

Vayechi: An Affirmation of Family?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l -- [Family, Faith and Freedom](#)

Genesis is not about power. It is about families. Because that is where life together begins. The Torah does not imply that there is anything easy about making and sustaining a family.

Sibling rivalry is a repeated theme of the book. The Psalm tells us “how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together.” It might have added, “and how rare.” Almost at the beginning of the human story, Cain kills Abel. There are tensions between Sarah and Hagar that lead to Hagar and Ishmael being sent away. There is rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers, in both cases coming close to murder. Yet there is no diminution of the significance of the family. To the contrary, it is the main vehicle of blessing. Children figure as central to God’s blessing no less than the gift of the land. It is as if the Torah were telling us, with great honesty, that yes, families are challenging...There is no guarantee that we will always get it right...But this is our most human institution...

- Is family the primary way you structure your life? If yes -- why? If no -- why not?
- Does “chosen family” serve the same function?

Genesis ends on these three important resolutions: first, that grandparents are part of the family and their blessing is important. Second, Jacob shows it is possible to bless all your children, even if you have a fractured relationship with some of them. Third, Joseph shows it is possible to forgive your siblings even if they have done you great harm...

People who look to the state, politics and power, to deliver the good, the beautiful and the true – the Hellenistic tradition – tend to regard the family and all it presupposes in terms of fidelity and responsibility as a distraction. But for people who understand not just the importance of politics but also its limitations and dangers, relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, grandparent and grandchildren, and siblings, are the most important basis of freedom...

- What does Rabbi Sacks miss in his depiction of a focus on the state or nation above family? What does he get right?
- What is missed by a complete reliance on either state or family to the exclusion of the other?

James Q. Wilson put it beautifully: **“We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former’s affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter’s tests, judgements, and demands.”**

That, surprisingly, is what Genesis is about. Not about the creation of the world, which occupies only one chapter, but about how to handle family conflict. As soon as Abraham's descendants can create strong families, they can move from Genesis to Exodus and their birth as a nation.

I believe that family is the birthplace of freedom. Caring for one another, we learn to care for the common good.

- Does this ring true? Does one's ability to navigate conflict with family translate into successful care for the common good?