To Confer a Blessing

by

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*A Blessing Makes Us Aware,*

*Not of Sameness but of Uniqueness*

What should we bless our children with? Good health. Long life. Loving families. To each and every one, the same blessings of a good life, a meaningful life, a life of God and Torah. But if that is the correct blessing, why then did Yaakov Avinu bless each of his children with a unique blessing as he prepared to leave this world? Not only was each *bracha* unique, but in most *brachos* he compared his sons to various beasts of the field.

Different blessings. Different beasts of the fields.

Why?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik highlights the uniqueness of each animal, explaining that, “each animal has a unique capability.” Even amongst the beasts of the field, there is diversity. Each to its task. Even animals show diversity and uniqueness. *Lehavdil!*  How much more therefore, do people! And yet, so often, we simply lump all our children, our students, even entire communities together as if they are a single entity. We impose identical goals and aspirations upon each and every one. Such a disservice.

We pursue “sameness” with daunting vigor. In some communities, sameness renders each almost indistinguishable from the other. Same hat. Same clothes. Same curriculum. Lots of same!

Pity the poor outcast in such a community. Pity him the vile looks and whispers. Pity him the various ways a group imposes its will both overtly and subtly.

But when goodness, learning and holiness are the goal, shouldn’t everyone share it? Of course. That is the individual and collective mission of the Jew. It is the reason why Yaakov not only blessed the individual with unique blessings but assured that the twelve would form a prototype community to usher in all Jewish communities of the generations to follow, communities that would support and reinforce each of their individual members.

In conferring his blessings, Yaakov focused first on the inspired, caring leadership that would, among its other goals, encourage and allow for each of his sons and tribes to reach for its unique potential. As Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches, such leadership calls for the “courage of youth with the prudence of age”; that is, it calls for the inspired and admired Yehudah.

The tradition of “blessing of the first born” would have Yaakov conferring the blessing of leadership on Reuven, or even Shimon and Levi. And yet, the father knew his sons well; he loved and appreciated their differences. He knew Reuven to be impetuous, Shimon and Levi to tend toward violence and insensitivity. He knew that they were not capable of leading a community in need of sensitivity and sympathy; not capable of recognizing each individual’s worth and potential.

In their eyes, the individual would be lost in the sea of community rather than fully integrated as an individual.

Yaakov’s sons and their tribes share a common destiny, a destiny that relies on each and every one of them. They need each other, not only because they share an historical destiny but because realizing that destiny depends on their unique, individual traits. As Rav Soloveitchik explains, “Zebulun excelled in commerce. Yissachar was engaged in research in the study of Torah, and had an analytical mind. Joseph had a magnetic personality. Benjamin had courage.” Yaakov’s prayer and aspirations was that each fulfills his potential. His wisdom made clear that no two people are the same, and no two possess the very same talents and abilities.

Some will become the great “Zebuluns”, scholars, steeped in Torah learning. Others will fulfill their technical, mechanical, commercial skills. Some will transverse the land and seas, joining with Yissachar in international trade.

Yaakov knew that God’s promise would be fulfilled so long as the individuals of the generations, with their uniqueness intact, unite as one People serving the will of God. Rav Soloveitchik continues: “*Knesses* Yisraelis a confluence of talents, of approaches, of thoughts, of emotion. Without all twelve components, *Knesses Yisrael* would never arise…”

We must learn from Yaakov’s example and always encourage our children and students to develop and pursue their unique strengths and gifts. Sadly, in too many of our communities, the mere idea that each student has a “real you” to be explored and realized is hateful. As a consequence, rather than realizing their gifts, individuals are *afraid* to discover who God fully intends them to be.

Foolishness. No one should ever be made to feel afraid to discover who they are, and what their gifts truly are. Faith in God presumes that all genuine gifts will benefit the Jewish people and community if they are allowed to be realized!

And this then is the true meaning of conferring blessings – not the pouring of all into a single mixing bowl so that the result is a single, smooth, bland sameness. God forbid! Of course, we bless our children and students with the same love and commitment to God and His Torah, but *not* to be indistinguishable from one another, to become little more than drones in a hive-like community. God has graced each of us with the crown of holiness; we must each pursue what that means in our lives.

Yaakov did not gather his sons and bless them all with one universal blessing. He didn’t simply tell them, *Zeit ge’bentscht.* Rather, he blessed each tribe individually, focusing his blessing to the characteristic and ability of each. This then teaches us what it means to truly bless. First and foremost, it is to *recognize* the uniqueness and gifts of the one (one!) being blessed. It is then to *support* and to *guide* the one being blessed to fulfill the potential of his or her uniqueness and those gifts.

Imagine how powerful our communities would be if each parent and every teacher were to bless this way! If each were to follow the model of our patriarchs. ! Yitzhak recognized and supported Yaakov’s gifts of piety, perseverance and scholarship. In the same way, Yitzhak blessed Esav. He recognized Esav’s nature as a warrior and his essence. He understood his son’s ability to accumulate the fat of the earth, the corn and the wine. At the same time, “Let the nations serve you…”

Esav, even Esav, was blessed by his father. He was not expelled, rejected or shunned. Yitzchok blessed him, recognizing him, supporting him and guiding him. Our generation would be wise to remember this, rather than willfully forgetting the message inherent in the blessing!

Rav Kook did not forget. “Every person must know and understand, that in the depth of one’s being there burns a candle and one’s candle is not at all as your friend’s candle… and there is absolutely no one that has no candle. Everyman must know and understand that it is his goal and responsibility to divulge the candle’s light publicly, and to allow one’s candle to be lit as a great torch that will give light to the entire world.”

Did you gaze at the Chanukah menorah? Did you realize that no two candles burn alike? Likewise, no two people are the same. Each has a light to share with the world. It is not enough to simply *allow* it to be ignited. To truly bless another, we must recognize that light and then encourage and guide its glow.

Rav Nachman of Breslav sees not the light of a candle, but hears the notes of song. “Every Jewish child has a *nigun miyuchad*, a unique melody. The job of parents is to nurture, cultivate and fully develop that unique melody. When they do, the most beautiful symphony evolves…” Another Master hears the individual’s melody too: “Each soul has its own note to sing in the divine chorus and no voice is more important than another.”

Teachers, do you hear? *Rebbeim, Moros*, are you listening? Parents, are you paying heed? Isn’t it time we bring Rav Kook and Rav Nachman into our current trends in child rearing and student orientation; isn’t it time we allow them to be who they were meant to be? Remember never to “free a camel of the burden of his hump; you may be freeing him from being a camel.”

Let us bless our children and our students with the gift of themselves, nurtured by those who love them and care about them, so that they will become everything that they are capable of being, strengthening themselves, the community and the Jewish people.

Many of Rabbi Safran’s essay are collected in “Something Old, Something New – Pearls from the Torah” available on **Amazon.**