

**D'var Torah By:** Paul J. Kipnes

## **Focal Point**

When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he asked, "Who are these?" And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." He [Jacob] said, "Bring them to me, pray, that I may bless them." Now Israel's eyes had grown clouded with age; he could no longer see. Joseph brought them over to him, whereupon he kissed and hugged them. (Genesis 48:8-10)

## ***D'var Torah***

Think how much of life we miss when we cannot really see! Though our eyes may function quite well, our hearts and minds may impede their ability to find blessing in what is before them. This is precisely what happens to our patriarch Jacob.

This week's *parashah*, *Va-y'chi*, completes the cycle of sightlessness that plagues Jacob throughout his life. As he approaches death, Jacob comes to see clearly the blessings that have been bestowed upon him. *Va-y'chi* forces us to consider: What does it mean to see? When we look with our eyes at another person, do we see the person as he or she really is? Or do we merely observe a reflection of our own emotional connections or disconnect with that person?

In this *parashah*, our patriarch Jacob finally discovers that the secret to seeing others as they are can be found in his own heart and soul. When Jacob learns how to let go of his own pain and accept others for whom they truly are, he gains a deeper connection with his grandchildren and begins to perceive them as individuals.

Such a discovery is not innate for our patriarch Jacob. He is surrounded by people who lack the ability to see clearly. For example, consider this passage about Isaac:

When Isaac had grown old and his eyesight had dimmed, he called his elder son Esau, saying to him, "My son!" "Here I am," he answered. (Genesis 27:1)

We are taught that the eyesight of Jacob's father Isaac had dimmed. Isaac fails to recognize the destructive sibling rivalry raging between his twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Birthrights are traded away; blessings are stolen. Few commentators interpret this "dimmed" eyesight literally to mean that Isaac had less than twenty-twenty vision. Rather, the prevailing opinion is that Isaac, having survived the emotional horror of witnessing his father Abraham's attempt to kill him on the mountaintop, loses the ability to see-to understand-the complex nature of human interactions. From Isaac we learn that when the mind and heart are hijacked by emotional turmoil, the eyes cannot see the world or other people as they truly are. Consider this passage about Leah:

Now Laban had two daughters; the elder was named Leah, and the younger was named Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and of face. (Genesis 29:16-17)

We are taught that Jacob's wife Leah has eyes that are weak. URJ's "Family Shabbat Table Talk" on *Vayeitzei*(5765) offers a variety of explanations for the term "weak," as follows:

Netziv claims that *rakot* [weak eyes] means that Leah's eyes were sensitive and that she was unable to shepherd flocks due to the pain the sun caused her eyes. Rashi explains that because the circumstances of her marriage (Jacob's true love for Rachel and Laban's trickery) were painful to her, Leah was easily moved to tears.  
([www.urj.org/shabbat/genesis](http://www.urj.org/shabbat/genesis))

Moreover, as Ellen Frankel teaches us in *The Five Books of Miriam*, the focus on Leah's weak eyes may say more about Jacob's character than it does about Leah's:

Since Jacob's deception of his brother takes advantage of Isaac's blindness, his punishment fittingly revolves around eyes. Leah adds: . . . "Although Jacob preferred beautiful Rachel and worked seven years to win her, it was me he married first-or rather my eyes, which were the only part of me he saw over my veil. In fact, it was his eyes that proved weak, so that he, like his father Isaac, chose the wrong sibling."  
(Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996], p. 51)

Because Leah's face is covered with a veil at her wedding, we imagine that the only parts of her that Jacob can see are her eyes. Although eyes are the window into the soul, Jacob's could look neither inward into his own heart nor outward to differentiate between the eyes (and soul) of his beloved Rachel and of his first wife Leah. From the marriage of Jacob and Leah we learn that when the heart is heavy, the eyes cannot see clearly.

In this *parashah* we are taught that Jacob's eyes, too, were *kavdu mizoken*, "clouded" or "heavy with age" (Genesis 48:10). Having endured the turmoil of his life-fleeing from his dysfunctional family, running from his enraged brother, being tricked initially out of marrying his beloved Rachel, failing to see the turmoil raging amongst his sons, enduring the apparent death of his beloved son Joseph-Jacob lacks more than twenty-twenty eyesight. Throughout his life, he is unable to open up his heart enough to see the beauty before his eyes.

That is, he is unable to do so until this week's *parashah*-until he finally realizes at the end of his life that he must transcend his suffering and embrace those he wants to love with fullness and openness. So he wraps his arms around his grandchildren Manasseh and Ephraim, and calls them his own. He offers them blessings because he recognizes-he finally sees-that *they* are his part of *his* blessing. Soon thereafter, he blesses all of his children, offering them wisdom based on his new "insight" (the "sight" he finds "inside" himself).

How sad it is that Jacob has to wait until the end of his days to see the blessings and beauty that surround him! To help us move from such blindness, our Jewish holy days encourage us to see what really is and what really can be. We learn from Chanukah that in the midst of darkness we can increase the brightness in our lives and in our world, allowing us to see more clearly. We learn from Pesach that in the midst of hopelessness we can envision a better tomorrow and move forward into a brighter future. And we learn from Yom Kippur that when we step back from those sensations that confuse or control us, we can gain insight ("sight inside" ourselves) to glimpse the truth that resides within.

Will you learn to see life as it truly is? Will you find a way to envision the blessings that are and can be yours? May you-differently from Jacob-find that insight earlier-now-so that you can still

enjoy the blessings that surround you.

## By the Way

[Rabbi Kipnes writes: If you were to take a look at this Torah portion in the Torah or in a *tikkun*, you might notice that it differs from other *parashiyot* in that the beginning of other portions is generally delineated by a new paragraph or at least an indentation in the text of the handwritten Torah scroll, but this portion is *satum*, "closed." The commentator Rashi quotes the midrash, which seeks to explain this idiosyncrasy:]

Why is this portion *satum* ["closed"]? The death of Jacob caused a closing of the eyes and hearts of Israel, due to the troubles of the oppression which began (at this time). Alternatively: (Jacob) wished to reveal the end of days to his children, but it was closed to him. (Rashi 47:28, based on *B'reishit Rabbah* 96:1)

## Your Guide

1. Notice how Rashi makes a connection between eyes, hearts, and oppression. How does pain and suffering affect the way we see each other and face the world?
2. Although the *d'var Torah* above suggests that Jacob finally opens up his heart and eyes to see and perceive the blessings around him, Rashi's comments suggest that something still remains closed up within Jacob. What might that be?
3. Jacob's death at the end of Genesis represents the end of an era, both literally and ideologically. With his demise, the patriarchal age comes to a close and a new generation will begin. Rashi's comments establish this Torah portion as not only the close of a book, but a closed book. If our lives are forever changing, can any experience every truly be closed off from us? Why or why not?

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1/14/2006

**Topics:** Blessing

Family

Generation

Death

Reconciliation

**Reference Materials:**

*Va-y'chi*, Genesis 47:28–50:26

*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, pp. 302–316; Revised Edition, pp. 304–322;

*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, pp. 281–304

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