

Dear Chavraya,

There is that which comes to us from generations past in the manner of things. We are joined to beloved relatives by a pair of candlesticks, a pocket watch, a precious tablecloth, or perhaps a set of plates upon which food once placed to sustain is now but a distant memory of taste and smell. If we are lucky, perhaps a hand-scrawled recipe remains upon a yellowed card, a living link, the possibility to recreate. *Nachalah/inheritance* also means “stream,” that which flows from generation to generation. An inheritance comes to us at times as money, at times as heirloom treasures, at times as words.

Words that encourage and sustain, offering praise and confidence in the child’s ability to go forth in the world beyond the presence of parent or mentor can be an inheritance most beloved. Words can also be a cruel inheritance, transmitting a burden from which the child can only struggle to come out from under, yearning to send it back upon the stream to its source. In this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*, and in the Haftarah, an inheritance of words is given to those gathered around the bed of the dying Jacob, and to Solomon at the bed of his dying father, King David.

In Hebrew, an inheritance of words is known as an “ethical will,” a *tzava’ah*. Of the type that encourages and conveys confidence, an ethical will can be a great blessing, and of the type that burdens, an ethical will can be a curse. Of those gathered around the dying patriarchs in the readings for this Shabbos, some receive words that shall be of blessing in their lives, while others receive words that can only be as a curse. Jacob speaks to Reuben, his first-born, honoring him as “privileged in rank and privileged in power,” and then adds with words that must have stunned, “but instability like water does not permit you this privilege.” Shimon and Levi are condemned for their use of violence, Jacob separating himself from them from beyond the grave, “my will must not enter into their council, my glory must not join in their assembly.” The greatest blessing is reserved for Yosef, “a noble, outstanding son, already at the source.”

David’s words to Solomon form an “unethical will.” Telling Solomon of all that his enemy, Yo’av, did to him, he then tells his son: “And you shall do according to your wisdom, and do not let his hoary head go down to the grave in peace.” It is the worst of wills, passing on the unfinished business of parent to child, and here, a cruel double message, “do according to your wisdom...” but don’t let him go peacefully to the grave.”

As the first book of the Torah, *B’reishit/Genesis*, comes to its close, the true inheritance of *Parashat Vayechi* that is given to us is in its name, *and he lived*. Referring to Jacob, it is a reminder to each of us that the inheritance we leave, of word and deed, is a reflection of who we were in life. If our lives are lived in the way of blessing, so shall our memories remain a blessing, a precious legacy in the lives of those we touched.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor