

When the head of a family dies, even the healthiest of families can be thrown into chaos despite all precautions taken to ensure peaceful transition. Past resentments and future aspirations can cloud judgement and lead to irreparable rupture, with tragic results that emanate far beyond the family. The rise and fall of great empires and dynasties offer abundant evidence of this endemic danger. The Book of Genesis, which ends with our parashah, is a textbook on human frailty and family dynamics. Our founding fathers and mothers are anything but perfect. Their actions are often ethically questionable at best and horrifically shocking at worst. They lie and cheat; they are driven by sibling rivalry, jealousy, and ambition; they engage in terrible violence, and they persist in egregious parental favoritism. In short, they exhibit all the human foibles, along with their ensuing consequences, that still plague us today. And that is why we can learn so much from their stories and from the wealth of midrashim that flesh them out and offer a huge variety of illuminating perspectives. The Torah's unambiguous dividing line between HaShem and earth precludes deifying the characters who populate our stories, which is precisely which makes them so accessible. Just like us, they are capable of rising to great human heights and plunging to the deepest depths of human depravity. Jakob has experienced it all, firsthand as well as vicariously through the actions of his sons, and his deathbed blessings reflect the tumultuous lives he and his family have led. It is truly amazing that all of Jakob's sons not only gather together around his bed, but that they quietly receive his parting words to each of them in turn, although some of these blessings are actually rebukes, especially to his firstborn Reuben, and next in line Simeon and Levi, the only sons he calls together. But Jakob is careful to separate actions from the person who committed them. He is also careful to highlight the individuality of each son with analogies and predictions that eloquently describe their unique attributes. Each son and the tribe he establishes is an integral part of the whole, contributing in its own distinctive fashion. "All these are the 12 tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them and blessed them; each man, according to his blessing, he blessed them." (49:28) One of the lessons we draw from this scene is a phenomenon that has pervaded these stories from the very beginning: birth order carries no implicit guarantee; merit is what is important. Hence, due to the poor choices made by his three older brothers, the kingship falls to Judah, the fourth born. Claiming preeminence by force is no longer necessary or permissible. The cycle of Cain's violence and Jakob's wiliness, which caused so much anguish, is broken by the peaceful ascendancy of Judah's son Perez and Joseph's son Ephraim. Jakob's blessings also teach that with very few exceptions, people are not entirely bad or good, and that out of the bad, good can follow. Thus, the priesthood will fall to the tribe of the impetuous Levi, whose murderous actions in Shechem Jakob cursed. Jakob's final lesson is to ensure that his family knows who they are and where they belong. "And he commanded them and said to them, 'I will be brought in to my people; bury me with my fathers ...'" (49:29-30) During their long sojourn in Egypt, they must remain true to their heritage if they are to fulfill HaShem's promise to their grandfather Abraham, something Joseph reiterates on his deathbed 17 years later. (50: 24-25). A paradigm shift is emerging, that strengthens the family bonds and renders them able to withstand the next paradigm shift, which brings oppression and slavery. But healing takes time, not only for those who have been wronged, but also for those who have committed the wrong. Joseph's magnanimity and Jakob's blessings and prophecies notwithstanding, Joseph's brothers are still plagued by fear of retribution now that their father is dead, a fear that prompts them to revert to the old family foible of bending the truth to avoid trouble. Midrash Tanchuma elaborates: "As they were returning from the burial of their father, they saw their brother go to the pit into which they had hurled him, in order to bless it. He blessed the pit with the benediction ... any man is required to pronounce at the place where a miracle had been performed in his behalf. When they beheld this, they cried out: 'Now that our father is dead, Joseph will hate us and will fully requite us for all the evil which we did to him.' And they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father commanded ... So shall you say to Joseph: forgive.' (50:15-16) We have searched the entire Scripture and are unable to find any place where Jakob uttered this remark. This statement is introduced to teach us the importance of peace. The Holy One, blessed be He, wrote these words in the Torah for the sake of peace alone." Joseph, moved to tears, assures them that not only it is not his to punish them, the entire ordeal has a positive outcome. It is noteworthy that there is no mention of forgiveness in this exchange. In families, peace is a precious commodity indeed. Like Joseph and his family, many people today bear the scars of resentment and trauma, often for generations, and sometimes forgiveness is not possible. Pursuing familial peace is a complex balancing act requiring multiple approaches and extreme sensitivity. We are not always successful, but the examples in the final chapters of the Genesis stories can give us valuable insight into relationships sustained by a love that encompasses and values the humanity of each member.

Shabbat shalom!