

Valerie Sopher, January 11, 2009

Background information on Iyyunei T'filah from the URJ biennial:

An *Iyyun T'filah* (more than one are *Iyyunei T'filah*) is an introduction to a prayer in the service, or a brief perspective on a current event or the Torah portion. It literally means something akin to, "directing prayer." It can be especially meaningful for the congregation when all *Iyyunei T'filah* are connected (either thematically or aesthetically) from the beginning to the end of the service. Unlike a sermon or *d'var Torah*, these are briefer in duration and more frequent in appearance, thus punctuating the entire *t'filah* experience with spiritual food for thought.

Introduction

As we will see, today's Torah portion, *Vayechi*, is about blessings.

Jacob blesses his two grandsons, who he sees for the first time, and his twelve sons, who he sees for the last.

Vayechi concludes the Book of Genesis.

Genesis starts with a blessing with God creating the universe and setting apart the seventh day and making it holy. In blessing this day, God has sanctified time, not the tangible earth or the visible heavens but each second, minute and hour of this day.

Before we resume our service on p. 192, let's take a moment of silent meditation to reflect on the blessing of being together on this sacred day and bring the peace and joy of Shabbat into our hearts.

Iyyun - Nisim b'chol yom

Nisim b'chol yom (which starts on p. 198) are the blessings for daily miracles based on the Talmud's instruction for expressing gratitude upon waking each morning to the phenomena of a new day.

The biblical references in these blessings correspond to daily mundane activities. For example, upon getting dressed, one blesses God who clothes the naked - the biblical reference is to God clothing Adam and Eve. Or, upon fastening one's belt, one blesses God who girds Israel with strength, a reference to the Psalm: "Oh God, our deliverer . . . Who is girded with might."

As Rabbi Richard Sarason writes: "The morning blessings literally wrap us in biblical imagery of divine goodness, to which the appropriate human response is gratitude."

Iyyun - Amidah

The Amidah, or Shemoneh Esrei or ha T'filah ("The Prayer) is a series of blessings.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman describes the Amidah as "a Jewish conversation with God: and he tells the story of Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha who said: "I once entered into the innermost part of the sanctuary to offer incense and I saw the Lord of Hosts seated upon a high and exalted throne. God said to me, 'Ishmael, my son, bless me!' I replied, 'May it be Your will that Your mercy may suppress Your anger and prevail over Your other attributes, so that You may deal with Your children with mercy.' And God nodded to me."

What does it mean to bless God?

What does God need from us?

Perhaps one answer is from Plaut who says: Every blessing one bestows is at core a prayers since we ask God to help accomplish what we cannot do alone.

Iyyun - Hoda'ah

Hoda'ah. A prayer of Thanksgiving.

Todah. Thank you. They come from the same root.

It has been said that the Hebrew word for blessing - b'rachah - derives from b'reichah, a spring, so that a blessing is a spring that flows constantly, its waters increasing.

Before we say this blessing, please share aloud:

What are you thankful for? What fills you up? What are the blessings in your life?

Iyyunei for drash

Introduction to reading of Jacob's blessings.

We are going to hear a reading of Jacob's blessings to his twelve sons by Mark and Jan Taksa.

This poem, like the Song of the Sea, is one of the more ancient texts in the Bible. The antiquity of the language makes it less readily accessible, translation is painstaking and the commentators vary widely in their interpretations. The strong imagery, often animalistic, may be a collection of old tribal songs and memories put into poetic form. It may help to understand that in some cases the blessing includes a tribal totem or symbol.

Today we are using Robert Alter's translation. You do not have a copy to read along

with. Listen. Pretend you are at a poetry reading or imagine you're there, at your father's bedside hearing him bless your brothers - and you.

<Reading Genesis 49:1-33>

Conclusion

So these are Jacob's blessings. It may be hard to see the blessing in some of his remarks to his sons. The commentators say these may be more than blessings - they're curses, prophecies, warnings, character analysis, motivational speeches.

Yet, the text emphasizes blessing three times - "blessing them, each according to his blessing, he blessed them." They're blessings.

Perhaps the poem is something else when viewed in the context not only of the whole parashah, not only as a denouement to the four parashat that dramatically tell Joseph's story, but as the end of the book of Genesis, the story of our ancestors, a family's story, and as a transition to a new chapter. For now we are the twelve tribes, the Children of Israel, and Israel/Jacob is blessing us as we begin the story of how we became a nation.