



The Blessing of Self-Awareness • Parshat Vayechi

Jacob, on his deathbed, gathers his children and addresses each one individually (Gen. 49:1-27). The genre of his speech defies easy categorization. The concluding verse identifies Jacob's words as blessings, "Each one according to his blessing, he blessed them" (Gen 49:28). Yet, even a cursory review of the blessings makes one wonder if they were misnamed. There are cryptic poetics related to the characteristics of each tribe, particularly pertinent to their eventual geographic divisions, and even criticisms; Jacob, for example, chastises Reuben for his impetuosity and condemns Shimon and Levi's anger. How are we supposed to understand these statements as blessings?

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, a twentieth century leader of the Mussar Movement, suggests that Jacob bestows upon his children the gift of self-awareness. Many people, Rabbi Wolbe argues, live their entire lives without any knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses. Jacob's censuring of Reuben, Shimon, and Levi's negative traits is considered a blessing since it provides them necessary feedback for their respective futures. As 14th century commentary Gersonides already notes, with this knowledge, they can attempt to address their deficiencies and improve their characters.

In her book, *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*, industrial-organizational psychologist Dr. Tasha Eurich points to Rabbi Wolbe's teachings to

highlight the importance of self-awareness in Judaism, writing that "in the Jewish faith, self-knowledge has been called 'the prerequisite to any self-improvement.'" Dr. Eurich summarizes the powerful benefits of self-awareness as extracted from the research. It is correlated with happiness, better relationships, enhanced career success, stronger moral behavior, and more effective leadership. Yet, accurate self-awareness is elusive. Dr. Eurich notes that 95% of people think they are self-aware, while research indicates that only 15% are adequately self-aware. "That means," she quips, "on a good day, about 80% of people are lying about themselves—to themselves."

In pursuit of self-awareness, many people introspect and think deeply about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The challenge with introspection is that it can backfire. Researchers report that for some people, more time introspecting leads to less insight about themselves (Grant, Franklin, and Langford, 2002). Ironically, internal blind spots and biases block self-awareness through personal introspection. Consequently, it is often the insights of others that pave the road to self-awareness. This is the blessing Jacob provides for his sons.

Rabbi Wolbe's teacher, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz also points to the importance of Jacob's identification of his children's character traits as essential to the narrative. Nahmanides and Sforno already note that the blessings were uniquely directed towards each son in particular –"each

one according to his blessing he blessed them.” Rabbi Levovitz elaborates on these differentiated blessings. He suggests that each blessing targets the natural predisposition and temperament of each respective tribe. The blessing would not work if it hadn’t been individualized to each son’s character. As Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb writes in *The Person in the Parasha: Discovering the Human Element in the Weekly Torah Portion*, Jacob knew how to, “bless them with the particular

resources that they will need as they march forward with varying talents and dispositions into their historical roles.”

Following in Jacob’s footsteps, one of the biggest blessings we can bestow upon other people is offering guidance so that they can discover their own strengths and weaknesses. This sacred task needs to be done with sensitivity, care, love, humility, and wisdom. If done properly, this gift of self-awareness can be the greatest blessing of all.

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Character Challenge: Identify a positive quality in someone else and tell them how and why you appreciate that trait.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Praise, and how we administer it, is a fundamental element in leadership of any kind. Recognizing the good in people and saying so, we help bring people’s potential to fruition... The right kind of praise changes lives.” (“How to Praise,” *Covenant and Conversation*).