

Vayechi 5775: Jacob's Testament to His Children and the Challenge of Pursuing the Common Good

- Endings always bring beginnings, and not necessarily with great clarity. Endings highlight the steep challenges of the beginnings. And so it is with Jacob in this week's parasha, Vayechi, as he both comes to the end of his days and marks the first hints of the birth of a people from the womb of a family clan.
- A central element of the parasha is Jacob's testament to his children. As commentators both medieval and modern argue, we best see Jacob's testament to his children before his death as a national leader's reflections on his children's past and projections for their tribal future. If we see the testament instead as blessings from father to children, they are rather blessings *and* curses. And why would a dying parent wish for negative circumstances to transpire for his surviving children?
- Jacob is here consistently and appropriately referred to as Israel, a national leader assessing the present and pointing toward the future. Jacob describes the raw materials of the tribes, who Moses and his successors would later need to acknowledge in their diversity and affirm in their unique identities, yet also mold together to be a nation. With his testament, Jacob shapes the federated consciousness of the next

generations and highlights the great future challenge of unifying the tribes and focusing them on a common law and a common good.

- As Prof. Ron Meron of Ben Gurion University describes it, “the characters of the different son, as they emerge from the blessings given them, represent the prototypes which taken together stand for the future collective body of the Jewish people.”
- The end of Jacob’s testament qualifies his specific statements about his children and puts them into the broader context of nation-building. As Prof. Meron puts it, Jacob’s words “preserve the memory of the patriarchs and the land in the hearts of the coming generation, whose daily lives” in Egypt “are likely to be far away.” Jacob is prescient concerning life in Egypt -- and in the Diaspora more broadly -- recognizing that time and distance may weaken his children’s connection to the land of Israel and the promise of nationhood, so Jacob reminds his children of these very things. These are the promises, the goals, the common purposes that the tribal muck projected by Jacob cannot cloud.
- There is much we can learn from the brilliant balancing act of Jacob’s testament – the balance between the past, present and future, and the balance between diversity and unity. We need to value our differences as individuals and groups, yet point to a common good – communally and nationally -- where we build something shared together.

- This is one of the central messages Rabbi Jonathan Sacks communicates in his book, The Home We Build Together.” As he writes,
 - o “We are different, but that does not mean there is nothing to bind us in shared belonging. What makes us different is *what we are*, what unites us is *what we do*.... The more different we are, the richer the possibilities of what we make together. That means seeing difference not as separation but as contribution... That act of making creates belonging.” (p.16)

- Sacks goes on to decry the way that multi-culturalism, in its extreme, impedes the pursuit of common goods, mires groups in the culture of victimhood, and robs groups of self-respect and responsibility for participating in the building process.

- We need look no further than the national political parties to see evidence of the disease. The parties cannot see past the self-righteousness of their own prescriptions for policy to build solutions that reflect the national good. They ignore the wisdom in the arguments of the other. They spend much more time blaming the other for the nation’s ills than working with the other to solve them. They ignore both needed solutions and the value of processes that build national consensus.

- Current policy debates demand hand-in-hand cooperation across the aisles of partisanship and ideology. Can we not support those who enforce our laws at the same time as we address abuses that disproportionately

threaten minorities and a justice system that likewise doesn't give them a fair shake? Can we not welcome immigrants into the country and be generous to those who have built a home here, at the same time as we strengthen border controls? Can we not balance the needs of development, the economy and the environment? None of these questions demand either/or answers. The common good by definition reflects sacrifice of parochial interests for something much larger and more composite.

- Jacob's early words in Vayechi divide to the extent that they spell out the differences between the developing tribes. His later words to his children unite. Yet, in truth, his early words – the blessings and curses, so to speak – just detail the reality of federated clans learning first about themselves before tackling the much harder task of becoming *one*. The tribes are not truly ready to engage the process of becoming one until Sinai, and are not successful in becoming one until well into period of the kings, and even that period is fleeting.
- Jacob teaches us how challenging it is to know ourselves, and to then give up of ourselves, to pursue something larger, the national good. May his words bring blessing and courage to us, to our country and its leaders, and to the world.