

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat Vay'chi

An Inconclusive Conclusion

As the book of Bereishit nears its conclusion, there is some “unfinished” business to be tended to. At first glance the issue is a local one, concerning a topic that has been hovering over the past few chapters: the reconciliation between Yosef and his brothers. While our initial impression is that in Parashat Vayigash, last week’s Torah reading, the brother’s had buried the hatchet in dramatic fashion, there was something unsettling, something one-sided about their rapprochement.

We hear Yosef’s words, and feel the raw emotion as he reveals to the sons of Yaakov that the man who has been tormenting them is none other than their long-lost brother. But what of the brothers? The Torah does not tell us what they said or, perhaps more importantly, what they felt. Did they finally come to see him as their brother? Did they see the error of their ways? Did they apologize to him? And even if they could not wrap their mouths around those difficult words, if they did not come to love or respect him, did they accept Yosef’s dreams not as delusional or self-serving, but as an accurate prediction of the future? Any intelligent observer, any reader of the text sensitive to the symbolic messages of Yosef’s dreams, is forced to acknowledge that Yosef’s

But what of the brothers? ... Did they finally come to see him as their brother? Did they see the error of their ways? Did they apologize to him?

dreams of economic and political superiority were clearly fulfilled. Did the brothers finally grasp the full import of Yosef's dreams, and accept the fact that Yosef had vision that far surpassed their own?

Parashat Vay'chi records the passing of Yaakov. Tragically, upon Yaakov's death, the brothers plead with Yosef not to exact revenge upon them. They tell Yosef that on his deathbed, their father ordered Yosef to do them no harm. They beg him to spare their lives and let them live out their days as his slaves. Although the Talmud debates whether or not Yaakov had actually addressed

Apparently, after all these years, the brothers still did not trust Yosef.

his sons' relationships with one another on his deathbed, or whether the brothers had concocted this dying wish for self-preservation, the painful truth is the same: Apparently, after all these years, the brothers still did not trust Yosef. Perhaps they suspected that his words of reconciliation had been motivated by

political expedience: In his glorified position it was unseemly that he had no family, no past. Perhaps they suspected that he tolerated their presence only as a means of reuniting with his beloved father. The Torah records Yosef's impassioned speech on this occasion as well: Once again, after 17 as their protector and benefactor, Yosef assures his brothers of his fidelity toward them. But did they believe him? Was the relationship healed?

Parashat Vay'chi is the final chapter of the book of Bereishit, in which the end of the story of a family is the beginning of the story of a nation. And yet, there is this uncertainty, this lack of resolution. Is this really the proper way to end a book, or to begin the epic tale of the origins of the Nation of Israel?

Perhaps a look back at the beginning of the book will help us appreciate its conclusion: The first two brothers, Cain and Abel, were murderer and victim respectively. Fraternal jealousy led to fratricide. As the chapters unfold, we find so many brothers who do not get along that we are quickly convinced

this is in fact one of the major themes of the book: Bereishit may be seen, not unjustifiably, as the story of sibling rivalry and family discord.

And that may be the greatness of the book's conclusion: Despite the jealousy and hatred the brothers had for Yosef, they do not resort to bloodshed. As is sometimes the case, the moral choice is no more than the lesser of two evils. The sale of Yosef is preferable to the murder of Abel at the hands of Cain, or to the fate Yaakov would have suffered by Esav's hand had God not intervened. Although the progress may seem small, it is progress nonetheless.

But the book does not end with the sale of Yosef. It does not end with Yosef overcoming impossible odds and rising to greatness. It ends as Yosef forgives his brothers, and cares for them for the rest of his life. This is true greatness of spirit. From beginning to end, the brothers' attitude toward Yosef ranges from outright animosity to ambivalence, yet they overcome their impulse to kill him, and Yosef takes their entire history to a new level when he forgives them. Framed in these terms, as we compare the morality exhibited in the beginning of the book to the end, mankind's progress becomes apparent; even in this sordid tale, some light shines through. The first steps to nationhood are taken when we finally become a family.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayichi.html>