

Haftarot Unrolled: VaYechi

Unfinished Business

וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת

The time of Yisrael's death drew near... (Breishit 47:29)

Parshat VaYechi describes the last will and testament of Yaakov to his sons. He blesses each of them, according to their specific talents and the future that he foresees for them.

וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי דָוִד לָמוּת

The time of David's death drew near... (Melachim I 2:1)

The Haftarah of VaYechi describes the last will and testament of King David to his son, the newly crowned King Shlomo. David does not bless Shlomo; instead, he asks Shlomo to dispense justice to people whom he had been unable to punish in his lifetime.

It appears that Yaakov leaves his sons with closure while David leaves Shlomo with all his unfinished business. However, the comparison of the two bequests show us that what both fathers had in common at their death, that they each bequeathed to their children, was the gift of perspective.

The first, and most difficult realization that David shares with Shlomo is his realization that Yoav had been guilty of murder. Yoav was David's kinsman and his closest companion throughout his life; he was also the general of the armies of Israel and David's right hand man. Years ago, soon after Shaul's death but before David was crowned as the king of Israel, Shaul's former general Avner had come to make a treaty with David. Yoav asked to speak with him in private, and stabbed him in the gut. Yoav defended his action by saying that he was protecting David and the nascent kingdom, that he was sure that Avner would betray David. At the time, David believed him, and disciplined him only for making it look like David assassinates his enemies, but he did not judge it as a murder.

More recently, however, after the civil war started by Avshalom, in a gesture to reunite the nation, David had offered Avshalom's general, Amasa, to serve as his own general, displacing Yoav. When Yoav heard this, he met up with Amasa, and under the guise of greeting him, stabbed him in the gut.

At that time, David was too vulnerable politically and militarily to lose Yoav. He was also still grieving for his son Avshalom, who had been killed in the civil war; the thought of losing Yoav must have been intolerable. He was not in a position to execute him, or even to judge him with a clear mind.

But now, "the time of David's death drew near, " and he sees clearly that Yoav must pay for his crimes. David is also worried about his son's future as the King of Israel. He now believes that Yoav's loyalty to the crown takes second place to his own agenda, and he cannot leave

Shlomo with a wild card in his cabinet. His goal is to bequeath to Shlomo a strong uncontested monarchy, and that means that he has to tell him to beware of Yoav.

Yaakov, too, uses the time of saying goodbye to his sons to take care of unfinished business. Some of the blessings that he gives his children bring up issues that had long been buried:

רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אֶתָּה כָּחִי וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי יִתֵּר שְׂאֵת וְיִתֵּר עָו : פָּחוּ כַמִּים אֶל תוֹתֵר כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבִי
אֶבִּיד אֶז חִלְלָתָ יְצוּעֵי עֲלָה :
Reuven, you are my first-born, my strength, and the first of my might. Ahead in dignity, ahead in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have extra. For you went up on your father's bed, thus you profaned, having gone up on my couch. (Breishit 49:3,4)

In his blessing to Reuven, Yaakov accuses him of having "gone up on his father's bed". This is a reference to a story that happened back in VaYishlach:

וַיְהִי בְשָׁכֵן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הַחֹמָה וַיִּלְךְ רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה פִּלְגֶּשֶׁת אֲבִיו וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל פ
וַיְהִי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר :
When Yisrael was living in that land, Reuven went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine. Yisrael heard..... The sons of Yaakov were twelve.
(Breishit 35:22)

Soon after Rachel's death, Reuven is recorded as sleeping with Rachel's maid, his father's concubine. The verse says that Yaakov heard, but does not record any reaction. It then points out that Yaakov had twelve sons. The implication is that Yaakov did nothing. He did not punish Reuven and he certainly did not exile him from the family. Perhaps, as the verse implies, he did not even say anything to Reuven.

But now, "the time of Yisrael's death drew near...", and Yaakov is ready to have this conversation. The Midrash explains why Yaakov had waited until right before his death.

מִפְּנֵי אַרְבַּעָה דְּבָרִים אֵין מוֹכִיחִין אֶת הָאָדָם אֶלָּא סְמוּךְ לְמִיתָתָהּ, כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה מוֹכִיחוֹ וְחוֹזֵר
וְמוֹכִיחוֹ וְשֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה חֲבֵרוֹ רוֹאֶהוּ וּמִתְבַּיֵּשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ, וְשֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה בִּלְבוֹ עָלָיו, וְשֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה הַמוֹכִיחִין
מִתּוֹכָחִין, שֶׁהַתּוֹכַחָה מְבִיאָה לִידֵי שְׁלוֹם, ... וְכֵן אֶתָּה מוֹצֵא בִיעָקֵב וִיקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן
אוֹמֵר לָךְ מִפְּנֵי מָה לֹא הוֹכַחְתִּיךָ כָּל הַשָּׁנִים הַלָּלוּ כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא תִנְחָנִי וְתִדְבֹק בַּעֲשׂוֹ אַחִי
There are four reasons why one doesn't rebuke a person until one is near death: so that he will not repeat his rebuke again and again; so that his friend will not be ashamed when he sees him; so that he will not carry a grudge against him; and so that the rebuke does not degenerate into an argument, as the rebuke is meant to bring peace... So we see with Yaakov, Yaakov called his sons, and said, Reuven, do you know why I did not rebuke you all these years? So that you wouldn't leave me and go to my brother, Esav. (Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Yehoshua 34)

The reason that Yaakov did not react immediately when Reuven sinned was that he was afraid of alienating him. Reuven knew that he had done wrong, he did not need his father to explain that to him or to prevent him from doing it again. But if Yaakov were to have words with Reuven then, he would have been so ashamed that he could not look him in the eye. Eventually, Reuven might have found it easier to just leave the family. Perhaps he would

even have started seeing himself as a sinner, and feel more comfortable with Esav, who had lower expectations, at least in this area of morality.

But now that Yaakov is about to die, he is not afraid of his son being ashamed to look him in the eye, or of leaving the family. Enough time has passed to give them all some perspective. Yaakov can now tell him that his actions did not go unnoticed, and that they have consequences, and that those consequences are in proportion to the ultimate effect of the deed. Reuven may have made a mistake, but it did not turn him into a sinner. He may not get the double portion of the first-born nor the leadership of the nation, but neither is he excluded from the Jewish People.

Yaakov's words to Shimon and Levi are much harsher:

שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֲחִים כָּלִי חֲמַס מִכְרֵתֵיהֶם : בְּסֹדֶם אֶל תִּבְא נַפְשִׁי בִקְהָלָם אֶל תַּחַד כְּבִדִּי כִי בְּאָפָם
הָרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרָצָנָם עָקְרוּ שׁוֹר : אֲרוּר אָפָם כִּי עָזוּ וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשְׁתָה אַחֲלָקָם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאֶפְצִים
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל :

Shimon and Levi are brothers; instruments of crime are their swords. Let my soul not enter their conspiracies, let my honor not be included in their gang. For in their anger, they killed a man, by their will, they uprooted an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; their fury, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Yaakov, scatter them in Yisrael. (Breishit 49:5-7)

In this "blessing", Yaakov denounces Shimon and Levi's actions in Shechem. When they went to rescue Dina, who had been abducted and raped, they did not limit themselves to getting her out, not even to killing only those who had actually hurt her. They went and killed all the men in the entire town. At the time, Yaakov did protest, but he accepted their reason that they were protecting the honor of their sister and of the family.

Also in this "blessing", Yaakov makes veiled references to their role in the sale of Yosef ("the ox" is the symbol of Yosef). Perhaps it is only now, after years in Egypt, that Yaakov puts together what may have happened to Yosef, and that it was not a coincidence that the first thing that Yosef did when he saw his brothers again was to separate Shimon from Levi. Now that the nature of their character is clear to Yaakov, he distances himself from their potential for fierce, destructive, anger. They must not be allowed to gang up, or they would destroy the entire nation.

Both Yaakov and David were able to see things in a sharper perspective near their death; they could tell what the long-term ramifications had been, and they could see what the future would need. Ultimately, taking care of their unfinished business brought closure, as well as blessing, to the sons of Yaakov and to the son of David.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל