

DECEMBER 25, 2017

Parashat Vayechi

The First Illness and the Origins of Healing

Behold, your father is sick... (Genesis 48:1)

הנה אביך חולה (בראשית מז:א)

As Jacob nears the end of his life, Joseph is informed of his father's illness, prompting him to come immediately. Interestingly, when Joseph is informed of the sickness in the text we read that he is told, "Behold, your father is sick..."—*hineh avicha choleh* (48:1). The word *hineh* (behold) connotes surprise at something unexpected or unusual. As Jacob was one hundred and forty-seven years old at the time, his illness should have been anything but surprising. Why would Joseph seem surprised that his elderly father had taken ill? According to the Midrash, Joseph was caught off guard because Jacob was, in fact, the first sick person in human history.

We read in *Bereishit Rabbah* (*Toldot* 65), "Jacob demanded sickness in the world. He said before [the Holy One]: Master of the Universe, if a person should die without illness he will not resolve [his affairs] among his children. Should he become sick for two or three days, he can arrange his affairs. Said the Holy One: by your life, you have demanded a good thing, and from you it will begin..." Jacob used his illness to put his affairs in order, bless his children and grandchildren, and convey to them an ethical and spiritual will that guides us to this day.

We might initially recoil at Jacob's request—after all, who wants to get sick? Yet, other rabbinic sources see this Midrash from the opposite view. According to *Pirkei D'rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 52), Jacob asked to turn certain death into a symbol of life. "From the days of creation a person never became ill. Rather, if he was walking on the road or in the market he would sneeze and his soul would depart through his nostrils, until our forefather Jacob asked for compassion in this matter saying: 'Master of the Universe, do not take my soul until I instruct my children and grandchildren. And he was answered...For this reason a person is obligated when [one] sneezes to say, 'To life!' for a type of death was turned into life..." From this perspective, Jacob petitioned not for sickness, but for a form of healing. From the few days that he asked for, humanity has expanded on that blessing and discovered and developed the means to dramatically extend human life in the face of illness and injury.

Today we take great pride in the innovations in the health and wellness innovations that emanate from the state of Israel. This month, [according to the Times of Israel](#), doctors at HaEmek Hospital in the northern Israeli town of Afula performed a groundbreaking surgery to regrow part of a human bone. Danny, a resident of a nearby kibbutz who had part of his shinbone removed eight months ago after a car accident, was treated in the procedure, which was hailed by medical staff as "science fiction." Using a procedure developed several years ago by Israeli biotechnology company Bonus BioGroup, fat cells are separated from the cells capable of generating tissue and blood vessels, and the latter are grown in a bioreactor. After two weeks, the process yields tissue that can be transplanted in the patient's body and regrows the missing parts of the bone. Prof. Nimrod Rozen, head of the orthopedic ward at HaEmek said that, "within six weeks the bone will regrow itself and his shin will function normally again. This surgery is truly science fiction; it changes the entire game in orthopedics. Today I have the ability to grow any bone in a lab."

Israeli innovators are creating new life through this incredible medical breakthrough. It is not difficult to envision a day soon when people around the world will undergo bone-growth procedures without a casual thought, never realizing that the new gift of life began in a lab in the state of Israel. Our forefather Jacob would certainly be proud to know that that the blessing of extended life he initiated continues to develop to this day. ■

Seeing the Good

But God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20)

אלקים חשבה לטובה (בראשית נ:כ)

Last week, a [video](#) of several Palestinian teenage girls harassing and slapping Israeli soldiers on duty in the village of Nabi Saleh lit up social media. The video was a blatant attempt to provoke a response on film that the teenagers and their backers could then share on social media in order to vilify the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). One of the girls, referred to in Israel as “[Shirley Temper](#),” has garnered a large social media following by using violence to create propaganda in an attempt to discredit Israel. After the incident, the IDF [issued a statement](#) that, “An inquiry revealed that the commander of the force, who had operational discretion, acted professionally in that he was not dragged into violence.” Israeli media outlets later reported that the girls were subsequently arrested for their actions. Why do IDF soldiers demonstrate incredible restraint in the face of hatred and provocation? We can suggest that they learned this trait of restraint from our forefather Joseph.

Rabbi Yaakov Meidan (*Ki Karov Eilecha* vol. 1 p. 408) notes that, “We cannot ignore an amazing fundamental attribute of Joseph: he does not take revenge. The hatred against him, his isolation during his youth, his being thrown into the pit, his sitting for more than a decade in prison—these were all forgotten during his meeting and reconnection with his brothers...” Moreover, as opposed to Esau who refrained, out of deference to his father, to take revenge on Jacob for stealing the birthright only as long as Isaac lived, Joseph, to his brothers’ great surprise, maintains his positivity towards them even after they return from Jacob’s burial.

How is Joseph able to ignore his brothers’ actions towards him and treat them so well after so many years of neglect, abuse and hatred? Rabbi Dr. Abraham Gottlieb of Bar Ilan University explains that while Joseph’s brothers anticipated that he would respond to their hatred with reciprocal vitriol, they were sorely mistaken. He [writes](#), “Unlike them, Joseph’s view of the world came from a place of love, everything being for the best. He perceived that every situation, whatever it might be, contained something positive, even when the process was drawn out and accompanied by physical and emotional suffering with no end in sight, even when his life was in danger...Joseph, in his wisdom, knew that in practice repaying hatred for hatred does not resolve any issue or contribute anything to the situation. Therefore he approached the reality logically, thinking what is good and seeing the good. He arrived at this approach by way of deep intellectual analysis of reality, finding a balance between what is right and proper, between the desired and the actual.”

This description of Joseph also fundamentally represents Israel’s attitude towards the Palestinians. Although often faced with great hatred, Israelis by a wide margin hope and yearn for peace with their Arab neighbors. This is why, despite repeated rocket attacks from Gaza, Israel continues to facilitate the transfer of goods and people through the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings. In fact, after a week of rocket attacks over Hanukkah forced Israel to close the crossings, Israeli [reopened the crossings](#) just three days later. Like the IDF soldier in the video, although often provoked with acts of violence, Israel nonetheless continues to work to improve the lives of Arabs across the region, due to a deep understanding that reciprocal hatred solves no problem and broaches no solution.

The Palestinian media outlets sharing the video undoubtedly intend focus on the girls’ defiance in the face of armed soldiers. Yet, those videos tell the Arab world a different story as well. Rather than depicting Israelis as weak, the videos depict a strength of resolve and an unwillingness to resort to violence that can and must resonate deep in the hearts of the Arab public. No other army in the Middle East would have reacted similarly, and that is to Israel’s credit. When the Arab world, including the Palestinians, finally halt their campaigns of hate and reciprocate Israel’s restraint, peace will become a real possibility. ■

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