Parashat Vayechi
A Leader's Final Moments
-Rabbi Boaz Genut-

He founded the company with his own two hands. It began as a small business with just a few employees, who became almost like family. Now, as he faces retirement, the company has grown tremendously and employs too many people to count. Those who began the journey with him waited at his retirement ceremony to hear words only he could speak.

This scenario sounds familiar to all of us, as it seems that we must only change the name of the company while the setting itself repeats itself. Our parasha relates a similar process and describes a similar setting to this one. Yaakov had created and nurtured an extensive family, effectively laying the foundation for the birth of the entire Jewish people. From someone who had run for his life from his brother, escaping to the great unknown, he had succeeded in establishing a family that would become a nation. Our parasha describes Yaakov's final moments as head of his family. Yaakov's clarity and wisdom, his deep understanding of the talents and nature of each of his children, as well as his prophetic foresight into their futures, bring him to bequeath to them a last will and testament reflective of the transition from the tightknit family unit of which they were part to the larger, national scale of a nation about to begin its birthing process.

When one examines Yaakov's messages to his children, one notices a striking difference between Yaakov's approach to his three older children, Reuven, Shimon and Levi, and the tone he takes with the rest of the brothers. Yaakov expresses anger and harsh criticism of the actions of his three older sons, while with the other brothers he takes a much softer and more positive approach. This obviously explains Yaakov's decision to pass the torch of leadership to Yehuda, his fourth son from Leah, who was parallel in his mind to Yosef, his first son from Rachel.

A deeper look at Yaakov's message for his three older sons reveals that at least with regard to two of them, Yaakov not only justifies their rejection from positions of leadership, but also guides them toward distinct future roles.

"Shimon and Levi are brothers; stolen instruments are their weapons. Let my soul not enter their counsel; my honor, you shall not join their assembly, for in their wrath they killed a man, and with their will they hamstrung a bull. Cursed be their wrath for it is mighty, and their anger because it is harsh. I will separate them throughout Yaakov, and I will scatter them throughout Israel" (Bereishit 49:5-7). Shimon and Levi lose their right to exist as independent tribes. They are divided and dispersed among the rest of the tribes. This dispersion can be viewed as a form of punishment, but it can also be interpreted as a reassignment based on their particular strengths. Thus, for example, Rashi cites our

Sages as follows: "There are no [itinerant] paupers, scribes or teachers of children except from [the tribe of] Shimon, so that they should be scattered. The tribe of Levi was made to go around to the threshing floors for heave offerings and tithes; thus he caused him to be dispersed in a respectable way." The presence of the poor in our lives enhances our feelings of pity for others and our desire to act with kindness, the presence of scribes and teachers enhances the study of Torah, and our regular encounters with Levites and Kohanim creates an ongoing connection with people dedicated to holiness and service to Hashem. It is in this way that Yaakov lays the groundwork for the birth of the people of Israel.

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