

Bringing meaning to life

Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BERESHIT

NOACH

LECH LECHA

VAYERA

CHAYEI SARA

TOLDOT

VAYETZEI

VAYISHLACH

VAYESHEV

MIKETZ

VAYIGASH

VAYECHI

VAYECHI

THE SELFISH BENEFIT OF SELFLESSNESS

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As Jacob's life draws to a close, his son Joseph decides to seize the opportunity of a blessing for his children from their holy grandfather. Jacob's eyesight has clearly deteriorated as he cannot recognise his grandsons.¹ Despite his father's decline in health, Joseph's admiration and respect for the elderly patriarch never vacillates, as expressed when he 'prostrated with his face toward the ground.'² However, given that we have already learned that Jacob's sight is wavering, with the Torah explicitly stating that his eyes 'were heavy with age and he was unable to see'³ this seems like a strange way for Joseph to display respect. Surely, a basic premise of showing respect is the other party's ability to recognize and appreciate it? If a simple reading of the text suggests that Jacob cannot see the actions of his son, what is the point in Joseph lowering his head?

Many later commentators divide the commandments into three main categories; relating to God, relating to one's fellow and relating to oneself.⁴ This final intrapersonal element of bettering oneself can be independently garnered from every commandment, and in essence underscores the very ethos of religious observance. In a number of places in the Torah, the Jewish people are commanded to emulate God.⁵ The Talmud teaches that one should: 'clothe the naked...visit the sick...comfort the mourner'⁶ because God does so and therefore one should: 'Be like Him! Just as He is gracious and compassionate, you shall be gracious and compassionate.'⁷

These imperatives point to the intended transformative and self-reflective nature of the commandments.

On the surface, their purpose is for people to strengthen their relationships with God and with others, but in essence they are indicative of the ultimate objective of self-refinement.

While Jacob can no longer see clearly and this may have nullified his need for visual respect from his son, Joseph is still nonetheless required to be a respectful human the visible act of lowering his head. In this manner, it seems that not only does sensitivity impact the beneficiary of an act, but it simultaneously sensitizes the one who bestows it. While the beneficiary of a good deed should, of course, be the focus of that good deed, the reflective nature of the act justifies it even if the recipient cannot appreciate it. This is proven by the Talmudic law that one is commanded to respect one's parents whether they are alive or dead.⁸ Similarly, we are taught that the greatest act of kindness one can perform is for the dead.⁹

As the dead can never reciprocate or acknowledge the act, this is considered the yardstick of whether or not the individual has truly internalised the essence of and the value behind the command. This deed highlights the thread that is woven throughout the interpersonal commandments, and teaches us the underlying message that **every selfless act performed contains incredible benefit for the performer.**

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the *parasha* and indeed the entire book of Genesis concludes with Joseph demanding that his descendants look after his bones after he dies, ensuring that this message which he represents is carried through as a legacy for the next generation.

As the book of Exodus begins, the seeds of compassion and character development are planted even before Jacob's family become a great nation.

For in order to build a great nation and to truly fulfil the Torah, one needs to first focus on others and, as we have learned from Joseph, in essence, this begins with reflecting internally and focusing on improving ourselves.

This concept that we learn from Joseph, of focusing first on oneself in order to ultimately impact our family, nation and the wider world, is taught through a profound statement of Rabbi Israel Salanter – the founder of the Modern Mussar Movement that focuses on Jewish Ethical Mindfulness:



When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn't change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn't change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world.

Notes

¹ Genesis 48:8.

² Genesis 48:12.

³ Genesis 48:10.

⁴ See for example Yaakov Etlinger, *Arukh Laner on Makkot 44a*; Samuel Eidels, *Maharsha on Bava Kamma 30a*; Vilna Gaon, *Biur Hagra on Isaiah 1:2*.

⁵ See for example Deuteronomy 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 13:5; 26:17; 30:16.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sota 14a.

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 133b.

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 31b.

⁹ Genesis Rabba 91:5.

Parasha Fact:

Vayechi meaning 'and he lived', is one of the three main parshiyot that contains a main protagonist dying as a significant feature. The title of all three of these parshiyot (the other two being Chayei Sarah and V'Zot Habracha) focus on life, suggesting importance of celebrating life rather than focusing on death.

Next Week in Shemot

Moses sees an Egyptian taskmaster killing a Hebrew slave, checks that no one is around and steps forward to intervene. The following day, a further encounter with two Hebrews reveals to Moses that someone had in fact seen him killing the Egyptian the previous day. Beneath the surface of this seeming contradiction within the story, lies the basis of a common psychological phenomenon regarding the duty upon each of us to act upon a sense of moral and social responsibility.