



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Generation to Generation

As we conclude the reading of five books of the Torah we pause to contemplate its paramount teachings.

Indeed, the Sages of the Midrash pondered this very notion when examining the final sedra of the Torah. They interpreted Moshe's final blessing to the nation, *V'zot Habracha* (*Devarim* 33:1), within a wider framework. Namely, Moshe's blessing to his flock is actually a continuum from Avraham's blessing to his son, Yitzchak; Yitzchak's blessing to his son Yaakov; and Yaakov to his twelve sons. (*Devarim Rabbah* 11:1)

What is the deeper idea being articulated in this midrashic teaching?

The Sages in this passage carefully note that each one of these leaders began their blessing with the precise word where the leader before them left off. Each of the forefathers, and even Moshe, utilize the very same term which was used previously to commence their own blessing. For example, Avraham concluded his blessing to his son with the word *ברוך* (*Bereshit* 25:20) - and following

in his father's footsteps, Yitzchak launched his blessing to his son Yaakov with the identical word, *ברוך* (*Bereshit* 27:28).

The Sages cite a halachic ruling regarding prayer that they attach to this particular gesture of the forefathers. In a circumstance where the *sh'liach tzibbur* (prayer leader) loses his train of thought and is unable to continue, what does the halacha dictate? (Parenthetically, in ancient days often one would recite this passage without a text in hand and it was not uncommon for this occurrence to happen). The Midrash states that the person who steps in "begins with the blessing where the prior prayer leader left off." In other words, the person who is relieving the first prayer leader does not start from the beginning. If the mistake is made in the 8th blessing of the *amidah*, for example, it is at the 8th blessing where the reliever begins (and he does not go back to the beginning).

Interestingly, the Midrash claims that this law regarding prayer is based on the fact that our forefathers continued their blessing from where the prior figure had left off. We emulate their way when we adhere to this practice when presented with the issue of blessings of the *amidah*.

How are we to conceptualize this law? What is the deeper significance of the

concept of ‘Beginning a blessing where the other left off?’

Three noteworthy insights:

Mesorah:

The message of the Midrash touches on the importance of parents and teachers connecting the younger generation to the entire *Mesorah* going all the way back to Mount Sinai and the beginning of our peoplehood, commencing with Avraham.

Although one is blessed with fortune and great success and therefore one’s life has been enhanced, yet, it is improper to lose a grasp on one’s humility and modesty

The notion of *Mesorah*, is a bedrock principle of Judaism. The very first Jew, Avraham Avinu, is praised by the Almighty who successfully passed his teachings and his unique vision to his child. Hashem says: “For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem...” (*Bereshit* 18:19).

The Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l was enamored with this power of *Mesorah* - transmitting the tradition from one generation to the next. Not only does the Rav often emphasize this idea in his teachings, but he spoke of it as one of his earliest and lasting memories. He

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recalled from his days in *cheder* as a young boy that his Rebbe was teaching the episode of Yehuda confronting Yosef. The Rebbe questioned why Yosef asked the brothers if they had a father. He was already aware of the fact that his father was alive. What then did he mean? At this point the *melamed* launched into a poetic reading of the text in which Yosef was really concerned with the issue of the brothers perceiving their father not only as a biological parent but the very source of their lives. “Do you look upon your father as branches look upon the roots of the tree? Do you regard your father as the foundation of your existence?...Do you believe that the old father, who represents the old tradition, is capable of telling you something new, something exciting, something challenging that you didn’t know before, or are you arrogant, insolent, vain, and demand independence from your father? (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Concepts in Jewish Education*, 1975).

A Link In The Chain:

Rabbi Chaim Zaitchik (*Mayanei HaChaim* 1, *Toldot*), a renowned contemporary teacher of Mussar (1905-1989), posited that the Midrash is spotlighting the uniqueness of the forefathers and of Moshe Rabbeinu in their wholehearted dedication to preserve the accomplishment of their predecessors. Often, new leaders are apt to demonstrate their own talents and genius; they prefer to make a name for themselves. Merely perpetuating the work of the earlier generation is perceived by the new head as being shameful.

This was not the case with these righteous figures of our faith. The midrash emphasizes that the great individuals mentioned in the midrash minimize their own contributions and were dedicated to giving credit instead to their ancestors who paved a way for them to follow.

These great personalities preferred to place their personal ambition aside. They strove to stay on the course that was laid out for them. They aspired to become another link in the chain stretching from the earliest founding of our people to the end of days. The blessing that they received from the earlier generation was a treasure in their eyes that required utmost care and supervision so that it remained fully intact and pure.

Expand and Embellish:

Perhaps the most novel reading of this midrash is found in the writings of the *Shem MiShmuel*, Rebbe Shmuel Bornstein, the beloved Sochotchover Rebbe (1855 -1926).

Each great figure mentioned in the Midrash, in the words of the Rebbe, “widened the gate that was bequeathed to them from the prior generation.” Their greatness was not merely carrying on the tradition but enriching and expanding on that which was inherited from the prior generation (*Shem MiShmuel* 5672).

The Midrash is quick to point out that when conveying the blessing, they also added a new word of their own. Indeed, the blessing they received was given new form and meaning. In other words,

each subsequent forefather enhanced and upgraded the blessing that they received.

The Rebbe carefully examined the text of this Midrash. The specific term each figure chose to implement in their blessing contained significant meaning. Let us cite the following examples:

Avraham gave the blessing to his son Yitzchak employing the term *ברכה* (*Bereshit* 25:20). To give in this way is comparable to giving a gift (*matana* and the word *yiten*). One does so with the pure intent of bestowing on another, deserved or underserved, additional favor.

When Yitzchak blessed his son Yaakov he opened with the word, *ויקח*, where his father left off, but then concluded his blessing with the word *קריאה*, which means to call upon. The Rebbe of Sochotchov says that this term suggests a quality of blessing that intends to enrich and elevate that person's station in life. In this way Yitzchak's blessing added a dimension not found in the original blessing of Avraham.

Yaakov picked up where his father Yitzchak left off. He employed the word *קריאה* but then concluded his blessing with another word: *זאת*, 'this'. The Rebbe suggested that this alludes to the idea that although one is blessed with fortune and great success and therefore one's life has been enhanced, yet, it is improper to lose a grasp on one's humility and modesty. "This" and nothing more. Yaakov adds to the prior blessings the dimension of humility, modesty and groundedness

which must remain the most noble aspiration of a Jew and the nation of Israel - even amid accomplishment and achievement.

In sum, the Rebbe of Sochotchov suggested that the final sedra of the Torah represents the exquisite aspiration and desire of every generation to provide the next generation with richness of blessing - even more abundantly than what was experienced in their lifetime. This ambition is one of our people's loftiest conceptions. Throughout time and our history we as Jews strive to steadily enhance and improve one generation to the next. We are committed to spiritual ascent; to building on our successes.

A beautiful example of this idea can be seen perhaps in the numerous families who make aliyah to Israel. In many cases the parents know that it will be quite challenging to accomplish their own personal goals in a new and somewhat foreign setting but their true intent and objective in making a new home in Israel is in order to provide their children and generations to come with a more noble and elevated life.

May we be *zoche* to bequeath to our children and grandchildren blessings even more robust than we received in our lifetime, and thereby continually bring more light and sanctity to the world - one generation standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before them. *Le'dor va'dor nagid gadlecha. 'From generation to generation we will declare Your greatness.'* ■