, deliberately choosing to bless the younger before the elder. A midrash tells us that this is because Menashe, born before Jakob came to Egypt, has been raised first as an Egyptian, while Ephraim has had the advantage of spending 17 formative years learning from his grandfather. Then, as *Jakob* – literally, heel/to trick, or be clever, he blesses his sons. He calls them using both names: “Gather and listen, *sons of Jakob*, and listen to *Israel*, your father.” Jakob is of this world and has experienced all its vicissitudes. As he tells Pharaoh in last week’s parashah, his years have been few and miserable. He has deceived and he has known deception. He is blessed with sons, and he is devastated by their actions. And at the end of his life, he is once more a fugitive, albeit this time because of famine, a circumstance beyond his control. In the fullness of both his wisdom and his pain, he blesses each of his 12 sons as befit their history and their attributes. As Jakob, he is brutally honest, as people at the end of their lives often are, looking back at their lives and how they impacted his own life; as Israel he envisions their future and the future of their tribes. The eldest three he deems unfit to lead, Reuben because he is too impulsive, Simeon and Levi because of their lethal anger. To Judah, whose mistakes have made him wiser, will go the kingship. Zebulun will become a prosperous seafaring trader, while Issachar (born before him – once again reversed order!) will remain on land, working for others. That is why in some circles Jewish philanthropists are called Zebuluns and scholars are called Issachars. Dan, the stealthy fighter, will judge all of his people. Some understand this play on words *dan yadin* as *Dan will avenge*, and indeed his descendant Samson, the last of the Judges and the only one to have been taken captive, leads a bitter, lonely life as a guerrilla fighter. After him, the Danites become idolatrous and the entire people descends into chaos. Israel’s parting words to Dan are visionary: “For Your salvation I hope, Adonai.” Gad’s descendants will choose to live on the other side of the Jordan but will help the tribes conquer the land. Asher (*Happy*) will prosper on fertile land that yields delicacies for kings. Swift Naftali will utter beautiful words (interpreted as words of thanks and praise for the fast-ripening fruits that grow on his land). To Joseph go Jakob’s most loving and effusive blessing, beginning with a review of his life that includes a reference to his extraordinary beauty, and culminating in the all the blessings he, Jakob, had received from his own parents. Benjamin will devour his plunder and then divide the rest. Indeed, this was the tribe that conquered Moab, Edom, and the Philistines, and from whom will come King Saul, and later Mordechai and Esther.

Through a series of events beyond his control, Joseph’s life has followed a different trajectory from that of his brothers. Separated from them as a teenager, he comes of age and prospers in a strange land, rising to unimagined heights. His brothers’ unexpected appearance moves him deeply, and he is visionary enough to try to guide them toward grappling with their past so they can move on to a better future. Nonetheless, after Jakob dies, they are mortally afraid Joseph will take revenge. As Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi 17 points out, they go so far as to put words in Jakob’s mouth: “And they sent a message to Joseph saying: Your father commanded us before his death saying, ‘So shall you say to Joseph: Please forgive ....’” (Gen. 50:15-16) How different are their reactions from those of Joseph! Jakob’s death evokes memories of what they did to Joseph and ultimately to their father. Haunted by their past, they are so paralyzed with fear that they are unable to understand where they are and where they are going. For Joseph, his father’s death and burial in Canaan bring forth memories of his father’s love and gratitude for the miracles that have brought him from the depths of despair to this exalted position. He firmly believes that their sojourn in Egypt, however long, will be temporary; when HaShem remembers the Israelites and brings them back to Canaan, they are to take his remains back home with them.

It is not ours to predict the future, but we do have the obligation to plan for it by drawing on our past to guide us through the present, even when unforeseen circumstances beyond our control upset our plans and force us to adjust. May 2021 bring healing to our world and may the stories of our patriarchs and matriarchs inspire us with the courage and wisdom to live in the present and move toward the future with confidence.

Shabbat shalom!