

Parshat Toldot A Heightened Sense of Blessing

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We find in a number of places in Tanach that with age comes impairment of the physical strength of the individual and infirmity. The last Perek in Kohelet reminds one to “appreciate your vigor in the days of your youth, before those days of sorrow come and those years arrive of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’.¹ It then continues with an allegorical description of the dulling of one’s senses as one grows feebler with age. This is especially true of the sense of sight and hearing. With the advent of glasses and more recently hearing-aids, these markers of ageing are much less debilitating. These experiences are a part of the human condition and are so synonymous with ageing that the Tanach will be wont not to mention them unless they are significant in the continuing narrative.² These impairments are especially crippling when it comes to those in leadership positions. That is why the Torah emphasizes the uniqueness of Moshe Rabbeinu whose physical vitality and mental acuity remained intact until the day of his death.³ Other leaders who faced such debilitation had to compensate or overcome that deficit by other means.

When Shmuel HaNavi is apprenticing with Eli HaKohen, it describes Eli HaKohen’s eyes “as beginning to fail so that he could barely see.”⁴ It helps to explain why in the subsequent verses Shmuel thinks that Eli HaKohen is calling him rather than God. Eli HaKohen’s inability to see created a situation in which he would call to others for help rather than investigate or take care of the matter on his own.⁵ In addition, the Pasuk is allegorically describing the sun setting on Eli HaKohen’s leadership which is manifest in the rarity of prophecy in those days.⁶ It also intimates that Eli HaKohen’s turning a blind eye to the indiscretions of his children were a serious lapse of leadership on his part.⁷ That failure would be his undoing as well as have serious repercussions for his family and Am Yisrael. This description of

Eli HaKohen is bookmarked by two prophecies, one of the man of God (איש האלקים) and one of Shmuel, both of which prophesy the impending doom that will befall Eli HaKohen, his children and Am Yisrael. In a sense, Shmuel becomes the eyes of Eli HaKohen, both physically and spiritually, which is a prescient indication that Shmuel will eventually supplant Eli as the leader of Am Yisrael.

In Sefer Melachim, it describes Achiya HaShiloni as being unable to see “for his eyes had become sightless by reason of his age.”⁸ The Navi relates that Aviya, the son of Yerav’am, had fallen ill. Yerav’am sends his wife to seek counsel of Achiya haShiloni because he was the prophet that anointed Yerav’am to become the first king of the northern Kingdom of Yisrael. Yerav’am is too scared to appear in person before Achiya because he had deviated from the ways of God which were the impetus for his being appointed king and that which sanctioned his breaking away from the Kingdom of Yehuda. It would also be an implicit endorsement of the Torah and the way of God rather than the new religious order that Yerav’am had set up in order to secure his hold on power. In order to avoid these problems and detection, he tells his wife to dress up in a disguise and take some goodies in order to consult the Navi as to what will be the plight of their child who was ill. Given the Navi’s impaired sight, Yerav’am thinks the ruse will work to get him the information he desires without being discovered. Ironically, Yerav’am wants to hear what the Navi says because he believes that Achiya’s guidance is the word of God, yet he has wantonly and knowingly deviated from God’s directives with the erecting of two golden calves and the invention of new religious holidays in his kingdom. He perpetuates this dissonance by thinking that he can also deceive the Navi, who he believes knows the truth from God, by simply having his wife dress up to avoid detection. God forewarns the Navi of the arrival of the wife of Yerav’am and provides him with a harsh prophecy to convey to Yerav’am through his wife. The prophecy compensates for Achiya’s lack of

¹ וזכר את-בוראיך בימי בחורתיך עד אשר לא-יבאו ימי הרעה והגיעו שנים אשר תאמר אינלי בהם חפץ: עד אשר לא-תחשך השמש והאור והירח והפוכבים ושבו העבים אתר הגשם: ביום שיזעו שמרי הבית והתענות אנשי החיל ובטלו הטחנות כי מעטו וחשכו הראות בארבות: וסגרו דלתים בשוק בשפיל קול הטחנה ויקום לקול הצפור וישחו כל-בנות השיר: גם מגבה יראו וחתחתים בדרך וינאץ השקד ויסתבל החגב ותפר האבונה כי-הלך האדם אל-בית עולמו וסבבו בשוק הספדים: עד אשר לא-
(ירחוק) ירתק חבל הפסוק ותנץ גלת הזהב ותשבר כל על-המבוע ונרץ הגלגל אל-הבור: וישב העפר על-הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל-האלקים אשר נתנה: (קהלת יב,א-ז)

² פשוטו של מקרא שהוא ענין טבעי ולפיכך הקדים להזכיר את סיבתה של חולשת ראיתו או כליונה במאמרו כי זקן... ואפשר שאירע (כך גם כן) לאחרים ולא זכר מפני שלא היתה שם סיבה להזכירו במקרא (ר' אברהם בן הרמב"ם בראשית ז,א)

³ שם; ומשה בן-מאה ועשרים שנה במותו לא-כהתה עינו ולא נס לחוה: (דברים לד,ז)

⁴ ויהי ביום ההוא ועלי שכב במקומו <ועינו> ועינו החלו כחות לא יוכל לראות (שמואל א ג,ב)

⁵ כשהיה נצרך לשום דבר לא היה זז ממקומו ללכת אל אדם שהוא צריך לו אלא במקומו עומד וקורוהו. לפיכך עלה בדעתו של שמואל כשקראו הק' שעלי קורוהו אעפ"י שלא ראה עלי עומד על גביו (ר"י קרא שם)

⁶ והנער שמואל משרת את-יקנה לפני עלי ודבר-יקנה היה יקר בימים ההם אין חזון נפרץ: (שם א)

⁷ ...וטעם הספור הזה במקום הזה אם ענינו על דרך פשוטו לא מצאתי לו טעם נכון ואם הוא דרך משל ור"ל עיני הלב כלומר רוח הקדש וטעמו שהיתה רוח הקדש הולכת ופוסקת ממנו שלא היתה רגילה אצלו כבתחלה מפני מעשה בניו לפיכך באה הנובאה הזאת אל שמואל ולא באה אליו (רד"ק שם)

⁸ ותעש כן אשת ורבעם ותקם ותלך שלה ותבא בית אחיה ואחיהו לא-יכל לראות כי קמו עיניו משיבו: (מלכים א יד,ד)

eyesight, but it is also an attempt by God to shake Yerav'am from his complacency and duplicity by having him be caught at his own hypocritical game.

The Gemara in Sota discusses what is the proper positioning of the Kohanim for Birkat Kohanim.⁹ Should the Kohanim be face to face (פנים כנגד פנים) with the congregation or should they be facing the backs of the necks of the people (פנים כנגד עורף) when they bless them? The Braita concludes that the blessing should be given face to face because the verse introducing Birkat Kohanim concludes, "you shall say to them (אמור להם)"¹⁰ implying that the blessing should be similar to the way a person speaks to another individual – face to face. This condition is so integral to the Mitzva of Birkat Kohanim that those who are found behind the Kohanim during the blessing (not facing them) are excluded from the Beracha.¹¹ This necessity to be face to face creates challenges because of the possible distractions that can be caused by the physical appearance of the Kohanim. The Mishna therefore precludes any Kohen with a physical deformity or distinct feature from blessing the people because of the distraction that it would cause to the recipients of the blessing.¹² In order to avoid this issue of diverting attention from the blessing, there developed a practice for both the people to avoid looking at the Kohanim and for the Kohanim to cover themselves during Birkat Kohanim.¹³ Absent this mitigating factor, the proper way to bless an individual is face to face – looking at them directly. Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi notes that one should only give a cup of blessing (כוס של ברכה) to one who is of generous spirit (לטוב עין).¹⁴ He bases this on the verse from Mishlei, "One who has a good eye will be blessed (יְבָרְכֶה)..."¹⁵ and he suggests do not read it as "will be blessed (יְבָרְכֶה)," but rather as "will bless (יְבָרְכֶה)".¹⁶

From the combination of these two sources, it would seem that there is a necessity to draw close

to the one being blessed. There needs to be a deep personal connection, a generous spirit (טוב עין), love¹⁷ and empathy experienced in order to bestow the blessing upon the intended recipient. Yosef conveys this to his brothers when he asks them to bring his brother Binyamin to Mitzrayim so that "I may set my eyes upon him (וְאֶשְׂמָה עֵינַי עָלָיו)" which implies that he would display a positive disposition towards Binyamin (and the brothers by association).¹⁸ To engender and instill that deep-seated connection, it is necessary to have the Kohanim face, look and see the people (פנים אל פנים). The most extreme form of this connection is demonstrated by Eliyahu HaNavi and his disciple Elisha when they each bring a child back to life. Eliyahu lays the deceased child of the widow who hosts him in Eliyahu's bed in the attic and then lies face to face, body to body on the child in order to revive the child.¹⁹ As the Ralbag explains, it was as if the spirit and soul of Eliyahu were being infused into the corpse of the child.²⁰ The Radak notes that being so intimately close, mouth to mouth, eye to eye, hand on hand deepened the intensity of his prayer because he became one with the child. This is similar to the way that Yitzchak prays opposite Rivka so that his prayers for her fertility would be focused, heartfelt and efficacious.²¹ That which is implicit in the case of Eliyahu (וַיִּתְמַדֵּד) is written explicitly in the case of Elisha when he resuscitates the child of the Shunamite woman who hosts him. There it says, "He then mounted the bed [upon which the deceased child was lying] and placed himself over the child; he put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, his hands on his hands..."²² The greatest blessing, the ability to give life, ultimately depends on the one's capacity to create an intimate connection with the recipient.

This requirement of facing and being able to see the recipient of a blessing proves a challenge for Yaakov Avinu. When Yosef brings his children, Menashe and Efra'im, to his father Yaakov to be blessed, the Torah relates that Yaakov asks, "Who are these?" After Yosef's response that

⁹ תניא אידך: כה תברכו - פנים כנגד פנים, אתה אמור: פנים כנגד פנים, או אינו אלא פנים כנגד עורף? תל: אמור להם, כאדם האומר לחבירו. (סוטה לח.)
¹⁰ דבר אל-אֶהָרֹן וְאֶל-בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר פֶּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם: (במדבר ו, כג)
¹¹ עם שאחורי הכהנים אינם בכלל ברכה, אבל מלפניהם ובצדיהם אפילו מחיצה של ברזל אינה מפסקת; ולאחריהם נמי, אם הם אנוסים, כגון עם שבשדות, שהם טרודים במלאכתן ואינם יכולים לבא, הם בכלל הברכה. (שו"ע או"ח קכח, כד)
¹² כהן שיש בידי מומין לא ישא את כפיו רבי יהודה אומר אף מי שהיו ידיו צבועות אסטיס ופואה לא ישא את כפיו מפני שהעם מסתכלין בו: (סוטה ד, ז ומגילה כד:) וגם שו"ע שם ללב
¹³ שם כג ובב"י שם ע"פ הרמב"ם והירושלמי ובתוד"ה בכהנים חגיגה טז.
¹⁴ ואמר ריב"ל: אין נותנין כוס של ברכה לברך אלא לטוב עין, שנאמר: טוב עין הוא יבורך כי נתן מלחמו לדל, אל תיקרי יבורך אלא יברך (סוטה לח):
¹⁵ טוב-עין הוא יְבָרְכֶה כִּי-יִתֵּן מִלְחָמוֹ לְדָל (משלי כב, ט)
¹⁶ זה גם יכול להסביר את מאמר חז"ל שסומא חשוב כמת (נדרים סד):
¹⁷ עיין שו"ע או"ח קכח, יא שהברכה על ברכת כוהנים מסיים "לברך את עמו ישראל באהבה" ומ"א ס"ק יח שם נ"ל דפי' כמ"ש בזוהר כל כהן דלא רחיים לעמא או עמא לא רחמין ליה לא ישא כפיו

¹⁸ וְלֵאמֹר אֶל-עֲבָדָי הַחַדְוֵהוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשְׂמָה עֵינַי עָלָיו (בראשית מד, כא) ועיין ברמב"ן שם ובאבן עזרא תהילים לג, יח
¹⁹ וַיִּתְמַדֵּד עַל-הַיֶּלֶד שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעֻמִּים וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-יְהֹוָה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהֹוָה אֶלְקֵי תַשָּׁב נָא וּפְשֵׁת-הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה עַל-קִרְבִּי (מלכים א ז, כא)
²⁰ ר"ל שנשתטח אצלו ועשה עצמו מדה לו בששם עינו אצל עינו ופיו אצל פיו וכפיו אל כפיו וכן בזה הדרך כמו שעשה אלישע בן השונמית כאילו ירצה בזה שתבא הרוח מאברי הנביא אל אברי הילד (רלב"ג שם)
²¹ מענין מדה מבנין התפעל כלומר שם עצמו במדת הילד כשנשתטח עליו כענין שנאמר באלישע וישכב על הילד וישם פיו על פיו ועיניו על עיניו וכפיו על כפיו והענין הזה שתהיה תפלתו בכונה יותר על הילד כששוכב עליו ויתמודד עליו וע"ד הזה ויעתר יצחק לה' לנכח אשתו כלומר שהיתה אשתו לנגדו בעת תפלתו כדי שיכוין תפלתו עליה כי עקרה היא אפשר ג"כ כי עשה כן להנשים עליו ולחממו בחום הטבעי היוצא מפניו ומבשרו כי רוב פעמים הנסים נעשי' ע"י מעט תחבולה מדרך העולם: (רד"ק שם)
²² וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׁכַּב עַל-הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשֶׂם פִּיּוֹ עַל-פִּיּוֹ וְעֵינָיו עַל-עֵינָיו וְכַפָּיו עַל-כַּפָּיו וַיִּקְרָא עָלָיו וַיָּחַם בְּיָשֶׁר הַיֶּלֶד (מלכים ב ד, לד) ועיין ברלב"ג ומצוד דוד שם

these were the children granted to him by God, the Torah explains, "Yisrael's eyes were dim with age; he could no longer see (וַעֲיַי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּבִדּוֹ מֵזְקֵן) (לא יוכל לראות ועיניו יגעו); so Yosef brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them."²³ The verse seems to be explaining why Yaakov was unable to discern Yosef's children, but it then continues that Yaakov hugged and kissed them. What was so important about the children being so close to Yaakov? The Alshich suggests that Yaakov was compensating for the deficit in his eyesight by bringing the children eye to eye, mouth to mouth with him; the physical proximity engendered a soulful closeness and connection that facilitated Yakov's ability to bless them.²⁴ Identifying them and identifying with them was essential for the blessing.

In this week's Parsha, the story of the Berachot opens with, "And when Yitzchak grew old, his eyes were too dim to see (וַהִ' קִי-זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ)..."²⁵ It could be that the loss of his eyesight signaled impending death and therefore Yitzchak believes that it was the appropriate time to bless his children (וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה-נָא זָקַנְתִּי לֹא יִדְעֹתִי) (יום מותי). On the other hand, many of the commentators see this a prelude to upcoming narrative explaining why Yitzchak was able to be tricked into believing that Yaakov was really Eisav or that this was God's way of facilitating the Beracha being given to Yaakov.²⁶ It is interesting to note that Yitzchak faces the same challenges that Yaakov had in giving the blessing to Yosef's children because Yitzchak was unable to see. Based on all that has been presented until now, this could prove an insurmountable obstacle to Yitzchak's ability to give a Beracha. In order to bless, Yitzchak needs to find alternative mechanisms to counteract his lost sight and to connect with the recipient of his blessing.

It is well known that those that are handicapped in one of their senses tend to have heightened acuteness in their remaining senses.²⁷ If one looks carefully at the story of Yitzchak's attempt to bless his children, one can discern that Yitzchak invokes all of his other senses in order to compensate for his lost sight. When Yitzchak calls in Eisav in order to bestow the Beracha upon

him, he requests that Eisav take his weapons and hunt him some game. Eisav should then prepare Yitzchak's favorite dish "so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die (וְעֵשָׂה-לִי מִטְעָמַיִם) כְּאִשֶּׁר אֲהַבְתִּי וְהִבִּיאָה לִי וְאֶכְלָה בְּעֶבֶר תְּבָרְכֶנּוּ נַפְשִׁי בְּטָרַם (אָמוֹת)." Yitzchak is invoking his sense of taste in order to facilitate a soulful connection with his son similar to the way Yerav'am sent goodies with his wife to the blind prophet Achiya HaShiloni. The joy of his son providing him with his favorite dish would engender a closeness and love that would further facilitate his ability to bless Eisav. It would also seem that Yitzchak relied heavily on his sense of touch to generate the intimate connection he needed. This might also explain why Yaakov immediately suspected and knew that his mother's scheme would be doomed if his father would touch him in order to identify him. Rivka had already thought through this challenge to her plan and dressed Yaakov in the goat skins of the delicacies she prepared in order to provide him with a hairy feel like his brother Eisav.

When Yaakov enters to serve his father his favorite dish, Yitzchak immediately asks who is attending to him at this moment. Yitzchak listens carefully to the voice and language that is utilized by whoever entered in order to identify them and draw close to them. He then asks his son "Eisav" to draw close so that he can "feel" him and be certain that it is really Eisav. Yitzchak's sense of hearing and touch are at odds and he declares, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav (וַיֹּאמֶר הַקֹּל קוֹל יַעֲקֹב וְהַיָּדַיִם) (יְדֵי עֵשָׂו)." In the end, Yitzchak relies on his sense of touch and blesses Yaakov. He still has lingering doubts and once again asks Yaakov if he really is Eisav and Yaakov answers in the affirmative. Yitzchak then invokes his other senses to draw close to his son in order to facilitate the closeness he needs to bestow the blessing upon Eisav, who is really Yaakov. He requests that Yaakov present him with his favorite dish and provide him wine to drink to engage his sense of taste as a means to reaching a connection that would allow the blessing to flow. Afterwards, he requests that Yaakov kiss him, similar to that which Yaakov does with his grandsons, Menashe and Efra'im. As the Alshich

²³ ועיני ישראל כבדו מזקן לא יוכל לראות ויש אתם אליו וישק להם ויחבק להם: (בראשית מח).

²⁴ על כן אמר יוסף מה זה שאבי אינו מסתכל בפני אלו לדעת אם הם צדיקים, אך לא יהיה רק על כי עיניו כבדו מזקן לא יוכל לראות אם לא בקרוב הרבה. על כן מה עשה הגישה אליו שישתכלל בהם, וזהו אומר ועיני ישראל כבדו מזקן לא יוכל לראות בפניהם, ולפיכך יגש אותם אליו שיוכל להביט בפניהם. ואז מה עשה יעקב לבלתי יבוש באומר שלא היה מאמין ליוסף, וגם לבלתי הראות בפניהם שהיה חושדם עם היותם מגודלים עם יוסף. על כן וישק להם למען על ידי קרב פיו בפניו של כל אחד, יהיו עיניו קרובות אל פני כל אחד להביט בפניו. בעצם. מראה של נשק וחבק כיוון להיותם חביבים לפניו, ולא שהיה מסתפק בכשרותם עד יוסף להביטם. נוסף על זה שעל פי דרכו סייע להכינם בצד מה, בדבק יעקב נפשו עם נפשותם בנשוק פה אל פה www.swdaf.com

וגופו עם גופו בחבוק. ככתוב אצלנו באורך בביאור שיר השירים כי כל כוונת נישוק וחיבוק הוא לומר נפשי כנפשיך וגופי כגופיך לאחדים. וכן בספר הזהר אומר כי הנישוק הוא לאדבקה רוחא ברוחא (אלשיך שם)
²⁵ וַהִ' קִי-זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ. עֵינָיו מְרָאֵת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-עֵשָׂו בְּנֵו הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנֵי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנְנִי: (בראשית כד, א)
²⁶ עֵינָיו רִשְׁטִי שֵׁם ע"פ ב"ר סה, ח ור"י בכור שור שלא תתמה איך נתחלו לו יעקב בעשו וגם שד"ל בראשית מח,
²⁷ <https://neuroscience.stanford.edu/news/supersensors-how-loss-one-sense-impacts-others> and <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/superpowers-for-the-blind-and-deaf>

explained earlier, the physical proximity engendered a soulful closeness, love and connection that enables Yitzchak to properly bless. That closeness and kiss is enhanced with the smell of Eisav's clothing that wafts into Yitzchak's nose. That engages his sense of smell and he once again blesses Yaakov explaining "that the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that God has blessed (וַיֹּאמֶר רֹאֵה גֵיחַ בְּנֵי כְרִיחַ) (שְׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכּוּ יְקֹוֹק)." With all of his senses engaged, Yitzchak is finally able to overcome the deficit of his lost sight and forge a deep connection with Yaakov which at long last facilitates his ability to give the blessing he reserved for the eldest child to Yaakov.

Through the many narratives above and the story of Yitzchak's blessing we see how powerful personal connections and empathy can be. The deep-seated connection between individuals is so powerful that it can even bring back life. The converse is also true that one who is "blind" to others' needs is similar to the dead (סומא חשוב)²⁸. These intimate connections are an absolute necessity for blessing to devolve upon the individual as the Gemara in Sota states, "those that bless others will be blessed."²⁹ Those that bless others with care, love and understanding will be rewarded with those blessings in return.

Shabbat Shalom

²⁸ ותניא, ארבעה חשובין כמת: עני, ומצורע, וסומא, ומי שאין לו בנים (נדרים סד:)

²⁹ ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל כהן שמברך מתברך, ושאינו מברך אין מתברך, שנאמר: ואברכה מברכך (סוטה לח:)