Blessings--Fulfilled and Not Yet Fulfilled: Thoughts on Parashat Toledot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Toledot

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""...and by thy seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves" (Bereishith 26:4).

In this week's Torah portion, God assures Yitzhak that the nations of the earth will find blessing in his descendants. God had made a similar statement to Yitzhak's father, Abraham; and later makes this statement to Yitzhak's son, Yaacov. The children of Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaacov--the people of Israel--have a special destiny. They live not only for themselves and their immediate families; rather, they live for the benefit of all humankind.

In many ways, this promise of God has been fulfilled throughout history. The people of Israel--the Jews--have made incredible contributions to humanity and have been a genuine blessing to countless human beings over the centuries. The Bible has been a powerful force in shaping Western civilization. Jewish prophets, sages and poets have had a profound positive influence on innumerable people. In the modern period, Jewish individuals have made incredible contributions in the arts and sciences. The State of Israel, in spite of its enemies and detractors, has been a beacon of justice and democracy in a part of the world characterized by tyranny and lack of freedom.

Some perceptive non-Jews have recognized the blessings given to humanity by the Jews. The historian, Paul Johnson, in his History of the Jews, has written: "Certainly the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place....To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral

furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place."

While Paul Johnson and many others have expressed appreciation for the Jews' blessings to humanity, much of humanity has not been as forthcoming. Indeed, Jews have suffered--and continue to suffer--under a burden of anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, anti-Israel progaganda etc. Enemies of Jews seem predisposed only to find fault in the Jewish people, and not to see the virtues and blessings of the Jews.

God assured Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaacov that the nations of the earth would find blessing in the people of Israel; and assuredly, the nations of the earth have received many blessings through the Jewish people and through individual Jews. Yet, there is a long way to go before God's promises are truly fulfilled. The Jews have so much more to contribute to the betterment of humanity, and will continue to strive to be a light unto the nations.

But God's promises will not really be fulfilled until the nations of the world openly and lovingly acknowledge the unique positive contributions of the people of Israel to the human family, until they rid themselves of the scourge of anti-Semitism, until they relate to Jews and to the Jewish State with respect and appreciation.

Jews are eternal optimists. We believe confidently that we will live up to God's expectations and that the nations of the world will find blessing in us--and will acknowledge these blessings lovingly. When God makes a promise, He will keep it.

Angel for Shabbat