

Vayechi 2015/5775

D'var Torah by Cantor Ken Richmond

Temple Israel of Natick

inspired by a dvar Torah by Rabbi Michael Levy & the Ruderman Foundation

In this week's Torah portion Vayechi, we reach the famous scene where Jacob, nearing the end of his life, blesses his family, beginning with a special blessing for his grandchildren, Menashe and Ephraim. People often ask why we bless boys on Friday night that they should be like Ephraim and Menashe, when we bless girls that they should be like our Matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, & Leah). The simple answer is that this blessing comes directly from our Torah portion, though other explanations invoke Ephraim and Menashe's ability to keep Judaism alive in exile, or their ability to get along despite all of the family *meshugas*. I want to draw your attention to another aspect of this famous scene, however, which I had never considered until reading a d'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Levy, through the Ruderman Foundation, a Foundation based in Newton that advocates for the inclusion of people with disabilities throughout the Jewish community.

As we remember, Joseph lines up his sons with the elder Menashe, by Jacob's right hand, and the younger, Ephraim, by Jacob's left, so he can bless them, as would be the custom, with the stronger, right-hand blessing going to the first born. Rabbi Michael Levy describes what happens next:

Observing this, Jacob's son Joseph, the father of the two boys, feels compelled to correct his father, both verbally and by moving Jacob's hands. He reminds his father that he should place his right (primary) hand on Menashe, the first-born son.

This might be the first recorded incident in which a non-disabled individual assumes that age and/or physical disability automatically result in diminished intellect or misguided judgment.

Jacob goes on, of course, to calmly let Joseph know that he knows what he is doing and foresees that Ephraim's tribe will be greater than Menashe's. Rabbi Levy calls Jacob a "self-advocate" who is able to let others around him know that despite his real or perceived disabilities, he still can do many things himself. As a person with some physical disabilities himself, he goes on to say:

Frequently, many of us with physical disabilities encounter people who, like Joseph, assume that we can't judge situations well. Once, as I tried to walk down subway stairs, a well-meaning commuter grabbed me from behind, assuming that I wanted to take the escalator. I wish I had maintained Jacob's calmness and dignity when I responded.

Often, a waiter observing a non-disabled person and a person with a disability together will ask the non-disabled individual "What does HE want?" After 3500 years, the stereotype remains.

For me, as for many of us, these issues are personal, as either we or members of our families or friends have disabilities. I have been blessed with an amazing sister who has had disabilities since surviving several life-threatening medical conditions as a baby, and she and I have been blessed with amazing parents who cared for her. Thanks to their advocacy, my sister Amy is now able to live in a group home, to work in a supervised workshop, and to live independently, with the help of her home's support staff. I always marvel at how much Amy can do independently despite her limitations. Using the term that Rabbi Levy uses for Jacob, she is an amazing self-advocate, and not only in regards to making sure everyone in the family knows about her birthday for months in advance and what she would like to receive. When she was travel training to learn how to take the train to Natick, on the first try, she got off in Natick Center while we were waiting for her at the West Natick station. We had started to worry when she

didn't show up, but a few minutes later, I got a call on my cell; pre-cell phone, she had calmly found the nearest store and asked to use their phone. Then, she successfully lobbied my parents to get her a cell phone so she wouldn't be in that situation again. The next time when we met her in Cambridge to take the train to Natick, we were surprised that not only had we come prepared with the train schedule, but she had on her own figured out which trains we could take. There are many more examples, but Amy is constantly surprising not only strangers, but also her own family, with what she can do, given the right support.

Rabbi Levy goes on to say that Jewish institutions including synagogues have much work to do to take down barriers that prevent participation by Jews with disabilities, and that families, institutions, and people with disabilities themselves can do much to teach each other how best to empower those with disabilities. Here at Temple Israel we have done much, and we have more to do to be inclusive of all. We have received supports for our special needs students from the Gateways Foundation (founded by the Ruderman family), and are applying for a grant to help support a new teen *madrichim* program, in which our teens would be trained to supplement our adult teachers and aides in supporting students of various needs. Our community includes adults and children on the autistic spectrum, with Downs Syndrome, with ADHD, with hearing and visual impairment, with mental illness, and a variety of physical limitations. I am proud that our Bima Accessibility Committee, led by Warren Manning, is working on a plan to make our bima accessible to all. We welcome your help and suggestions, your input and questions in the ongoing conversation and quest to empower those of all abilities in our community.

I want to close with Rabbi Michael Levy's words:

“The 3500-year-old “physical disability equals poor judgment” stereotype is not likely to disappear in our lifetime. May God help all of us to face this disability stereotype with dignity, as we repeatedly prove that the stereotype is a mis-perception.”