



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Vayechi: Holding the Tribe(s) Together

After the great trauma of the sale of Joseph and the family's reunification in Egypt, I always wonder whether the family of Jacob lived in a state of joyous harmony or in a tense but distant togetherness. (I have written about this elsewhere: <http://www.alexisrael.org/vayechi-scar-of-enmity>)

I. Whichever option is true, the scene in which all 12 sons stand around Jacob's deathbed receiving his final blessings is a remarkable one for the book of Bereshit/Genesis; the family has remained intact! Neither Abraham nor Isaac had the privilege of seeing all their sons within the family tradition, and now **all** of Jacob's sons form the foundational structure, the paradigmatic architecture of the Jewish people – the 12 tribes. How was this unity achieved?

One answer is that Jacob fosters and promotes the individuality of each family branch. As witnessed by the deathbed scene in which Jacob focuses on the individual features of each son, each tribe receives a differentiated blessing. No two tribes are alike, as no two sons are alike. Tribes are encouraged to foster their distinctiveness and diversity within the collective and are commended for their unique traits. This unity is not uniformity; it is a varied array of dispositions, talents, flaws and strengths that associate as a family notwithstanding individual differences. Our strength is in our difference.

II. This strength can become a weakness. Differences between tribes can rupture the family, as seen many times in Jewish history. Is there a lesson to be learned here that relates to the retention of a family collective?

Jacob's parting words conclude with the following summative verse:

All these are the 12 tribes of Israel,  
and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them,  
giving each man a blessing appropriate to them.

Most commentators read it as stating that each son received a blessing in accordance with his personal strength or tribal legacy, the emphasis being on the differentiated blessings.

Rashi is disturbed by a grammatical anomaly. It does not read “giving each man a blessing appropriate to HIM,” but rather “each man a blessing appropriate to THEM!” He comments:

Since Jacob blessed Judah with the strength of a lion and Benjamin the stealth of a wolf and Naphtali the grace of a gazelle, one might think that he did not include all of them in all the blessings. Therefore, Scripture states: “he blessed **them**.”

In other words, though each tribe has its uniqueness, its special trait, its individuality, Jacob blesses his sons that they should all receive in some manner, the blessing of their brothers.

What might this mean? A doctor, a professor or any professional may have a specialty, an area of expertise, but will also have a broad knowledge and appreciation of the wider field. A musician may specialize in one instrument, but play many others, albeit at a less expert level. This sense of focus and depth, balanced with breadth and scope give us perspective.

Likewise, Jacob knows each tribe will have a unique specialty, but he also blessed “them” that each should gain something from the other.

My teacher, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein z”l, used this Rashi to encourage us to look to other sectors and sub-communities of the Jewish world not in a sense of derision, but to learn from them; to ask what expertise, passion and values other communities have that we could learn and adopt?

Our Jewish world has many “tribes”, many different sectors. Each group has its own particular ideology and emphasis. But can we also appreciate and learn from the blessings of another tribe in the Jewish world?

**So here is a discussion for the Shabbat table:**

- Take two communities outside your own. (Do you need ideas? – Israel/diaspora; Sephardi/Ashkenazi, left-wing/right-wing, Haredi/Modern etc.)
- Look at the other group.
- What value, behaviour or emphasis do they have that you in your group could learn from?
- How might you implement that idea, that “blessing”, in your own community?

Shabbat Shalom!

