

## **Bless Us, Our Father, All of Us As One Parashat Vayechi, 5778**

I often ask people, “What are you doing when you pray?” People give me a number of very different answers, but often there is some commonality. Today, for example, we come together to share blessings with one another, to pray from our innermost souls, our *neshamot*, to gather in social and spiritual community, and to share something of ourselves with God. At its core, prayer should be an expression of our deepest thoughts, feelings and desires, a moment through which we are able to reach out to God using the words of blessing found both in the siddur and in our own hearts

One of my absolute favorite stories of prayer famously appears in Masechet Brachot of the Babylonian Talmud (Brachot 7a). This section of Talmud is devoted primarily to describing and explaining our own acts of worship, and so our Sages, who spend so much time talking about OUR prayers, ask the question, “What does God pray?” and the following story is their attempt to answer that question:

*Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest, said: Once, on Yom Kippur, I entered the innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies, to offer incense, and in a vision I saw Akatriel Ya, the Lord of Hosts (one of the names of God expressing His ultimate authority) seated upon a high and exalted throne (Isaiah, chapter 6).*

*And He said to me: "Yishmael, My son, bless Me." I said to Him the prayer that God prays:*

*"May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law."*

*The Holy One of Blessing nodded God's head and accepted the blessing. This event teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly. If God asked for and accepted a human being's blessing, all the more so that one person must value the blessing of another.*

And in this week's parasha, Parashat Vayechi, we are exposed to a great number of blessings. We read of the deaths of two incredible Biblical patriarchs, Jacob and Joseph, the former toward the opening of the parashah, and the latter at its close. But it is Jacob's deathbed scene that draws so much interest. It is dramatic and described in copious detail. He feels himself getting weaker and calls his children to him, but before they all gather, he calls for Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Menashe. Jacob, with the last of his strength, gathers them close and gives them a special blessing.

Except, that he doesn't. The text (Bereshit 48:15-16) reads:

*And he blessed Joseph, saying, "The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day— The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm— Bless the lads. In them may my name be recalled, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth."*

We read the JOSEPH is blessed by his father Jacob, only Jacob never mentions Joseph at all! Instead, he blesses Joseph's sons. How are we to understand this?! The Aish Kodesh, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto, explains this phenomenon saying that a blessing given to one's children is inherently a blessing for their parents, and uses the story from Brachot as an example. The blessing that Rabbi Ishmael gives to God is that all of God's children should receive mercy and compassion, a blessing which seemingly benefits God's children most directly. Therefore, Rabbi Shapira deduces, by the blessing the children, their Heavenly parent revels in their joy and is uplifted along with them.

The opposite, says the Aish Kodesh, is similarly true. When we are suffering or in pain, when we are afraid or upset, when we feel alone or we despair, God suffers along with us. Just think about that for a moment: the most brilliant rabbinic scholar living in the Warsaw ghetto in 1940 is giving a sermon for Parashat Vayechi, as things in the ghetto are getting worse, and the rights of Jews more restricted, and the future appearing bleak and terrifying, telling his people that God is in the ghetto suffering with them.

I find this image both heartbreaking and extremely compelling. What happens to me affects the entire universe. When I am exalted, the world rises up alongside me with joy and gladness, as if the happiness I feel flows into everyone and everything. And when I am hurting, the world around me shares that pain and suffers too.

Or at least, that is how it should be. We should not be able to rain on someone else's parade, but should rather feel, at least in small ways, that more joy in the world is certainly better for all of us. We should not be able to turn a blind eye to any suffering, and should instead feel the pain, even of those to whom we are not closely connected. More than this, what these texts and ideas ultimately point us toward is the realization that for any of us to succeed, all of us must succeed; for one of us to be secure and happy, all of us must be, for when any of us is suffering, we all suffer.

This is why, when concluding our Amidah as we just did a moment ago, we don't simply pray for peace in general, or peace for those of us who happen to be in the room today. Rather, we conclude these nineteen blessings with Sim Shalom, in which we petition God, "ברכינו אבינו כולנו כאחד", *God, bless us all as one,*" because in reality, all of us ARE one. We are each connected to one another in ways we often cannot even comprehend, but only dimly perceive. And so, our

actions in this world can affect one another just as subtly but also in incredibly meaningful ways.

The new secular year starts in just 2 days. I hope that it brings blessings to each of you and, in so doing, brings blessings to us all.

Shabbat Shalom.