

PARASHAH: Vayechi (He lived)
ADDRESS: B'resheet (Genesis) 47:28-50:26
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher bachar banu m'kol ha-amim,
v'natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This week, we conclude our study of the book of B'resheet (Genesis) with **Parashat Vayechi**, he (Ya'akov/Jacob) lived. Actually, we will read about the death of Ya'akov in this parashah; likewise, our study on Yosef will draw to a close with his death at the end of B'resheet. During this study about the most famous son of Ya'akov, I have attempted to show how the Torah masterfully used his life to portray the life of our Messiah, Yeshua. In no way did I intend to minimize the significance of Yeshua's divinity by using Yosef as a type and shadow. In fact, what I have done has been done elsewhere, using many other Scriptural characters, including a man of whom we shall quickly become familiar with in our next parashah, by the name of Moshe.

I believe that the Torah was written so that we might attain to the goal that HaShem has set forth for us, namely the righteousness that is found when we place our trusting faithfulness in his Son Yeshua. Remember that according to a proper translation of Romans 10:4, the goal that the Torah is aiming at is (our knowledge of and placing our trust in) the Messiah! Moreover, in defining what "sin" is, in the Hebrew word, its fullest definition is conveyed as "missing the mark." So as we study the pages of God's Torah, let's not lose sight of the fact that we are to be conformed into the image of his Son (Romans 8:28-29), which is the "righteousness of HaShem!"

The Choices We Make

The aging Isra'el (Ya'akov) is nearing his death and rightly calls for his grandsons Efrayim and M'nasheh, in order to bless them. It is significant for us to realize

that this formula, employed by Isra'el's father Yitz'chak, was the method by which ADONAI would prophetically identify the destinies of the offspring of Avraham. In other words, the men were operating under the divine influence of the Ruach (Spirit) when they spoke these verbal blessing onto their children. And to be sure, as we learned in the case of Isra'el and his brother 'Esav, the verbal blessing was a coveted thing to receive.

Keeping true to the pattern that HaShem had been displaying, the younger of the two brothers (Efrayim) received the preeminent blessing instead of his older brother. This is the third time that this has happened, the first being Yishma'el and Yitz'chak, and the second being Ya'akov's and his brother 'Esav. Why does HaShem seem to confuse the issue by circumventing the older brother? I believe that HaShem wants us to realize, as is taught elsewhere in his Torah, that he can and often does use the "weak" things of this world to confuse "that which is wise." In other words, we normally expect the older to be wiser and more suited to become the chosen one, yet HaShem chooses the younger ones to demonstrate his mighty power, displayed through their own weakness and (seeming) less importance. This is also the case with the future king of Isra'el, Dah-vid. In fact it is even more to the point with Dah-vid, for he was not the second oldest, but the youngest of all of his brothers!

So Isra'el blesses Efrayim above his brother M'nasheh, but he does include both of them in his immediate inheritance. This can be observed in his wording to Yosef in verses 5, 6. So we learn from these verses why Efrayim and M'nasheh from this moment on are counted with the other twelve tribes. In fact, they are considered as half-tribes. Isra'el also institutes a well-known formula, used to this very day whenever fathers bless their sons. In 48:20, he predicts that future Isra'el the Nation will bless their sons, asking HaShem to make them like these two boys, in blessing and good favor. Anyone who has attended a conventional synagogue these days knows that this is the blessing spoken specifically for this occasion.

Isra'el's sons (here in chapter 49) are the recipients of blessings that directly involve their individual actions, but also incorporates their future inheritance and characteristics as tribes. In essence, HaShem, through Isra'el, blesses them according to what they have done, but simultaneously, grants them grace for what they could not achieve on their own. Comparing the above-mentioned blessing of Y'udah with, per se, Shim' on and Levi, we can see this. In the case of the latter, their blessings (or lack thereof) directly point to their prior actions taken during the incident with Dinah their sister, taught in B'resheet chapter 34. In this story, they took matters into their own hands, much to the shame of their father Isra'el (34:30, 31). Yet in the case of the former, nothing is mentioned of his shameful actions in B'resheet chapter 38. Still, HaShem sees fit to bless him abundantly, by promising to send forth the promised ruler from his loins. Amazingly enough, this promise of "Shiloh," a title/name which has no corresponding Hebrew roots or stems relating to it, has been almost universally

accepted by rabbis and Christian scholars alike, as referring to the coming Messiah! Observe the opinions of early Judaism as preserved for us in their writings (a few quotes for our study):

“Kings and rulers shall not cease from the house of Judah...until King Messiah comes.”¹

UNTIL SHILOH COMETH; this alludes to the royal Messiah. AND UNTO HIM SHALL THE OBEDIENCE (YIKHATH) OF THE PEOPLE BE: he [the Messiah] will come and set on edge (makheth) the teeth of the nations of the world.²

In the Babylonian Talmud Rabbi Johanan said:

“The world was created for the sake of the Messiah, what is this Messiah’s name? The school of Rabbi Shila said ‘his name is Shiloh, for it is written; until Shiloh come.’”³

Judah receives much favor despite his shameful actions. We see that the Torah remains consistent when, several centuries later, a prominent Jewish Pharisee named Sha’ul (Apostle Paul) would go on to explain that HaShem will have mercy on whomever he wills to have mercy on, and compassion on whomever he chooses to have compassion on (read Romans 9:13-16).

Obedience and disobedience... the Torah is full of blessings and curses based on our dynamic interaction with the God of Ya’akov. I wish to take time while we are still early into the Torah to deal early on with the Scriptural topics of ‘**covenant**’ and ‘**commandment**’ (this will pave the way to better understand our upcoming studies of the Torah in Sefer Sh’mot [Book of Exodus] as a national constitution for the Nation of Isra’el).

Covenant and Commandment

In Hebraic thinking the term “covenant” is synonymous with the term “commandment.” I am of the understanding that in the Bible these terms and concepts are interwoven in such a way as to render them inseparable. But can my postulation be substantiated Scripturally?

In ancient suzerain treaties, if the situation changed for one party, a covenant could be amended (or renewed) to adapt to the new circumstance. But only what no longer fit would be revised; everything else remained in effect exactly as before. When looking at the Mosaic Covenant, was there something “wrong”

¹ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*

² *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis XCVIII. 8*

³ *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b*

between the parties of the existing or previous covenants that necessitated a renewal on God's part? Let's read the passage for the answer:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.” (Jer. 31:31-32, RSV)

Scripture goes on to describe that HaShem found fault with “them,” viz, Isra’el. How did they “break” the first covenant? —By not keeping the commandments. Observe:

6. “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.

7. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples;

8. but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

9. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,

10. and requites to their face those who hate him, by destroying them; he will not be slack with him who hates him, he will requite him to his face.

11. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which I command you this day.

12. “And because you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love which he swore to your fathers to keep;

13. he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock, in the land which he swore to your fathers to give you.

14. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle.” (Deuteronomy 7:6-14, RSV)

Ariel, are you suggesting that mere commandment keeping is tantamount to covenant faithfulness? In “Bible times” is that all it took to be found righteous in God’s sight? Before I get labeled as a legalist, let me demonstrate God’s view of TRUE commandment keeping:

“For those who trust HaShem for the promises, the proper order for faith and obedience is set by the sequence in which the covenants were given. In other words, faith must precede obedience. But the kind of faith accepted by HaShem is one, which naturally flows into obedience. True obedience never comes before faith, nor is it an addition to faith. It is always the result of true biblical faith. To rephrase this in terms of the covenants: the covenant of promise (Avraham) must come before the covenant of obedience (Moshe). If we were to put Moshe first, attempting to secure those promises by obedience, we would be going against HaShem’s order. (This, by the way, is the key to unlocking the difficult midrash used by Sha’ul in Galatians 4:21-31.) All we could hope for would be a measure of physical protection and a knowledge of spiritual things. But we could not receive justification or a personal relationship with the Holy One through obedience to the Torah; it all had to start with faith. Avraham came before Moshe, but Moshe did not cancel out Avraham! The two complemented each other—as long as they came in the proper order.”⁴

We see that “commandment breaking” was the reason that God needed to renew the covenant. In a sense, when Isra’el walked away from the covenant—when she forsook the commandments of God—she was declaring to God that she had no interest in him and ultimately this unfaithfulness was seen as grounds for divorce. Observe:

Isaiah 54:1-10: the faithful husband (HaShem) is seen promising the unfaithful wife (Isra’el) reconciliation unto himself after a brief period of rejection (verses 7, 8). Why did he reject her? Because she willfully walked out of the covenant agreement in order to pursue alien love, causing HaShem to act in accordance with his own Torah and give her a bill of divorcement (see Deut. 24:1-4).

Jeremiah 3:1-20: God is the husband and Isra’el is the wife. Verse 1a reinforces what Moshe stated in Deuteronomy. Verses 1b through 7 show that the unfaithful bride did not remain pure, but adulterated with another “lover,” spurning the sorrow and fury of her first husband HaShem. In verse 8, after desiring her to

⁴ Ariel and D’vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered* (FFOZ, 1996), p. 32-33

return to him, HaShem hands her bill of divorcement, based on her refusal to remain a faithful bride to him alone. In verses 11-15 the faithful husband pleads with his unfaithful wife to return to him and find forgiveness but she persists in her adultery. Thus, the unfaithful bride walked out on the marriage covenant to pursue other sexual interests, causing the faithful husband to write her a bill of divorcement. Did HaShem wish to write her this bill? According to Genesis he desires unity for eternity. But hard-heartedness drove his wife to force, as it were, God's hand of divorce upon her. She willingly left God; he always remained faithful waiting for her return.

Covenant Status: Earned or Freely Given?

So, is covenant status something we can earn on our own? Is there a commandment that we can keep that will turn God's Hand in our favor? We affirm that there is nothing that we can do to earn covenant status. God freely bestows covenant status upon those who surrender to his Salvation-working Power—the Spirit of Messiah Yeshua, Savior of Isra'el and of the whole world. Some might argue that grace is all we need. For them a Torah does not even figure into the scenario. What shall we "Torah-keepers" say then?

Here at the end of Sefer B'resheet (the Book of Genesis) allow me to recall some words from a previous parashah:

What [made] Avraham such a great role model of faith is that, not only did he trust in the Word of HaShem, but the LORD saw into his future and predicted that his offspring would also be taught how to trust in the Almighty. Let's look at [Genesis] 18:17-19,

“ADONAI said, “Should I hide from Avraham what I am about to do, inasmuch as Avraham is sure to become a great and strong nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by him? For I have made myself known to him, so that he will give orders to his children and to his household after him to keep the way of ADONAI and to do what is right and just, so that ADONAI may bring about for Avraham what he has promised him.” (Emphasis, mine)

This is a fantastic statement from the mouth of the One who sees every human possibility! Would that we might have HaShem pronounce this blessing over our families today! What must we do? The divine tandem-like actions spoken of here must not be taken too lightly. Firstly, God promises to be faithful to make himself known to us. We like faithful Avraham are then enabled and subsequently covenant-bound to obey the Teachings of our Heavenly Father. Finally, such Teachings are uniquely designed to bring about a righteous behavior in our lives, aligning our lives to be the object of God's righteous promises! To be sure, the syntax of

the above p'sukim (verses) is hinting at that very reality (note the running continuity suggested by the connecting phrases "so that" in the quote above)! Furthermore, we must, like faithful Avraham, trust in the LORD against all unbelievable odds, to perform in our lives, the promise that he has given us through Yeshua our Messiah! What is that promise?

**"Furthermore, we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called in accordance with his purpose; because those whom he knew in advance, he also determined in advance would be conformed to the pattern of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers; and those whom he thus determined in advance, he also called; and those whom he called, he also caused to be considered righteous; and those whom he caused to be considered righteous he also glorified!"
(Romans 8:28-30)**

We usually stop at the first verse, but reading further informs us of our true identity in Messiah: righteous heirs according to trusting faithfulness, causing us to be called, as faithful Avraham was called, "righteous!"⁵

I like to imagine that grace steps in when we misunderstand the Torah as a document of legalism. Not all who approach God approach him correctly. Not all understand his gracious ways. Mankind has a human tendency to pervert God's gracious document into something it was not meant to be used for. To be sure, the Torah cannot, in and of itself, bring to the goal, the participant and his conscience (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; Gal. 3:21b; Hebrews 7:11, 19). In fact, to use a "kal v'chomer argument" (light and heavy, argument from a weighty premise to a less weighty one), if actually participating in the sacrifices of ancient Isra'el could not bring about covenant membership, then surely all attempts to follow Torah today will ultimately result in failure without regeneration from the inside:

**"For the Torah has in it a shadow of the good things to come, but not the actual manifestation of the originals. Therefore, it can never, by means of the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, bring to the goal those who approach the Holy Place to offer them. Otherwise, wouldn't the offering of those sacrifices have ceased? For if the people performing the service had been cleansed once and for all, they would no longer have sins on their conscience."
(Messianic Jews [Hebrews] 10:1, 2)**

Only the Spirit of the Holy One, writing the Torah on the heart and mind, can bring the participant to the intended goal of surrendering to the Mashiach. With

⁵ Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, *Parashat Vayera* (Tetze Torah Ministries, 2005), p. 8-9

our natural mind, we read, “do this...” and “don’t do that...” and we have a tendency to misunderstand the grace behind the words. Yeshua came to explain the gracious intent of every command, by explaining the primary thrust of the Torah in the first place: leading its reader to a genuine trusting faith in the Messiah found therein—namely himself!

Moreover, grace is needed when sin blinds our eyes to believe that covenant status is granted on the basis of ethnicity, whether natural or achieved. Historic Isra’el of the 1st century genuinely believed that by virtue of being born Jewish they were automatically guaranteed covenant status. What is more, from their point of view, if someone from non-Jewish stock wished to join the covenant people all he or she needed to do was convert to Judaism, hence my use of the terms “natural” and “achieved” respectively. Natural Isra’elites—those native-born—held to the prevailing theology that Torah was given to maintain the covenant status already acquired at birth. The “ger” (Hebrew for stranger, alien, etc.) was deemed as someone in the process of becoming a Jew via the vehicle of proselyte conversion.

Sha’ul went to great lengths to refute such teaching in his letters both to the Romans and to the Galatians. To be sure, if we apply this hermeneutic to those letters, instead of adopting a “grace versus law” hermeneutic, the Apostle begins to make more sense theologically and historically. I am convinced more now than ever that a foundational understanding of Paul’s writings must take into account the historical fact that 1st century Isra’el reckoned herself as right-standing before HaShem on the basis of ethnicity (read as “being Jewish”) alone! She did not feel that keeping the Torah equaled positional (forensic) righteousness; she concluded—albeit incorrectly—that keeping Torah was the vehicle that one used to maintain covenant status already achieved either at birth or by conversion.

Conclusion: Covenant Status and the Promise

In closing, we affirm with perfect faith that genuine and lasting covenant status is granted to the individual who eventually exercises genuine faith in the Promised Word of HaShem—namely, the Messiah Yeshua. Such status is offered freely to both Jew and Gentile. Jewish people with natural lineage tracing back to Ya’akov are in fact born with a “corporate covenant status” given freely by God and based on his promises made to Avraham. However, this does not automatically grant them the status of right standing in a positional sense. There is no such thing as “involuntary corporate righteousness” in the Torah of HaShem. For the native-born Jewish person, the proper sequence for the covenants is demonstrated when such an individual “graduates” from [mere] corporate faith and belonging towards personal faith in God. To be sure, it is only when God does his monergistic work of opening the eyes of the blind and drawing the individual into his covenant of faith that the person attains genuine

and lasting covenant status—the kind of covenant status that is worthy of a place in the ‘Olam Haba (Age to Come).

What place hath the Torah in the life of such an individual? The Torah comes alongside of the Promise (covenant status) and acts as a guarantor that the individual will also achieve behavioral righteousness, thus placing him or her on a direct collision course with the blessings of HaShem! Far from frustrating the grace of God, Torah compliments the grace of God! In the weeks to come I shall elaborate on this most wonderful truth as it flows from the never-changing pages of God’s Word.

It is customary after the completion of a book of the Torah to say,

“Chazak, chazak, v’nit’chazek!”
(Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened!)

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-’Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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