

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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**ט"ז בטבת תשע"ז**

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* [Genesis] 47:28-50:26

The book of *Bereshit* ends with the deathbed blessings of Yaakov to his sons. At least, they are traditionally referred to as blessings. However, a close look at them reveals otherwise:

רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אֶתָּה... פָּחַז כַּמַּיִם אֶל-תּוֹתֵר, כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבֵי אָבִיךָ... שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי... אַרְוֹר אָפֶס כִּי עָז... אַחְלָקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב, וְאֶפְיָצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

Reuven, you are my firstborn... unstable as water, you will not excel because you went up to your father's bed... Shimon and Levi... cursed be their anger for it was fierce... I will divide them in Yaakov and scatter them in Yisrael. (49:3-7)

The statements in these verses can hardly be referred to as blessings. Even for those sons about whom Yaakov's expressions are positive, it is difficult to call the deathbed statements "blessings":

זְבוּלֹן, לְחוֹף יַמִּים יִשְׁכֵּן... יִשָּׂשכָר, חֲמֹר גָּדֹם-רֹבֵץ... נַפְתָּלִי, אֲזִלָּה שְׁלַחָה... בְּנֵימִין זֵאֵב יִטְרֹף....

Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea... Yissachar is a large-boned donkey... Naftali is a gazelle... Binyamin is a ravenous wolf... (49:13-27)

What, then, are these words that Yaakov leaves with his sons? According to some commentators, most notably Targum Onkelos (2<sup>nd</sup> century Palestine), and R. David Kimchi (12<sup>th</sup> century Provence), they are *nevu'ot* (prophecies) about what each son's descendants will accomplish. For example, "Naftali is a gazelle" refers to Barak, the Israelite general who vanquished Sisera and the Canaanite armies in the

days of Devorah the Judge (*Sefer Shoftim* [Book of Judges] chapters 4-5), and who the commentaries describe as being “as swift as a gazelle.”

But there is another possibility. Throughout much of Jewish history, parents passed on ethical wills, known as *tzeva'ot* in Hebrew, to their children. Many consider Yaakov's statements to be one of the first recorded *tzeva'ot*. (It is possible that Yitzhak's “blessings” for Esav and Yaakov in *Bereshit* [Genesis] chapter 27 were actually also ethical wills.) What is an ethical will? Unlike traditional wills that transfer worldly possessions, or living wills which give medical directives, an ethical will bequeaths values, ideas, and personal reflections to family members and other loved ones. In this week's *haftarah* (I *Melachim* – Kings 2:1-12), we see David giving Shlomo, his son, clearly stated values: “Keep the charge of Hashem your God to walk in the ways, to keep the statutes, the commandments, the ordinances, and the testimonies as written in the Torah of Moshe...”

Probably the most well-known ethical will is the one written by Ramban, Nachmanides (13<sup>th</sup> century Spain/Judea) to his son. He begins with a warning against allowing anger into one's being, as anger has the tendency to control a person rather than the person controlling the anger, and he exhorts his son to remain constantly humble.

An excellent overview of Jewish ethical wills can be found at the following url: <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/writing-and-reading-ethical-wills/>

Besides passing on to one's children whatever intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and moral ideas one wants, ethical wills serve an additional purpose. The process of composing an ethical will forces each of us to consider what we really believe to be true and important about life. It articulates for ourselves, in addition to our children, what we think and what we feel.

If you are interested in learning more about writing an ethical will, there are a number of good books available, including *Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury* by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer (1983).

Shabbat Shalom.

For discussion:

- What is a blessing? Do we bless just Hashem or can we bless people also?
- If you were giving a blessing to another person, what would you bless them with?
- An ethical will is a statement about your core beliefs and values. What areas would you cover if you were going to write an ethical will?
- What specific ideas would you want to share with your children or other loved ones in an ethical will?