

## JACOB'S DEATH-BED FAREWELL TO HIS SONS: ACCORDING TO THE RABBIS

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There is no more striking and intrinsically beautiful illustration of the rabbinic form of exegesis known as midrash than the rabbis' elaboration of the biblical scene of the children of Israel gathered around their dying father to receive his "blessings." As we read their comments, two characteristics typical of their method will readily become apparent:

1. Their point of departure is an anomaly in the biblical text which invites speculation.

2. The rabbis impute to the biblical figures the thinking and sensitivities of their own times, a policy which may be called "deliberate anachronism."

The peculiarity in our text which draws the rabbis' attention is the seeming repetition of Jacob's call to his children to gather round:

*And Jacob called to his sons and said: 'Gather yourselves together that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days [aharit hayamim]'* (Gen. 49:1).

*'Assemble yourselves and hear you sons of Jacob and hearken to Israel your father'* (49:2).

First, why the need for the second verse, which does not seem to add anything? Second, in the first verse there is mention of a particular subject that Jacob wishes to discuss with his sons: '*. . . that which will befall you in the end of days.*' Why is this not alluded to in the second verse nor mentioned in the blessings that follow?

The rabbis took this as a mandate to view each of these verses not merely as a poetic introduction to what follows but as containing allusions to something substantive. Perhaps in the interval between these two verses something changed, something significant happened, while the second verse, with its stress on "sons" and "father" suggests that some sort of exchange took place that was expressive of that relationship. Here is the comment of the

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rabbis on the first verse, as cited by Rashi: "Jacob sought to reveal the end [*ketz*] but the Divine Presence withdrew from him and he began to say other words."

They interpreted the phrase *aharit hayamim* [end of days] in Verse 1 in accordance with the meaning these words had assumed in the books of the later prophets and in talmudic literature; i.e., the *end* of the exile in an eschatological sense, the redemption to be brought about by God.<sup>1</sup> In this view, Jacob, who was surely aware of the Divine revelation to Abraham concerning a long servitude in an alien land, sensed what was ahead for his children in Egypt and wished to alleviate some of their burden by disclosing prophetically when it would all end. Thus, Jacob's original intention in calling together his sons was not what ultimately eventuates – a blend of blessings and chastisements – but, as he explicitly states, to disclose what will happen in the end.<sup>2</sup> The rabbis, who were quite familiar with the bitter taste of an open-ended exile without any idea of when it would end, could not conceive of a loving father like Jacob, who surely possessed prophetic vision, not wishing to provide his children with the knowledge of the time of their redemption.

However, the fact that there is no further mention of this in the second call, nor anything in the "blessings" that connect with disclosure of the "end," leads us to believe that something intervened. The Almighty did not approve, so Jacob was suddenly deprived of his prophetic vision. Therefore, he had to change his agenda and begin to speak of other things.

How are we to understand God's disapproval? Here the rabbis projected their own ambivalence on the question of the advisability of knowing what is to come, of pulling aside the curtain that hides the future. This is one of the most persistent urges in the human psyche, to dispel anxiety about the uncertainty that lies ahead. Particularly, the religious consciousness believes that an all-knowing and compassionate God would share His omniscience with His prophets: *For the Lord God will do nothing but that He reveals His counsel to His servants the prophets* (Amos 3:7). But, while God revealed to His people the length of the first Babylonian Exile, He did not do so concerning the second.<sup>3</sup> Israel longs to know the end of the Exile and the time of the coming redemption but, alas: *We see not our signs; there is no more any prophet; neither is there among us any that knows how long* (Ps. 74:9).

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Perhaps it is best not to know the future. For, if the *ketz* is too far off, we will despair and lose hope. If the *ketz* appears to be soon, perhaps we will cease trying to help ourselves and leave it all to God! Moreover, perhaps, there is no such thing as a *ketz* in the sense of a pre-determined end-time for the redemption which necessarily and inevitably must come. Perhaps the question of the *time* of the redemption is open-ended, depending upon human development.

Dimly grasping what happened, Jacob changes the subject and *begins to say other words*, which the rabbis saw reflected in Genesis 49:2:

At the time Jacob, our father, was departing from this world, he called to his twelve sons and said to them: "Hearken to Israel your father, is there perhaps in your hearts any division regarding the Holy One, blessed be He?" They said to him: "Hear O Israel, our father, just as there is no division in your heart so there is none in ours, but rather (Hear O Israel) the Lord (is) our God, the Lord is One" [Deut. 6:14]. Hearing this, Jacob exclaimed: "Blessed be His Name whose glorious Kingdom is for ever and ever."<sup>4</sup>

A primary concern of every Jewish father, particularly as he nears the end of his life, is the question: "Have I been successful in transmitting the tradition to my children?" How much more must this have agitated Jacob, knowing that the entire future of the people of Israel depended upon this question. Would his children's faith and commitment to the Covenant of Abraham be strong enough to withstand the allure of Egyptian civilization in the short term and the suffering and humiliation of the servitude in the long run? Jacob's blunt and probing question was meant not only to test the faith of each son individually, but also to ascertain whether in matters pertaining to God and the public interest they could act in unity. Could the Leah-children cooperate with the Rachel-children and both with the children of the handmaidens? Could tribal rivalries be overcome to forge a national consensus?

The formulation of the single response of the 12 sons demonstrated an understanding, at least for now, that the One God can best be served by a people united: "Thou are One and Thy Name is One who is like unto Thy people Israel, a nation united on its land" (Sabbath Mincha Amidah prayer). A grateful and exalted Jacob responds with a unique blessing: "Blessed be the Name of the glory of His Kingdom for ever and ever," which was considered so

very special that it was recited in the Temple only on Yom Kippur and subsequently in the synagogue after the *Shema* by the congregation *in a whisper*.<sup>5</sup>

The special nature of the blessing lies in the words: *k'vod malchuto* [the glory of His kingdom]. God's kingdom is manifest only when the living body of the people Israel actively affirms the rule and majesty of God. At that historic moment, the living body of the children of Israel consisted of the 12 sons of Jacob. Hearing their spontaneous, united affirmation of the reality of God's Oneness, Jacob pronounced the blessing: he had truly seen the glory of God's kingdom!

But perhaps Jacob has not changed the subject at all. He still wishes to talk about the redemption but decides to approach it differently. The question of the unity of the children of Israel and how they feel in their hearts about God, interests Jacob not merely because he is their father. The point he is making is this: It is precisely the relationship between each Israelite and his fellow, and his relationship to God, that is the key to Israel's redemption. Only a people united in their love and respect for each other and their God can testify to the reality of the One God, for only "in that day shall the Lord be One and His Name One."<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 49:39; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1; Daniel 10:14.
2. There is no easy answer to the question of the purpose and meaning of Jacob's last words to his sons. An objective analysis of the content reveals the following elements: Some receive blessing. Others are reproved for their reprehensible conduct. Some receive intimations of events to occur in the future. Others are told of the portion they will receive in the Promised Land. Ab- arbanel suggests that Jacob's entire presentation was designed to show why the tribe of Judah alone was qualified to produce the family that would rule Israel for centuries.
3. See Jeremiah 29:10.
4. Genesis Rabah 98:4. Note the ingenuity with which the rabbis, as it were, conjured up this dramatic historic setting for the "origin" of these two major doxologies of Judaism, so central to Jewish liturgy: "Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One," and "Blessed be the glorious name of His kingdom for ever and ever."
5. See the explanation in Pesachim 56a as to why this is so.
6. See the comments of Rashi on Deuteronomy 6:4.