



BEREISHIT

Vayechi

2017 Year-End Lessons from the End of Genesis

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YEAR-END LESSONS FROM THE END OF GENESIS

ABSTRACT

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Daily, we witness extraordinary scientific and technological breakthroughs, which radically improve the quality of virtually every area of our lives. And daily, we witness, as well, an unparalleled breakdown of personal and family life, crises in intimacy and relationships, people in the grip of despair and emptiness.

We have never been as connected and as disconnected all at once.

As we close out the year – which corresponds with the closing out of the Book of Genesis – it seems appropriate to look back a little, and perhaps identify trends that can help us understand where we are headed and what we can improve to get there.

Indeed, the story of Jacob in this concluding chapter parallels the paradox of our times and lives in exile. For seventeen years, Jacob also spent out of the Land of Israel – in Egypt, the most deprived place on earth!

Why could Jacob not have been blessed to live out his last and best years in the Land of Israel? What lessons can we derive from this today?

The answer to this question is contained in the answer to the greatest question of them all: Why are we here and where are we headed?

1. The Year 2017

They say that an optimist stays up until midnight to see the new year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves. And that probably makes most of us pessimists, eager to have year 2017 end.

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This human tendency of reviewing a period in time (a week in review, a year in retrospect) has of course nothing to do with something actually happening at the end of the respective time period. Nothing cosmic or less will occur as the clock strikes midnight on December 31, 2017. Yet, there is something to be said for taking stock of the past, with the objective being to chart a clearer course – and devise a more constructive strategy – for the future.

Accountability is a critical component in all growth. Like looking in the rear-view mirror to help us forge ahead, reviewing our past can be a powerful tool to help us move forward.

The major events, milestones and upheavals of this past year have been – and surely will continue to be – well documented in special supplements and programs in the wider media. Newspapers, magazines, TV and websites have comprehensively listed all the key developments of this year – in science, medicine, technology, politics, religion, business, economy, environment, psychology and global relations. No need, therefore, to reiterate what has already been thoroughly covered.

Instead, I would like to focus on some of the larger spiritual issues that have emerged. There is a unique advantage to hindsight – let's call it the bird's eye view – the vision that we can achieve only when we are able to step back, rise up and distinguish the forest from the trees.

2. Jacob's Blessings

And it is no coincidence that in this week's Torah reading, our patriarch Jacob does the same. As he prepares to transition, he looks over his life and that of his sons – the Twelve Tribes of Israel – and gives them his blessings for the future.

But one glaring fact jumps out at us: Jacob ended his life not in the Promised Land, but in Egypt, where he lived out his last seventeen years.

Like our times, Jacob's last seventeen years, were also paradoxical: On one hand these were his best years.¹ This was the only period in Jacob's life in which he had peace, living united together with all his family on the choicest parcel of land.² Yet, these best years were spent living in Egypt, the most depraved land on earth!³ Egypt is called *Mitzrayim* in Hebrew which connotes the constraints and boundaries of material existence.

Why could Jacob not have been blessed to live out his life and best years in the Land of Israel? How did this place of “constraint” and “depravity” – where the Jewish people would soon be enslaved and oppressed in horrible bondage – become the place where Jacob lives his *best* years?!

And what lessons can we derive from this today?

3. The Greatest Light

The answer to this question is contained in the answer to the greatest question of them all: Why are we here?

What is the purpose of our lives?

Instead of basking the spiritual warmth of the higher worlds, why are our pure souls subject to descend into a dark and hostile world, a place of deep constraints and depravity, having to face the hardships and hard labor of life, and fight many battles for survival?

The answer is captured poignantly in the following moving story heard from the distinguished Chassid, Rabbi Zalman Posner:

As a young man he was once summoned by the previous Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, who instructed him to travel to a certain city to teach Judaism. Sensing his hesitation, the Rebbe dramatically told him in Yiddish:

When a *nesbomo* (soul) has to come down to Earth, it doesn't want to go. Why? Because heaven is warm and comfortable, while life on Earth is cold and dark (*kalt un finzter*). What happens? In heaven the soul is ordered: “You must descend below.” And to demonstrate the point the Rebbe took his index finger and repeatedly pointed downward in a deliberate motion. “You must go down below into the dark and cold world, and *there* you must bring light (*machen dort lichtig*).”

Reb Zalman understood the message and embraced his mission to go to the designated city, which certainly was not as comfortable as staying home, with the objective of illuminating and warming the place with spir-

¹ The Baal HaTurim writes that seventeen is gematria (the numerical equivalent) of the word *tov* (good). In Hebrew each letter corresponds to a number, and the three letters that comprise the word *tov*, tes (9), vav (6), bet (2), add up to 17.

² Genesis 47:11.

³ See Genesis 42:9. Kohelet Rabba 1:4.

itual light.

“To this day I never forget,” Reb Zalman says, “the Rebbe’s finger pointing downward, ‘you must go down and illuminate the dark and cold world.’”...

This indeed is the purpose of all of our lives: Our souls were deliberately sent into this dark and cold world in order to illuminate our surroundings. We were given all the powers necessary to achieve our mission.

Furthermore, the greatest light is the one that is drawn out of darkness. In the spiritual realms we can never scale the heights that we can reach in our hard work of transforming darkness into light here on earth

But we do not travel alone. We are empowered by our ancestors who pioneered and paved the way for us. Like midgets on the shoulders of giants, we can reach the greatest heights with the cumulative strength of over 100 generations and millions of good deeds and sacrifices of our predecessors.

Beginning with our patriarchs, and especially with Jacob.

4. Jacob Our Father

Jacob descended to Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, and lived there his final best years in order to pave the way, demonstrate and give us the strength to bring out the greatest light in the darkest place.

Thus Jacob concluded the work of Abraham and Isaac in constructing the “building blocks” of existence. The three patriarchs represent the attributes of love (Abraham), of discipline (Isaac) and of compassion (Jacob). These are three primary pillars that define the vision of life – the vision of transforming existence into a home for the Divine, of integrating matter and spirit in order to take us all back to the way it was in the Garden of Eden, before the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil caused our expulsion.

Jacob and his sons – the Twelve Tribes – brought this vision into the material world of Egypt, with its constraints and boundaries of material existence. But the real work of refining Egypt we will begin to read about in next week’s Torah portion, as the tribes experience Egyptian bondage.

The descendants of Jacob will spend 210 years under very harsh conditions to refine and elevate the divine sparks embedded in the first great empire. And this work will in turn imbue the Jewish people, and ultimately the entire human race, with a sense of true freedom and transcendence ... with the strength to face any material challenge or adversary.

Indeed, this Shabbat is called *Shabbat Chazak* – literally, the Shabbat of Strength – because we are given special strength when we conclude a book in the Torah. [As we all just declared, upon the conclusion of today’s Torah reading: *Chazak Chazak v’Nischazek*, “Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!”]

We can glean much strength from Jacob's last seventeen years, and also from the rise to power of his son Joseph – all of which took place in the same depraved Egypt, reflecting yet again the paradox of reaching greatness in the lowest of places.

These are just some of the many lessons in the Torah that give us both guidance and strength in dealing with different aspects of our particular crises today.

5. The Balanced Life

One of the most compelling challenges haunting us today is balancing material success and power with morality and ethics. Case in point: the explosion of sexual harassment in the workplace, with women being taken advantage of by men in powerful positions.

Is decadence an inevitable result of affluence and wealth? Can we find a healthy equilibrium between prosperity and higher values?

In his scathing critique of capitalism, Marx brilliantly described how the capitalist system devalues the worker, reducing him to no more than a commodity, thus leading man to inevitable alienation and estrangement from his essential self:

Labor is external to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; that he, therefore, does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence, the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working, he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labor is, therefore, not voluntary but forced, it is forced labor. It is, therefore, not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself.

But while Marx correctly identified the problem, he came up with the wrong solution, as we retrospectively know today after the failure of the socialist and communist experiments. He highlighted the flaws of capitalism without ever really providing a viable alternative.⁴

6. The First Capitalist

Witness how differently the Torah approaches this problem. I am thinking in particular of Joseph – the first capitalist, if you will – and how he might have responded to Marx.

Joseph was faced with this very dilemma. His forefathers chose to be shepherds, thus avoiding confrontation

⁴ *Paris Manuscripts*, 1844.

with a corrupt marketplace, allowing them to discover their true essence while meditating among nature as the docile sheep grazed in the fields. Joseph, however, was thrust into Egypt, first becoming an accountant (yes, there you have the first Jewish accountant) in the house of Potiphar, and then becoming the viceroy of Egypt, running the entire grain business of the land.

When Joseph's brothers and then Jacob reunited with Joseph the first thing they recognized was that despite the formidable challenges he faced for twenty-two years in Egypt, he had not in any way compromised his profound spiritual connection. How did he do that?

Joseph never lost his connection to G-d.

As harsh as it was to accept that his brothers sold him into slavery, Joseph never became bitter and was never broken. He always knew that his arrival in Egypt and the work he did there was G-d's plan. As he told his brothers:

“There has been a famine in the area ... G-d sent me ahead of you to ensure that you survive in the land and to sustain you through great deliverance. It is not you who sent me here, but G-d. And it is He who has made me Pharaoh's viceroy, master of his entire government and ruler of all Egypt.”⁵

As immersed as Joseph was in the massive Egyptian grain industry, he did not experience alienation or estrangement, because his work was not something external outside of himself. He saw it for its true nature – it was all divine work, part of his divine essence and mission in this world to save lives and to ensure the survival of his family and ultimately the entire Jewish nation.

Arriving first in Egypt allowed Joseph to prepare the ground so his family could survive the great famine. It allowed the Jewish nation to be born – fulfilling G-d's promise and vision to Abraham.

Throughout all his work as head of state and ruler of Egypt, Joseph never let go of this vision. He always held on to G-d's promise, and thus he was eternally connected to the divine process, always recognizing the *deeper spiritual* meaning of his physical work as director of the grain industry – the biggest business of its time.

7. The Message to Us

The message and lesson to us today is clear – stay connected to G-d.

The greater our success, the more we will be challenged to remain humble and not see our achievements as a product solely of our “own making.” The Torah warns us of the trap of smugness and arrogance that can come with prosperity:

⁵ Genesis 45:1-11.

When you achieve success and prosperity be careful that you not to say to yourself, “It was my own strength and personal power that brought me all this prosperity.” You must remember that it is G-d who gives you the power to become prosperous. He does this so as to keep the covenant that He made with an oath to your fathers, even as [He is keeping it] today.⁶

Why is it a problem to feel self-made?

In addition to the fact that we shouldn’t delude ourselves and that we shouldn’t be ungracious in failing to acknowledge those that helped us achieve success, there is a deeper issue at stake. By denying our blessings and cutting G-d out of the picture, we end up creating a self-defeating prophesy. Attributing success solely to ourselves basically renders us vulnerable creatures, with no strength but our own. Once we refuse to recognize the “hand inside the glove,” even the “hand of G-d Himself” cannot do anything to show its strength.

In psychological terms:

A mortal creature needs nurturing and love. In this cruel world, every one of us must have an unwavering foundation that holds us up. Without it – our conscious and unconscious never develop the strength and confidence necessary to navigate life. Witness the profound effects that an under-nurtured (or abused) childhood has on a person’s self-esteem and inner security. Without the fortitude provided by a Higher Power, we are left to our own vulnerable schemes, alone with our existential fears, relying on our own, weak selves.

8. The Power of Faith

Faith in G-d is what allowed Joseph to ride through his challenges and to harness them to bring light to a dark world.

Joseph learned this from his father, Jacob, whose faith also allowed him to descend to Egypt and live his best years there. And this faith was passed on to Jacob’s children and grandchildren, in all generations to come, to this very day, in all of us gathered here today and everywhere around the world.

This Torah chapter – which describes one of the first paradigm shifts in history – guides and empowers us as we go through the transitions and paradoxes of our times, including the year 2017, which is now coming to an end.

If we perceive ourselves as travelling in a little boat down the fast-moving river of time, all we can see is the sky above us, the river banks on each side, and maybe the fish in the water. We no longer see our point of departure, and we cannot see our destination. If a storm comes all we can do is hold onto the rudder and hope we don’t sink. But if we see ourselves as a bird flying over the river, we can see everything.

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:17-18.

This is also an analogy for the body and soul – the body travels in the boat, the soul soars like the bird. If we relate only to the physical, only to our body, then we will feel trapped in time. We will feel blinded by events, and we will not see our way clear to a solution. In short, we will feel trapped. But if we find a way to relate to the bird in our soul, by connecting to our faith in G-d. we will have the ability to soar and traverse change, challenge and transition.

With that understanding, we can learn how to navigate an uncertain future, as we transition from one life-space into another, and we can stay the course and grow through the process.

9. The Role of Faith

We need faith, now more than ever.

Since the 18th century, many Western intellectuals have predicted the imminent demise of every faith and religion. But the majority of us still cling to it.

Because we know that faith connects us to the values we hold most dear and that it connects us to G-d.

And thus most of us have been able to withstand the withering attacks of the new illuminati – atheists all – like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens.

As former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, has pointed out,⁷ the irony is that many of the new atheists are followers of Charles Darwin. We are what we are, they say, because evolution has allowed us to survive and pass on our genes to the next generation. Our biological and cultural makeup constitutes our “adaptive fitness.”

Yet, despite that, faith is the greatest survivor of them all. The question is why.

Writes Rabbi Sacks:

Darwin himself suggested what is almost certainly the correct answer. He was puzzled by a phenomenon that seemed to contradict his most basic thesis, that natural selection should favor the ruthless. Altruists, who risk their lives for others, should therefore usually die before passing on their genes to the next generation. Yet all societies value altruism, and something similar can be found among social animals, from chimpanzees to dolphins to leafcutter ants.

Neuroscientists have shown how this works. We have mirror neurons that lead us to feel pain when we see others suffering. We are hard-wired for empathy. We are moral animals.

How does this work exactly?

Well, it seems that we hand down our genes as individuals but we survive as members of groups, and groups can exist only when individuals act not solely for their own advantage but for the sake of the group as a whole. The

⁷ See “The Moral Animal” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2012.

result is that we have two patterns of reaction in the brain, one focusing on potential danger to us as individuals, the other taking a more considered view of the consequences of our actions for us and others. The first is immediate, instinctive and emotional. The second is rational.

The immediate response – the fast track, so to speak – helps us to survive, but it can also lead us to acts that are impulsive and destructive. The slow track leads us to more considered behavior, but it is often overridden in the heat of the moment.

In the words of Rabbi Sacks:

We are sinners and saints, egotists and altruists, exactly as the prophets and philosophers have long maintained.

And now we can better understand how faith – how our connection to G-d – has not only helped us survive, but thrive. And how it has in the past – as it surely will in the future – help us save our national and individual soul.

The research of political scientist Robert D. Putnam – author of *American Grace* – has shown people who have a connection to G-d are more likely to give money to charity, do volunteer work, help the homeless, donate blood, help a neighbor with housework, spend time with someone who was feeling depressed, offer a seat to a stranger or help someone find a job. And this is a better predictor of altruism than education, age, income, gender or race.

Faith – and the goodness it brings with it – is the single best antidote to the uncertainty and alienation of the consumer age. And this is why we can never lose our faith and our connection to G-d.

It is also the ultimate way of riding through the transitions and paradoxes of our times. And not just surviving, but thriving. As the Torah tells us about the oppression in Egypt – the more the Jewish people were oppressed, the more they proliferated and spread.⁸

As 2017 draws to a close, let us look to the story of Jacob and Joseph as Genesis comes to a close, and learn from the need to renew our commitment to our faith and our religious ideals and traditions – to loving our neighbor, to caring about the stranger, to being moral people. We can only sustain such a commitment with a regular program of Torah study, and so let us resolve to never abandon its ideals. Through the Torah we remain connected to G-d and that – as history has shown – is the best port of refuge in any situation.

Our souls – yours and mine – were indeed sent into a dark and cold world. But they were sent armed with unbelievable powers and resources. We can not only overcome any challenge, but achieve excellence in the process. What better way to enter a New Year? Amen.

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⁸ Exodus 1:12.