



TORAH ACADEMY
of Bergen County

קול תורה

Parashat VaYechi

12 Tevet 5775

January 3, 2015

Vol. 24 No. 15

Who's in Charge?

by Rabbi Yaakov Blau

Many of the Birchot Ya'akov are rather obscure, and it is often hard to understand not only what events are being referred to, but also how to even translate the words. Yehudah's Berachah contains a section whose meaning is debated by the Rishonim. The Pasuk states, "Lo Yasur Shevet MiHudah UMechokeik MiBein Raglav Ad Ki Yavo Shiloh VeLo Yikhat Amim," "The staff shall not leave Yehudah, nor the scepter from between his legs, until Shiloh comes and nations will gather to him" (BeReishit 49:10). Targum Onkelos understands that this Pasuk is teaching us that the Malchut, kingdom, will not depart from Yehudah until Moshiach comes. Rashi (ad loc. s.v. Ad Ki Yavo Shiloh) agrees with this reading and also quotes the Gemara (Sanhedrin 5a) which teaches us that this Pasuk refers to the Jewish leaders in Bavel who will be from Yehudah. The Ibn Ezra (ad loc. s.v. Lo Yasur Shevet MiHudah) interprets the Pasuk to teach that Shiloh refers to David HaMelech and is saying that David will bring Yehudah to full sovereignty, but with no mention of what will happen after that event.

The Ramban (ad loc. s.v. Lo Yasur Shevet MiHudah) famously understands the Pasuk to be a prohibition against anyone other than a member of Shevet Yehudah ever assuming a position of power. He explains that when Shaul, who was from Shevet Binyamin, was appointed as king, it was only a temporary measure from its inception. Since the request for a king was improper at the time, as evidenced by both Shmuel and Hashem's reaction to the request, the chosen king was never meant to be one whose family would be monarchs for an extended period. Along those lines, he feels that the Malchei Yisrael throughout Sefer Melachim were wrong to continue to usurp the kingship from David's family. Finally, he claims that the Chashmona'im sinned by becoming kings in the Chanukah period. The Ramban goes so far as to say that this transgression was the cause for the bad end of the Chashmona'im. The end was so extreme that the Gemara (Bava Batra 3b) recounts that anyone who claims to be from the Chashmona'im is in reality a slave, because a slave, Herod, assassinated the entire family line.

While this Ramban is often quoted, it is far from being universally accepted. The Ran (Derashot HaRan 7) responds to the Ramban that the Pasuk is not a command, as the Ramban understood it, but rather a prediction of what will happen. The prediction was fulfilled because it actually meant that sovereignty will never leave Yehudah altogether, not that no one else will ever assume a position of power. With this understanding, the Malchei Yisrael do not present a problem, as they never ruled alone; there was always a parallel Melech from Yehudah. He also is not bothered by the

Chashmona'im becoming kings because he feels that they were merely emissaries of the Romans. The Abarbanel contests this last point, as he feels that the Chashmona'im had full sovereignty, which leads him to conclude that it is true that they made a pact with the Romans, but they were not subservient.

The final approach is that of the Abarbanel. He believes that the Pasuk means to say a descendent of Yehudah will always maintain a position of importance, but not necessarily be the main leader. The aforementioned Gemara in Sanhedrin also states that the second half of the Pasuk refers to the children of Hillel who taught Torah in public. The Abarbanel deals with the Chashmona'im period by assuming that the head of the Sanhedrin at the time was from Shevet Yehudah, and, as such, the Pasuk's prediction did indeed come true.

This final approach contains an important lesson for us. Too often leadership is seen in political terms, but the Abarbanel reminds us that Torah leadership is a critical aspect of leadership in our community as well.

MA'ASEH AVOT SIMAN LeBANIM

by Hillel Koslowe ('17)

The following Devar Torah is based on a Shiur delivered by Rav Reuven Taragin of Yeshivat Hakotel at TABC's Night Seder Program.

In both this week's Parashah as well as in Parashat Chayei Sarah, the word "life" appears in the title, even though both Parashiyot contain deaths. Why do we title these two Parashiyot with names that are contrary to the actual events that occur within them?

According to the Midrash HaGadol, even though Ya'akov had a bitter life (BeReishit 47:9), the years of his life in Parashat VaYechi were the best years of his life; although he had a difficult life, it ended on a positive note.

Although we are taught that Parashat VaYechi records Ya'akov Avinu's death, it never actually states that he dies. Rather, it is said about Ya'akov that, "VaYigva VaYei'asef El Amav," "And he expired and was brought to his people" (BeReishit 49:33). According to Rabi Yochanan (Ta'anit 5a), Ya'akov Avinu never died. Since his children are still alive, he is still alive. This seems to contradict the fact that Ya'akov was both eulogized and buried (Bereishit 50:10-13)! How could Rabi Yochanan possibly argue that Ya'akov never died?

Towards the end of Parashat VaYechi, Ya'akov gives a Berachah to each of his children. Whereas most of the Berachot that Ya'akov bestows are Berachot that one would expect a father to give to his children on his deathbed, Ya'akov's Berachah to Ephraim and Menasheh is quite peculiar—first, Ya'akov compares Ephraim and Menasheh to Reuven and Shimon, his own sons. Then, Ya'akov blesses them that, "VeYikarei VaHem Shemi VeSheim Avotay Avraham VeYitzchak," "And may [Jewish children] be called by my name and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak" (BeReishit 48:16). Why did Ya'akov compare Ephraim and Menasheh to his own sons?

Additionally, why does Ya'akov mention his father and grandfather in their Berachah?

Rav Reuven Taragin notes that Ephraim and Menasheh are the first two Jews raised without the Avot, because they were born before Ya'akov got to Mitzrayim. Yosef's fear was that his sons would stay in Mitzrayim and assimilate. Therefore, Ya'akov alleviated Yosef's fears by saying in his Berachah that even though they were born in a foreign country, they would continue the Jewish people and the Jewish legacy. Additionally, Ya'akov mentioned his father and grandfather in Ephraim and Menasheh's Berachah in order to show them that just as he was molded into the person that he was because of his father and grandfather, they would be able to be future Jewish leaders who continue the Jewish legacy, despite the fact that they were raised in a foreign country.

However, is it actually the case that Ya'akov was a person who valued Jewish ideals and wanted them to be passed on to his descendants? According to a simple reading of the Torah, it seems that Ya'akov was a sneaky person who deceitfully took the Bechor from Eisav and tricked his blind father into giving him the Berachah for the Bechor?

When Ya'akov offered to buy Eisav's Bechor status, he said, "*Michrah Kayom Et BeChoratechah*," "Sell me as of this day your Bechor" (BeReishit 25:31). Rav Reuven Taragin suggests that Ya'akov was right for taking the Bechor from Eisav, because Eisav valued his life only today, not in the future. Since Eisav did not value the Bechorah, he was unworthy of it, and therefore Ya'akov acted properly in taking the Bechorah from Eisav. Eisav believed that life was worthless, since he would eventually die. Ya'akov, on the other hand, valued the long-term continuation of Judaism. According to Rashi (25:30 s.v. Min HaAdom HaAdom), Ya'akov made lentil soup on that day because it was Avraham's Yahrzeit. It is clear that Ya'akov valued Judaism and its ideals from the fact that he looked up to Avraham, the original father of Judaism, and mourned his death. Because Ya'akov valued his father and grandfather, and because he strived to continue Jewish ideals, it is possible to suggest that he never died—his legacy continued even after his death. We cannot say the same about Avraham and Yitzchak, however, because they had Yishmael and Eisav who killed their legacy.

Although we are currently living in Galut, we must realize that we can achieve spiritual greatness. Just as Ephraim and Menasheh were able to keep Jewish ideals and pass them down to their children in Galut, so too, we can continue Judaism in our children. Just as Ya'akov succeeded in carrying on Judaism by remembering his father and grandfather, so too, we must remember the great people that preceded us to inspire us to continue Judaism. Additionally, we must remember that if we want our children and grandchildren to remain on the path of righteousness, they must be able to look back at us, their parents and grandparents, as an inspiration. By remembering our previous generations and thinking about our future generations' success, we will be able to continue to be passionate and successful in creating an atmosphere that fosters Jewish ideals, and a love of Hashem.

A CURSED BLESSING

by Moshe Davis ('17)

Parashat VaYechi, the last Parashah in Sefer BeReishit, marks the culmination of the story of the Avot and springs forward into the story of Ya'akov's children. Before Ya'akov dies, he gives a Berachah to his descendants—first to his grandchildren Ephraim and Menasheh (BeReishit 48:16), and then to all of his sons (49:3-32). Although the majority of Ya'akov's Berachot seem to be wonderful blessings, some of them appear to be rebuke more than a Berachah. However, it is very difficult to believe that Ya'akov's final words to his children would be harsh. Therefore, we must take an in-depth look at his words in order to understand the true meaning of his Berachot.

Especially when looking at the Berachot of Shimon and Levi, Ya'akov seems to be scolding his sons. A particularly troublesome part of their Berachah is when Ya'akov tells them, "*Achalekeim BeYa'akov*," "I will separate them throughout Ya'akov" (49:7). Although this phrase seems to be a blatant curse, Rashi (ad loc. s.v. Achalekeim BeYa'akov) interprets this phrase to be a complement by which Ya'akov is informing Shimon and Levi that their descendants will be great people in Eretz Yisrael, and therefore, they will scatter throughout the land to have a positive influence on the rest of the Jews. Why do Shimon and Levi deserve to merit this great Berachah, especially right after Ya'akov cursed them for their bad tempers (49:7)?

The meaning of Ya'akov's words to Shimon and Levi is a bit misleading at first. Although one might erroneously come to the conclusion that Ya'akov is cursing them for their anger, he is really cursing the attribute of anger, not his sons. He tells his sons "*Arur Apam Ki Az*," "Anger should be cursed, for it is mighty" (49:7). Perhaps Ya'akov is trying to teach his sons about the importance of avoiding rage.

Whereas Levi's temper is apparent early in his life when he wipes out the city of Shechem, it seems that he did Teshuvah and learned to use his anger in a positive way. After the Cheit Heigel, Shevet Levi uses their "anger" to exact justice upon all those who had sinned (Shemot 32:26-28). Although we can see that Ya'akov's words to Levi became a Berachah, it is not apparent that Shimon took his father's words to heart. Why is there such a drastic difference between Shimon and Levi's outcome if they both received the same message from their father?

Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky explains that Ya'akov's Berachot to his children were not just blessings, but they also pointed out his children's strengths, weaknesses, and uniqueness. Each of his children had a choice to either use his talents to serve Hashem or for other destructive purposes. When Ya'akov gave his Berachah to Shimon and Levi, he was praising their passion in everything they do. The question was whether they would use their passion and zealotry for good or for bad. We see that Shevet Levi successfully controlled their rage and used it for the good, but we do not see the same regarding Shevet Shimon.

We can learn a very important lesson from the Berachah of Shimon and Levi. Each of us is given different attributes, and they can be used for the good or bad. It is imperative that we try to limit our bad characteristics and try to develop our good characteristics. More importantly, we must train ourselves to take our negative

ק
ו
ל

ת
ו
ר
ה

פ
ר
ע
ת

ו
י
ח
י

CONGREGATIONS

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Explaining the Ashkenazic Custom

The Agur concludes that refraining from Birkat Kohanim is permitted for these reasons since technically a Kohein does not violate his obligation to bless the nation unless he is summoned with the call “Kohanim” to bless the nation. Indeed, Targum Onkelos (BeMidbar 6:23; see the Torat Chaim edition of Onkelos) translates the Pasuk which states, “Instruct the children of Aharon, this is how

Aruch HaShulchan—Minhag Garu'a with a Heavenly Endorsement

Behold there is certainly no correct explanation of our custom to fail to fulfill the Mitzvah for Kohanim to bless the nation⁸ throughout the year. [Authorities] have written that

² In order not to be Ba'al Keri when they perform Nesi'at Kapayim.

⁴ Of course, this justification does not apply to an Ashkenazic Jew who prays in a Sephardic congregation which summons the Kohanim to bless the nation, as we shall discuss later.

On the other hand, Yalkut Yosef's instruction to Sephardic Kohanim to leave an Ashkenazic service before the Shaliach Tzibbur reaches Birkat Kohanim seems difficult. Yalkut Yosef is concerned for the Kohein failing to fulfill his obligation to bless the Kahal in an Ashkenazic service. However, since Ashkenazim do not summon Kohanim to bless, this should not be a concern since the obligation to bless is bypassed. It seems that common practice among Sephardic Jews is not to leave the Beit Keneset when praying in an Ashkenazic congregation.

⁵ This is not the proper mind frame for Shabbat, as Rashi (Shemot 20:9 s.v. VeAsita Kol Melachtecha) notes that on Shabbat we should feel that all our work is done. Our weekday worries and concerns should be shunted aside as we usher in Shabbat with its Neshamah Yeteira (added soul).

⁶ This Gemara also explains the joyful melodies sung by Sephardic congregations on Yom Kippur.

⁷ Rav Gedalia Schwartz, the well-respected Av Beit Din of the Beth Din of America and the Chicago Rabbinical Council, once commented that when he studies the Aruch HaShulchan he feels as if he is sitting before one of the greatest old time European rabbis guiding a younger rabbi as to how to conduct himself as a community rabbi.

⁸ The Sefer Chareidim (cited by Be'ur Halachah 128:1 s.v. Katav BeSefer Chareidim) argues that not only is it a Mitzvah for the Kohanim to bless but also a Mitzvah for the non-Kohanim to be blessed. Be'ur Halachah notes that many Acharonim cite this opinion as

this is a Minhag Garu'a (unworthy Minhag), but what can we do? It is as if a Bat Kol (heavenly voice) has proclaimed that we should not perform Nesi'at Kapayim year round. I have a tradition that two Gedolei HaDor (leading rabbinic authorities) in generations prior to ours, each one in his community, sought to institute the daily performance of Nesi'at Kapayim in their communities, and when the time came to implement this plan, the plans went awry, and each great rabbi proclaimed that they understand that Hashem has decreed as such that we should not conduct daily Birkat Kohanim.⁹

I suggest that part of the hidden heavenly reason is a reminder that those of us who unfortunately choose to live in Chutz LaAretz are not leading a full and proper Jewish life. This practice reminds Ashkenazim that a proper and joyous Jewish life is led only in Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, Ashkenazic Kohanim who have spent considerable time in Eretz Yisrael find it very depressing to refrain from Nesi'at Kapayim in Chutz LaAretz.¹⁰ This may also be a partial explanation of Chazal's decree (Beitzah 4b) that the second day of Yom Tov is observed in Chutz LaAretz even when there is a set calendar and no uncertainty regarding the proper date of the Yom Tov. It reminds us we are not living the full and desired Torah life as it is observed in Eretz Yisrael.¹¹

Ashkenazic Kohanim Visiting a Sephardic Congregation

It has clearly emerged as a non-negotiable custom that Ashkenazic congregations refrain from daily Nesi'at Kapayim. However, what should the Ashkenazic visitor do when he visits a Sephardic congregation? It is clear that he cannot remain in the synagogue when the Shaliach Tzibbur summons the Kohanim to bless the nation if he will not perform Nesi'at Kapayim, since the summons triggers the obligation. The question remains whether he should leave the synagogue before that point or may he remain inside and join the Sephardic Kohanim in the Mitzvah to bless the Kohanim. This question depends on whether the Ashkenazic custom applies to only the community conducting Birkat Kohanim or even to the individual Ashkenazi who visits a differing community.

a viable approach. Yalkut Yosef 128:5 also cites this opinion but he notes that some disagree. Thus, according to the Sefer Chareidim one who attends a Sephardic Minyan has the opportunity to fulfill a Mitzvah even if he is not a Kohein.

⁹ The Netziv (Teshuvot Meishiv Davar 2:104) relates:

I recall hearing, I believe, from my father-in-law Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin (the son of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin who was the leading student of the Vilna Gaon) that the Vilna Gaon decided to introduce daily Birkat Kohanim in his Beit Midrash. However, he was prevented from doing so from heaven since he was arrested during the terrible dispute that emerged in Vilna. Afterwards, my father-in-law's father Rav Chaim of Volozhin decided to begin daily recital of Birkat Kohanim the next morning. That night a huge fire erupted and burnt half of the city including the local Beit HaKeneset (Lo Aleinu). They saw this and understood that there is a secret mystical factor regarding the effect of Berachot caused by the introduction of Birkat Kohanim in Chutz La'Aretz.

¹⁰ I recall an Ashkenazic Kohein commenting about his return to the United States in 1999 from his sabbatical year in Israel complaining that the three saddest words in his life are the words "Kein Yehi Ratzon" the customary response to the Shaliach Tzibbur's request that Hashem bless us with the Kohanim blessings, recited when Birkat Kohanim is not performed.

¹¹ See Yerushalmi Eiruvim 3:9 which may be understood as expressing this idea.

This question may be resolved by a story related about Rav Shalom Schwadron, the famous mid to late twentieth century Tzaddik, known as the Maggid of Yerushalayim, who was a Kohein. Rav Shalom often visited the New York area to deliver his Mussar speeches. I was told that, when possible, the Maggid would attend Shacharit at a Sephardic congregation where he would have the opportunity to perform Nesi'at Kapayim.¹² Clearly the holy Maggid felt that the custom applies only to an Ashkenazic congregation and not to individual Ashkenazim.

This approach is very compelling. The Ashkenazic custom is, as described by the Aruch HaShulchan, a Minhag Garu'a and thus should not be applied in an expansive manner. As Chazal say in many contexts,¹³ "Chiddush Hu VeHavu DeLo Losif Alah," it is a surprising approach and it should not be expanded. Indeed, as Rav of Congregation Shaarei Orah, the Sephardic Congregation of Teaneck, I encourage visiting Ashkenazic Kohanim to seize the opportunity to fulfill a Mitzvah they would otherwise miss and perform Nesi'at Kapayim along with their Sephardic cousins. Teshuvot Beit Avi (3:4) adopts a similar approach.

Moreover, one could argue that Ashkenazic Kohanim should try to pray Shacharit in a Sephardic congregation since one should place himself into a situation where he will fulfill Mitzvot (Tosafot Pesachim 113b s.v. V'Ein Lo Banim). This value is expressed in Sotah 14a which states that Moshe Rabbeinu passionately desired to enter Eretz Yisrael not to enjoy its fruits but rather to place himself in a situation where he can fulfill the Mitzvot HaTeluyot Ba'Aretz, land based Mitzvot.

Conclusion—The Joy of Serving as a Kohein

Ezra Douek, a Kohein member of Congregation Shaarei Orah, once commented to me that being a Kohein is a life of Simcha. This is especially true of Sephardic Kohanim who have the opportunity to bless the Jewish People on a daily basis even if they are not in Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, the Rambam (Hilchot Tefillah 15:12) concludes his presentation of the laws of Birkat Kohanim stating "Any Kohein who does not bless is not blessed and any Kohein that blesses is blessed as is written (BeReishit 12:3) "I will bless those who will bless you."

¹² Rav Paysach Krohn, who was particularly close with the Maggid (his family hosted him during his visits in the New York area) confirmed this story in a phone conversation on July 14, 2014.

¹³ Such as Sanhedrin 27a

Editors-in-Chief: Moshe Pahmer, Matthew Wexler

Executive Editor: Gavriel Epstein

Publication Editors: Binyamin Jachter, Yosef Kagedan, Hillel Koslowe, Yehuda Koslowe, Simcha Wagner, Noam Wieder

Business Manager: Azi Fine

Publishing Managers: Yehuda Feman, Amitai Glicksman

Staff: Moshe Davis, Ari Fineberg, Avi Finkelstein, Ezra Finkelstein, Zack Greenberg, Dani Hagler, Alex Kalb, Shlomo Kroopnick, Zack Lent, Jonathan Meiner, Binyamin Radensky, Tzvi Dovid Rotblat, David Rothchild, Yehoshua Segal, Adam Zomick

Rabbinic Advisor: Rabbi Chaim Jachter

To subscribe to Kol Torah via email, message webmaster@koltorah.org

This publication contains Torah matter and should be treated accordingly.