

PARASHAS VAYECHI

A Blessing in Disguise

It was the moment of final parting, a time charged with emotion and transcendent historical significance. Jacob lay on his deathbed, his twelve sons gathered beside him, and prophetically, he pronounced the individual blessings to each of his sons that would define their individual future roles in the broader context of the Jewish nation. Every word spoken in this room would resonate down the halls of history.

But let us listen for a moment to the final words Jacob addresses to Simon and Levi. "Simon and Levi are brothers," he declares, "who keep stolen weapons in their arsenal. Let my soul not come into their intrigues, nor my honor join in their conspiracies. For they killed people in their anger, and uprooted oxen in their willfulness. Cursed is their anger, for it is powerful, and their rage, for it is unyielding. I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."

Harsh words of rebuke, and undoubtedly deserved. But there it ends. Why didn't Jacob continue with some kind words for them as well? Why didn't he offer Simon and Levi at least a few words of blessing, as he did for the other brothers, to carry them forward into the perilous expanses of the future?

The commentators explain that the fiery dispositions displayed by Simon and Levi were like a pernicious cancer in their branches of the family. They were liable to flare up and erupt at any time in some untoward and destructive manner, posing an ever growing danger that at some point the damage would be irreversible.

Therefore, Jacob gave them the perfect blessing for their situation. He cursed not them but their anger and rage, and he decreed that they be dispersed among the other tribes so that their anger and rage would have less opportunity to find expression. Slowly but surely, their fierce nature would be subdued, until it no longer posed a hindrance to their spiritual growth and development.

A bright young boy attending a prestigious boarding school was having difficulty adjusting to the rigors and discipline of the program. His work was consistently poor, and he became surly and withdrawn. Before long, he was hanging on by a thread.

One day, one of his teachers gave him an assignment not to his liking by. Enraged, he tossed it to the ground and trampled on it.

The boy was called into the headmaster's office, reprimanded and suspended from the school.

The next day, the boy returned with his parents to the headmaster's office. The boy hung his head in shame and murmured an abject apology.

"Would you like to come back to our school?" asked the headmaster.

The boy nodded.

"Please wait outside, while I speak with your parents."

As soon as the door closed behind the boy, his mother said, "We are both so mortified by what happened. Such disrespect! We knew he was doing poorly, but this is the very worst that could have happened."

The headmaster smiled. "On the contrary, it is the very best thing that could have happened. Until now, he was just slipping and sliding, going nowhere slowly but steadily. He did not have the discipline and resolve to measure up to our high standards and his own superior potential. But this time he hit rock bottom, and it shocked him. He had to look at himself in the mirror and decide how he wanted to live his life. His desire to return tells us what his decision was. From here on, I expect to see steady improvement."

Both parents breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"Look at it," said the headmaster, "as a blessing in disguise."

In our own lives, we are all too often confronted with situations that bring out the worst in us, and regrettably, we are not always successful in overcoming our ignoble instincts. This is where we should concentrate our greatest efforts. We all pray for a life full of blessing, but if we think about it, the answer to these prayers is in our very own hands. If we can vanquish the more disagreeable aspects of our nature and achieve genuine personal refinement, we will indeed enjoy a truly blessed life.