

One Day Before . . .

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YOU ARE ON YOUR DEATHBED. YOUR LOVED ONES are gathered around you. It's your last chance; what do you tell them?

Our patriarch *Yaakov*/Jacob is on his deathbed. He summons his twelve sons: *Hei'asfu v'agidah lakhem eit asher yikra etkhem b'acharit ha-yamim / Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come.* [GEN. 49:1]

The Talmud [B. PESACHIM 56B] explains that *Yaakov* intends to reveal, to prophesy, literally *b'acharit ha-yamim*, the end of days! But as soon as he begins to speak, the prophetic spirit abandons him, and he is left to his own devices. So *Yaakov* offers his sons the words we read in this week's parashah, *Va-Yechi*. For example:

*Shimon and Levi are...lawless...I will...scatter them in Israel.
Zvulun shall dwell by the seashore, he shall be a haven for ships.
Asher's bread shall be rich, and he shall yield royal dainties.
[May all manner of blessing] rest upon the head of Yosef,
on the brow of the elect of his brothers.*

What is *Yaakov* saying? Is this imprecation? Prediction? Character analysis? Warning? Blessing? Among the commentators who speculate on *Yaakov's* motives, the 15th century Portuguese exegete *Abravanel* suggests that *Yaakov* is ruminating aloud — in front of all the brothers — as he considers from which of them will come the future kings of Israel.

This, perhaps, is not unlike the way parents sometimes speculate on their children's futures based on current interests, abilities, and behavior, though that tends to be done in private!

In the *JPS Torah Commentary*, *Nahum Sarna* describes this “last testament” of *Yaakov* as “blessings and curses, censure and praise, geographical

and historical observations” (p. 331). Sarna writes that medieval exegesis views Yaakov’s words in a prophetic light, while modern scholarship tends to see them as retrojections from later periods.

However you view Yaakov’s words, you would think that, with all his sons gathered ’round his deathbed, he would want to leave them with equally supportive, loving and encouraging words, a family ethical will of sorts.

When I read Yaakov’s words, I am sure that least a couple of his sons are thinking what one of our daughters, in the throes of adolescence, once said to us: “Is this how you want me to remember you?” It is tempting to take Yaakov to task for being insensitive and (still) playing favorites. Even if you’re on your deathbed, why speak to the children so bluntly, why treat them so unevenly?

On the other hand, shouldn’t you be brutally honest when you’re near the end? If not then, when? We may be troubled by Yaakov’s words to his sons. But we should not be troubled by the idea of a deathbed challenge; I am just a few months away from rabbinic ordination in large measure because of one.

Nearly five years ago, my father, Abraham Kremer, was dying. At age 90, his faculties were intact — other than some selective hearing loss. But medicine had done all it could. My two brothers and I visited him and his wife fairly often.

On one of those visits, something moved me to offer pastoral counseling of sorts. My father and I had never discussed spirituality, theology and the like. And I can’t say what moved me to broach such topics with him at this time; it just felt like the right thing to do.

In private conversation, I asked about a couple of family mysteries and he responded honestly. Did he have any regrets about his life? “No.”

When I asked if he had any “spiritual concerns,” I was thinking *olam haba*/afterlife, the soul. He said: “I don’t want a Rabbi ‘Cohen’ funeral, I don’t want a Rabbi ‘Schwartz’ funeral. There should be mixed seating. It should be brief. I don’t want to inconvenience anyone.” To which I responded, “Then don’t die!” After we chuckled, I asked whom he wanted to conduct his funeral. He looked up and said, “You.”

I was stunned. And motivated. I had led a few family funerals — graveside, mostly. This was different; this was my father! I spent the next two weeks distracted from the imminence of his death by reviewing the halakhot relating to dying and death, funeral and burial.

Years before, noting my changing interests, my father had advised me to transition my Hebrew calligraphy business into a career in commercial graphic design. Now, it seemed clear to me, to my wife Ellie, and to my brothers, that in telling me to conduct his funeral my father was telling me it was time to move on from design to the rabbinate.

Why the rabbinate? For years, in response to my art and to my involvement in my community's religious life, friends had been saying, "Jonathan, you should go to rabbinical school." And I would just smile ("right!"). But that *was* the path I was on, even if I couldn't see it or wouldn't admit it.

Six months after my father's funeral, I became a first-year student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. So I was both challenged and blessed, even if indirectly, by my father on his deathbed. And the experience helped me to hear our patriarch Yaakov's words in a different light. Recently, I asked my brothers if they had received any kind of last words, a final wish, a blessing, a *zetz*, from our father, anything similar to mine. They had not.

My mother-in-law, Julia Helfman, has explained many times, "I love my five children equally, but at times one or another needs more from me than do the rest." Likewise, my father wasn't expressing favoritism; rather, he recognized what I needed then and was resourceful in getting me to see it and act on it. And that changed my life.

So maybe Yaakov, too, wasn't playing favorites; he was just being honest, giving each boy what he felt that child needed. This may account for the wide disparities and seeming inequities in his final words. Indeed, the Torah tells us that Yaakov blessed his sons "*ish asher k'virkhato* / [each with] a parting word appropriate to him." [GEN. 49:28]

Sometimes, we wish to offer our loved ones a personal, nuanced blessing; that is what Yaakov gave his sons. At other times, a formulaic, even-handed approach is called for. *Birkat yeladim*/blessing the children is an example.

I didn't grow up with the home practice of *birkat yeladim* on *erev Shabbat*, but I eagerly adopted it when our first child, Aviva, was born. For over three decades, every week, in person, by phone, or over Skype, Ellie and I have been conferring the traditional blessing upon each of our three daughters, and now their spouses as well.

The words are the same for each child. But as I recite those words, I try to concentrate on this particular child, willing through my hands on a

head or through my voice over the phone an aura of protection, a channeling of spiritual energy, for what I feel is needed just now.

Occasionally, frustration or other intrusive feelings — related to the child or not — distract me during the blessing. Understanding that this happens, and to prevent any indication of favoritism, our wise tradition tells us: Recite. These. Words...Every. Time.

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Eliezer said: *V'shuv yom echad lifnei mitatkha* / Repent one day before you die (2:10). I will borrow that and recast it as “Bless your children one day before you die.” Which means, of course, every day...just in case! Even if only once a week, we are enabled to express unrequited love to our children through the formality and formula of birkat yeladim.

Our patriarch Yaakov does not rely on formula. Remember, in the Talmudic tale, Yaakov intends to reveal *b'acharit ha-yamim* / the end of days. But his intentions are thwarted; no one can know the end of days; we cannot predict our children's futures, not even our own tomorrow. Instead, Yaakov tells each son what he thinks the boy needs to hear.

We can learn from this to not wait until we're on our deathbeds to bless our children, but to open our hearts to them, to be honest with them, and to tell them what we think they need to hear, or, even, what we need to tell them.

We also learn to not wait until our parents are on their deathbeds to ask the challenging questions, but to have the important conversations, be they practical or spiritual, factual or emotional.

You want to offer the blessing, you want to ask those questions, you want that conversation “*yom echad lifnei* / one day before...”

It could change your child's life; it could change yours.

RABBI JONATHAN KREMER received ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary in May 2014. A renowned Jewish calligrapher and artist, he has been the designer of Kerem since its inception. He gave this version of his senior sermon at Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El, Wynnwood, Pennsylvania, on December 14, 2013. Jonathan is currently serving Congregation Beth Judah, Ventnor, New Jersey.