

That the charge given to Avraham to be a blessing, was no easy thing becomes evident in the life of his grandson, our paradigmatic progenitor Yaaqov, who was named and blessed and whose blessing name, Yisrael, we carry to this day.

Yaaqov spends a lifetime stumbling around in the land of blessing. Astute in almost all things, witness to strengths and weaknesses in others, able to play on their hidden attributes, he is incredibly vulnerable in the area of blessing.

He is vulnerable both in being blessed, as we have seen in the mess with Esav and their father, Yitzhak, and in blessing others, as we shall see when it comes to blessing his own sons. It is, one might say, following the text, a wounded place in him. Whenever it is touched, he is close to being overwhelmed.

We know what happened with Esav. The contretemps began with the sordid business of trading some grub for the blessing “owned” by his overtired hunter sibling just back from a jaunt in the fields. Witnessed though he must have been by his mother in one of the first hunter-gatherer splits, he surmises that he cannot be blessed as he is; he has to present as “other.” To steal the blessing he had already bought, he clumsily makes himself appear as his older brother, whose heel he had entered the world holding. The deception is “successful” with the father who cannot “see” what is in front of him. Despite the text, which may reflect his mother’s view of him, he had never really been the *ish tam*, certainly not in respect to blessing. He had unfairly bargained for it and had received it under false pretenses. The blessing, bought and dissembled for, roused an understandable rage in his brother Esav and led to Yaaqov’s being “cursed” with years of exile.

Though the inept blessing by his father led to pain and animosity, it taught Yaaqov little about blessing—its presence, its importance, its power, and its dangers. He did not learn that how one was blessed and what one was blessed for were crucial. The [*Tzelem\_N’shamah*] present in others needs to be witnessed, properly named, and then blessed.

Perhaps we can forgive our errant forefather, understanding that Yaaqov’s original blessing was tainted. Maybe it wasn’t just nurture. Perhaps Yaaqov had inherited from Yitzhak a certain genetic predisposition toward “blindness” in the field of blessing. He, who was a shrewd assessor of what was going on in others and who saw the look in Lavan’s face that indicated a subtle change in mood, could not witness nor properly name the loyalty,

love, and persistence resident in his wife Lea, and so he could not bless it even if he knew how. To him, she continued to carry the epithet “Dim Eyes”—this despite her seeing her husband and children with exquisite clarity. She wants what any of the matriarchs (namely, her mother and grandmother-in-law) want: to bear many children and have her children blessed by Yaaqov, who himself had been blessed, and whose task it is to bless. Yet, as we shall see, *none* of her children are blessed by their father. She does her best to get them blessed. She sees something special and unique

in each of her “boys.” She witnesses the nascent [*Tzelem\_N’shamah*] present in each and quite properly names them, which, as we have seen, is a prerequisite for their being blessed. Her proper naming of them, she prays, will provoke not only his love and appreciation but more crucially their being blessed by their blessing-impaired father—her husband, who *had* been blessed.

Lea bears their first and proclaims: “Re’uven/See a Son!”<sup>1</sup> and when he is not seen, she persists and brings forth Shim’on/Hearing. And if neither seeing nor hearing avails, then a third, Levi/Joining. He would join her husband to her (as he was later to couple God and Israel with his service in the Temple), and so might blessing rub off on her and her progeny. When none of this bearing, witnessing, and naming brings blessing or even a hint of gratitude, she brings forth one who is destined to be one of the greatest of all, Yehuda/Giving thanks, for what God had provided. The text records a pause in bearing. With no newborn to suckle, her mind could well have been preoccupied with the ebbing hope that her four might still be blessed. It does not happen. With intensifying resentment, for she has truly merited more than she received, she bears Yissachar/There is hire—she has earned Yaaqov’s blessing five times over. Still nothing! She persistently follows with her sixth son, and since her husband will not/cannot bless, she ups the ante, attempts it herself, and, in one fell swoop, simultaneously names and blesses him Zevulun/Prince.<sup>22</sup> Then comes her daughter, Dina, for whom no explanation of naming is given. If the sons have not been blessed, what could one hope for a “mere” daughter, yet her fate will reverberate. Through all of this, Lea remains unseen, unheard, unwitnessed, unappreciated, and herself unblessed, and her progeny’s special gifts, even when recognized, are unappreciated and unblessed. Perhaps her husband, Yaaqov, is the one with “dim eyes.”

With his beloved Rahel’s son, Yosef, it is different. Beyond the arrogant, insufferable, preening young man, Yaaqov must have witnessed something

of the [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*]. It is something very familiar, something very much like himself. There is greatness in the boy. Having been taught by his mother that “clothes make the man,” always being taken with outward appearances (“and Rahel was fair of form and fair to look at”), and having learned little about seeing beyond the surface, he gives Yosef a beautiful coat that marks him as “other.” He knows well the part in himself that could put on a garment not his, present himself well, be clever beyond words, and use these artifices to be blessed by his own father, and later to achieve some of his God-given aims.

The coat is an awkward, inept attempt at blessing. It provokes anger for favoritism and infuriates the brothers whose very names testify to their own yearning to be blessed, and whose special gifts have gone unwitnessed and unblessed by their father. Time has not taught Yaaqov very much. He cannot name the greatness in Yosef appropriately and therefore cannot bless it in a way that is useful.

And upon reaching those generative years at the end of his life, when in the fullness of his life experience the task of blessing his progeny falls upon him full force, Yaaqov remains, as always, blessing impaired.

How Yaaqov dealt with that challenge has been unequivocally passed down to us as “Yaaqov’s Blessings.” The biblical editor, spin doctor extraordinaire, positioned the event for publication by repeating *three* times in one brief sentence that Yaaqov had “blessed” all of his sons. As a matter of fact, Yaaqov had blessed only one, and the careful reader will nonetheless observe the degree of his impairment.

Despite all of his brushes with blessing, Yaaqov has not learned that even though only he who receives blessing can impart it, that alone is not enough. To bless requires beyond the prerequisite of being and feeling blessed, witnessing the essential [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*] residing in each of his sons, then giving it a proper name so it can have “human existence,” and, only then, blessing it.

Yaaqov continues to the end of his days the habits that have caused so much trouble and are destined to cause more. If it is true that *Ma'aseh Avot Siman l'banim* the acts of the patriarchs are an omen for their descendants, then maybe his habits (learned from Mom?!) engender the multitude of splits that have bedeviled our people. Those splits are foreshadowed when Yaaqov, unaware of the deeper implications of his words, says proudly to his brother Esav, now ready to reconcile over the stolen blessing: “For with only my rod did I cross this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.”

The text points in an unknowing allusion to all the splits, seeded so long ago, that are to have such great impact: the split between Yosef and his brothers; the split between Yehuda and the tribes who lived in the land named for Yosef's son Efrayim, later known as Israel, a split that was papered over in the reigns of David and Solomon, only to resurface after Solomon's death; the conflict between the sanctuary at Beth El in the Land of Efrayim and the Temple of Jerusalem; and on and on. The tendency implicit in the Genesis story of the twins is to think that there is blessing enough for only one. This leads inevitably to the insatiable craving to have it all. This split was passed over to our Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters, who claimed the blessing for themselves exclusively. This thinking is present in all of the splits between those who feel blessed and those who we think are not. It is a split implicit in all Fundamentalism, in all of the [Either/Or] splits that seem endemic in human nature and have wrought havoc with humankind.

Yaaqov's blessing his children commences when Yosef, fulfilling the *mitzvah* of visiting his dying father, brings the grandchildren Efrayim and Menashe along. Despite the absence of the rest of his family, Yaaqov spontaneously decides to use the visit to bless his favorites. He starts appropriately enough by presenting his own credentials as one who has been blessed: "Yaaqov said to Yosef: God Shaddai was seen by me in Luz [and the reader will note that our blessing-impaired forefather uses the pre-Beth El, pre-blessing name of the place<sup>31</sup>] in the land of Canaan; *he blessed me.*" In the presence of his favorites, he describes his own having been witnessed and properly named, as were Avraham (Avram) and Yitzhak ("for it is through Yitzhak that seed will be called by your [name]"<sup>34</sup>), but then he stumbles as he specifies the naming for only one set of grandchildren, Yosef's sons:

Then he *blessed* Yosef and said: The God in whose presence my fathers walked, Avraham and Yitzhak, the God who has tended me ever since I was (born), until this day—the messenger who has redeemed me from all ill-fortune, may he *bless* the lads! May my name continue to be called through them and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzhak!

Yaaqov has been adequate at witnessing the [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*] in Yosef and Yosef's sons, Menashe and Efrayim, naming them in the line of his father and grandfather. Even this is done somewhat ineptly, for, no doubt, word of Dad's playing favorites again will get back to the other siblings, whose angry response we can presume.

Yaaqov then blesses Yosef's sons: "So he *blessed* them on that day,

saying: "By you shall Israel give *blessings*, saying: God make you like Efrayim and Menashe!" The words have become our Friday night way of blessing our children.

And for those who serve Jews in the midst of "affluenza" and secularism, it is a very topical and poignant blessing. It *is* crucial to bless those who, despite their affluence and despite their being accepted, have heroically maintained their Jewishness in a foreign land.

Yet, not only Yosef and his foreign-born sons are Yaaqov's children; all twelve and unmentioned Dina are his. Now in his old age he must gather them together and bless them. This is the task he is not up to.

He himself summons them all to his bedside. They know what such a meeting portends. It is blessing time. They know the routine from what they have heard of the blessing of their father, their aggrieved uncle Esav, and their great-grandfather Avraham. They will hear about their future as their father has told them when he summoned them. Those predictions will be interspersed with words of blessing for each. That is the way it is done. Their expectancy rises as they gather to hear their father's blessing. One might think that having blessed Yosef and his progeny privately, Yaaqov would have the good grace, with his demise approaching, to this time, at least, not differentiate between them when all are present. The reader will note well a peculiar fact. Yaaqov has still not learned the lesson of the coat he had so long ago bestowed upon Yosef! Yaaqov uses the occasion, as he promised, to predict for them what would happen in their future. As he, one by one, calls the roll of the first ten sons (six of whom Lea of the "dim eyes" bore him and did the crucial work of preparation by witnessing and naming them for his blessing), the word *beracha* appears nowhere. *None* is blessed until Yosef's turn comes. Then, apparently unable to contain himself,

Yaaqov erupts in an outpouring of blessing—**six times in just two verses:**

By your father's God—may he help you, and Shaddai, may he give you—***blessing: Blessings*** of the heavens, from above, ***blessings*** of Ocean crouching below, ***blessings*** of breasts and womb!

May the ***blessings*** of your father transcend the ***blessings*** of mountains eternal, the bounds of hills without age. May they fall upon the head of Yosef, on the crown of the consecrated-one among his brothers. Yaaqov offers words of *b'racha*, blessing and abundance, only for one.

For none of the others is there *b'racha*. Once again, only with Yosef and his sons Efrayim and Menashe is the Hebrew root \_\_\_ *b'racha* used. Only Yosef's line is blessed.

Yaaqov isn't very good at witnessing and naming the [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*] in others, except for Yosef. His failing is that he cannot name (though Lea has done her very best) and bless the [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*] in the others. There is not *one* word of blessing in the whole last testament for them—cold, accurate, pungent descriptions, yes, but no blessing.

Yaaqov cannot witness the dedicated holiness resident behind Levi's anger that would one day mediate between God and God's people. Anger and violence belongs to his brother Esav; it is not his. He lives by his wits and his cunning; violence is not part of him. It is anger that he is most afraid of, denying its presence in himself. And where is the creativity and music that is to show up later despite Levi not being blessed? Yes, that happens too, despite not being blessed.

With Yehuda, Yaaqov describes what will one day be recognized as Yehuda's power and strength. Yehuda is lavishly praised, but contrary to the party line commentary found in the Torah texts of both the Conservative and Reform movements, which list the words to him as being a blessing, there is not *one* word of blessing for him. Blessing is reserved for only Yosef and his progeny.

Yaaqov's failings are indeed an omen and a warning to us. We are reminded how crucial it is for us to "be a blessing"—to witness the [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*] in all, to give it proper naming, and to bless it.

Though crucial, doing this is no easy task. Witnessing and naming the obvious, what we like and approve of, is not enough for blessing.

We are called to witness, name, and bless those different from Efrayim and Menashe, who have not yet succeeded in creating Jewish lives in the well-off Diaspora. We are called to ready for blessing those who are peripheral and struggling with who they are. Our task is to witness, name, and bless those whose gifts are in hiding, those who need blessing to aid in the discovery of who they really are.

Not too easy is this business of being witness to the blessing in us and in others—alertness to, witnessing of, providing ongoing testimony for, advocating on behalf of, and naming and blessing the often obscured and sometimes rejected [*Tzelem\_N'shamah*] in ourselves, in others, and in the world at large. Yet being blessed, we are called to bless All.

None of us is fully up to the task—we can all do only a part of it. As Jewish relational caregivers we have no choice but to undertake it, knowing that too often we will fail and spend a lifetime learning to do it better.

It is told of one of my teachers, the late Milton H. Erickson,<sup>43</sup> who was perhaps the greatest therapist of our era, that a patient, having heard of his

healing prowess, traveled halfway around the world to see him. Entering Milton's somewhat shabby office, he was shocked as he took in its wellworn furniture, overused chairs, and ramshackle bookshelves—rather humble surroundings for such a great man. Erickson noticed him looking around in disbelief, fixed his intense gaze upon him, and said, "I know it's not much, **but I'M HERE!**"

**I'M HERE!** We can have no better motto. Each of us is more than enough. Each of us is all we've got. Each of us and all of us are blessed. We need to know and be assured that our blessedness is not in the doing; it is in the *being*. We are blessed through no choice of our own. Our being blessed is God's irrevocable gift. So when the going gets tough, and assuredly it will, each of us can do no better than to respond, "*Hineni, I'm Here,*" words that have reverberated down the ages. Each of us is more than enough. Each of us is a blessing.