

Bringing meaning to life

Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BERESHIT

NOACH

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VAYERA

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TOLDOT

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05

CHAYEI SARA

BLESSED WITH EVERYTHING

One of the most elusive – and perhaps pervasive – of all desires is that of having ‘everything’. People want ‘more’, they wish they could ‘have it all’. But what does it actually mean to have everything in life?

We are told in no uncertain terms that: ‘God blessed Abraham bakol (with everything).’¹ Eliezer became responsible for ‘everything’ that was Abraham’s,² and later, ‘Abraham gave everything that was his to Isaac.’³ Immediately after this, Abraham went on to give gifts to his other children.⁴ This implies that whatever it was that he had received from God and passed onto Isaac could not have been physical, tangible items, for then there would have been nothing left to give to his other children. The Talmud grapples with this idea, bringing no less than six interpretations of what exactly bakol – ‘everything’ means. Suggested interpretations

include: not preventing the loss of the Abrahamic name, having a daughter whose name is bakol, astrological skills that kings of the east and west seek, a special stone that heals people, the fact that Esau’s rebellion did not occur in Abraham’s lifetime and Ishmael’s repentance.⁵ With all these interpretations for the term ‘bakol’ the question remains, how are we to know which is correct?

Perhaps, rather than being mutually exclusive, all the interpretations are indeed correct, such that rather than each interpretation representing a distinct answer, each could represent a different expression of the same answer.

This can be explained by classifying the different opinions into two types. One category relates to Abraham’s investment in his children, whether through actually bringing them into the

world, or through the honorable role that they played and legacy that they left behind. Rashi explains that the numerical value of ben (son) is equivalent to that of bakol (everything), implying that our children are everything.⁶

In Abraham’s case, his descendants were one of the greatest blessings he received from God, and were also his greatest blessing to the world, in that they became the torch from which his message of ethical monotheism continues to burn.

The second category relates to providing for those in need, whether spiritual guidance or physical healing, suggesting that helping others is ‘bakol’, everything. The common denominator spanning both categories of interpretation is that of the blessing of a meaningful contribution to the world.



Earlier, God empowers Abraham with the ability to bless others,⁷ and the Midrash explains that when Abraham gives Isaac ‘everything’, he blesses him with the ability to bless others.⁸ Thus the blessing does not just stay with Isaac, but rather it continues through to Jacob as he declares to his brother: ‘I have everything,’ implying that this was all he needed.⁹ It seems that all the interpretations point to one clear idea that is passed down from generation to generation.

To have ‘everything’ is to have the ability to bless others. The greatest gift that exists is the gift of giving itself.

Notes

¹ Genesis 24:1.

² Genesis 24:2.

³ Genesis 25:5.

⁴ Genesis 25:6.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Batra 16b.

⁶ Rashi on Genesis 24:1.

⁷ Genesis 12:2.

⁸ Genesis Rabba 61:6.

⁹ Rashi on Genesis 33:11.

Parsha Fact:

Chayei Sarah is one of only six parshiyot named after a person, and the only one named after a woman

Next Week in Toldot

All too often we may despair and get disappointed with the blows that life throws our way. It is not an easy ride, and it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture, the knowledge that everything is part of a greater plan. Hidden within an unusually detailed description of Isaac digging wells, we find a profound message of faith, that offers hope and perspective to all of humankind.

שבת שלום