

The Story Lines Project
 Rabbi Lisa Edwards
 Parashat Vayichi
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Remember that old billboard/ bumper sticker that read:
 "The family that prays together stays together?"

Do you believe it? How many of us can testify to it? I speak to many people who, as children, prayed with their family – or at least went to church or synagogue with them – and yet find themselves as adults quite alienated from their family of origin (often from their religion of origin as well).

A recent survey suggests that churchgoing people tend to be happier and more satisfied than their a-religious peers. Is that because they pray? No, says the survey, it's the people who attend religious services *and also have networks of church-based friends* who report more life satisfaction. Those who just go to church but have few or no friends in the congregation are not among those who "tend to be happier and more satisfied."¹

Knowing this community, I believe that new survey. Two weeks ago at Hanukah, 136 people – mostly BCC members – turned up here to help BCC member Harriet Perl celebrate her 90th birthday.

On the other hand, a faith-based friendship network doesn't guarantee anything. BCC has its share of well-connected, "friended" members who nonetheless experience bouts of depression, or just plain loneliness or unhappiness in their lives.

Neither prayer nor family nor friendship circles bring with them promises of happiness or a "satisfaction-guaranteed" seal of approval on one's life. But they do bring the promise of people gathering around in support when difficulties arise.

I bring this up partly because we are approaching the end of yet another secular year (time flies!), which brings with it another opportunity to examine our lives and make a few resolutions, etc.

And I bring it up partly because, this week, Jews the world over – including here – are finishing our annual study of *Bereshit*. Yes this week is the exciting season finale of the Book of Genesis --which ends with Parashat Vayechi [Ya'akov]– in which, like any self-respecting season finale, no fewer than two of our main characters die – Jacob and his favorite son, Joseph.

In the first half of this portion, just before Jacob dies, he gathers all his 12 sons around him (they have all outlived him after all) and bestows upon each one of them a different "blessing." {A topic for another time is what happened to Jacob's 13th child – Dinah – the only daughter, who has gone missing after her difficult encounter a few chapters earlier. But as I said, a topic for a different time}

The commentators question whether "blessing" is the right word for what Jacob says to each son, for Jacob begins by saying "I will tell you what will come to you in the end of days," [49:1], and then he proceeds to speak very different words to each one – each seems to be part blessing, part fortune cookie fortune, part description of what each son has done or is like – their nature or more often, what animal they resemble [ex., a lion cub is Judah Issachar is a strong-boned donkey, Dan will be a serpent on the highway].

One might question – as we did last night at Torah study – how the sons responded to these varied words from their father. Some of the blessings seem better than others; some are long and some are short. Did it induce jealousy among the brothers (jealously has long been a problem among these brothers anyway)? The text doesn't really give us any indication how they all responded.

The commentators on the Torah, however, as is their wont, expend a lot of effort trying to interpret the precise meaning of the words Jacob speaks to each son, and, as usual, they come up with many explanations, but no one really satisfactory explanation (not to me anyway).

This whole poetic passage ends with this verse:

"All these are the tribes of Israel – twelve – and this is what their father spoke to them, and he blessed them, each one according to his blessing he blessed them" [49:28] *va-yivarekh otam ish asher k'vir'kha-toe bei-rakh otam.*

¹ Time Magazine, December 20, 2010, p.24

It's in that last verse that I find satisfaction (I and other readers too) – “each one according to his blessing” – “each according to his appropriate blessing.” Each son of course is different from the others, and here for sure, if not all along during their long lives, Jacob acknowledges not only that each of his sons is a different person, he acknowledges – by giving each son appropriate blessing – that he knows the differences between them, that he sees each one for who he is.

Wasn't that a moving poem that Leslie Tuchman read earlier this evening? Perhaps at Leslie's mother's death, their roles were reversed from Jacob and his sons – for that poem tells us that Leslie surely saw her mother for who she was.

And wasn't it [won't it be] inspiring to have Judge Groman sworn in for her second term right here at BCC by another BCC member judge? What an opportunity – thank you, Donna (and Chris) – for allowing us the chance to kvell over one (two really) of our members. What a lovely way, Donna, to celebrate your accomplishments with your BCC family and friends. Thank you!

And how lovely to have BCC's former Cantor Don Croll, with us tonight, sharing his music and his neshoma. And to have our current Cantor, Juval Porat, just being a prayer-er tonight, attending services even though he is not obligated to be here, to take the opportunity to meet his colleague and new friend, Cantor Croll.

Remember that recent survey I told you about? “People who attend religious services *and have rich networks of church-based friends* reported more life satisfaction than those who go to church but have few or no friends in the congregation.”

I would add: people who come to BCC and are willing to see each BCCer for who that person is ---appreciate each person — are the ones with a richer congregational experience, and I dare say, more life satisfaction.

Seeing each person for who that person is requires getting to know each of us, and requires that each of us be willing to be known. Next week we're going to begin an exciting project that has been in the works for a few months now, a project that will help each of us reveal ourselves, and help us get to know each other better.

We're calling it *The Story Lines Project*, and with it each one of us will be invited to help create the new wall behind the new ark in our new sanctuary. Do you all know we're moving in March or April to our new building? Just west of here at 6090 W. Pico. Through the *Story Lines Project* each member of our community will have a chance to contribute our own stories to the sacred stories already held safe in the ark on the bimah wall.

In the next two months each BCC member will be invited to submit a story – your story -- about your relationship to BCC, to Torah, to Judaism. Your story, together with all other stories will be a witness to BCC's vibrant and colorful life made possible by its members. Once gathered, fragments of our stories – each one reflecting who that person is -- will be written by us in our own handwriting on copper strips, which will become an integral part of the Bimah wall surrounding the Ark holding our sacred Torahs in the new sanctuary. – Thus together, with our own hands, and hearts, we will create a wall of “story-lines.”

Don't fancy yourself a writer? Have no fear, January here will be filled with writing workshops led by several of our own BCC writers and teachers. In the workshops facilitated by our talented writers we'll explore the process of writing something meaningful and special, a portion of which will be written on to a copper strip that will then be integrated into the bimah wall. Think of it as an extra special Torah verse of the week – for our stories too are part of the Torah of our lives and our life at BCC.

[A special web-page with examples and renderings of the new Bimah wall, a submit-form, and more details on the project will launch on December 23rd. The workshops and writing will happen in January.]

Imagine our words, our stories, inscribed for all time in the sacred space of our congregation. Imagine each of us giving our congregation and each other what Jacob gave each of us his twelve sons: *k'vir'kha-toe bei-rakh otam*. “a blessing that reveals each of us for who we are.”

I can hardly wait to read yours.

Shabbat shalom & as we say whenever we finish a book of Torah:

Khazak, khazak v'nitkhazek

Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another