

A Blessing on Your Head (Vayechi)

Kind words are a creative force, a power that concurs in the building up of all that is good, and energy that showers blessings upon the world. -Lawrence G. Lovasik

Joseph son of Jacob enters with his own two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to visit with his bed-ridden father, Jacob (Genesis 48). Jacob inquires as to who is accompanying Joseph. Joseph responds that it is his two sons, and then Jacob asks that they come closer so he may bless his two grandsons.

Before continuing with the blessing, the Biblical narrative seems to go out of its way to mention that Jacob had trouble seeing. Jacob proceeds to kiss and hug his grandchildren and then, in what sounds like somewhat elaborate maneuvering, Joseph extricates his sons from Grandpa Jacob's embrace, so that they may now bow down to receive the formal blessing.

Biblical commentators give a range of interpretations to the above actions. Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475-1549), however, takes the narrative at face value. Jacob had trouble with his vision, Sforno explains. In order to properly bless the boys, he had to see them; hence, his request to bring them closer. The loving Patriarch kisses and hugs them, which Sforno says was so "his soul may attach to them and his blessing to them should come to pass".

Jacob then gives them blessings that are included in the blessings many traditional Jews pronounce to their children to this day on Friday nights ("May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe. May God bless you and safeguard you. May God illuminate His face for you and be gracious to you. May God turn His face to you and establish peace for you.")

Sforno then provides other examples of vision being a critical component of blessings, such as Moses viewing the entire land of Israel.

However, just a few verses later, after having just given his thesis as to the need to see in order to bless, Sforno makes an about-face. On the same visit Jacob blesses Joseph as well. Sforno, who understands that Joseph is not close enough for Jacob to see clearly, states that Jacob blesses and can bless Joseph without having to touch him, be near him or even see him.

Sforno seems to imply that while the common way to bless is to see the person or object one is blessing, people have the power to also bless at a distance without even seeing the party being blessed. Perhaps it was the strong and loving nature of the

Jacob-Joseph relationship that enabled this more powerful connection, bypassing the common method.

May we always be both recipients and deliverers of blessings – and may they all come true!

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Rabbi David Eliyahu Paley z"l. May his family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.