

A New Family

Since early Fall this year, we've studied the book of Genesis and its many family-centered narratives. Mostly, the text zeroes in on one family – the Abrahamic family, trying to survive as it moves into the book of Exodus and its birth into nationhood. The recurrent message in Genesis was over chosenness: which of the family will carry the dreams through the next generation. That decision is never simple. On the contrary, the choice of one over another – who's in and who's out – is always conflict-ridden. When leafing through Genesis, we find G-d setting the tone of this theme of choice as early as Cain and Able, (ch 4) and yet again with Noah. (ch 6) Finally, G-d chooses a particular family to be His ambassadors of covenant and destiny with Abraham and Sarah. (ch 12)

But after that point, the focus on who is choosing shifts from G-d, in G-d's endless wisdom, to humankind, in our limited intellect. Abraham, not G-d, must make the difficult choice which of his two sons will carry his and G-d's message: Isaac or Yishmael. (ch 21) Then Isaac must bestow the blessing of covenantal continuity onto one of his two sons: Jacob or Esau. (ch 27) Ultimately, these stories bear out a similar message of pain, confrontation and severing of family.

Jacob, our final patriarch, loves Joseph most of all and chooses him for the role of prominence. But Joseph's sudden disappearance stunted the realization of Jacob's hopes. The family must then realign itself in the wake of tragedy. To which of his surviving children will Jacob impart his final blessing of covenant?

Thankfully, that question does not need resolution. In this week's portion, Parshat Vayichi, the final Shabbat reading from Genesis, the family is reunited. In the closing moments of Jacob's life, his twelve sons are huddled around his bed, leaning over his bedside, straining to hear their father's last words. To our surprise, Jacob keeps in step with his fathers, blessing each of his sons, favoring some, criticizing others. (ch 49) And we want to scream from the sidelines: 'No! Not again!' Why does Jacob seem to fall into the same trap that his fathers fell?

But a closer look shows how this event differs from Abraham and Isaac's choices. Unlike his father and grandfather, Jacob blesses each of his sons at the same time. All the brothers are present while receiving their blessings. The Midrash picks up on this novelty and expands upon it, suggesting that the brothers actually share each other's blessings. (49:28)

These final verses of Genesis give us insight into family, equality and

communication. For the family to progress there must be transparency, there cannot be secrets; secrets suggest preference. With his honest words, Jacob teaches his family the distinct and essential quality of each member.

On this Shabbat, may we remind ourselves of the uniqueness that defines and the likeness that unites us.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
Rabbi Menashe East