Blessings: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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Angel for Shabbat—Parashat Toledot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The rivalry between Jacob and Esau came to a head when it was time for Isaac to give his blessing. As things turned out, Jacob received the blessing through a ruse. Esau was enraged and demanded a blessing also; but although Isaac did bless Esau, he did not revoke the main blessing he had given to Jacob.

Receiving Isaac's blessing was obviously of great importance. The recipient would thereby be anointed as Isaac's successor. We might have imagined that the blessing would have focused on Isaac's prayer that his son carry on the faith of Abraham, be successful in teaching others about the One God, and generally be a role model of righteousness.

But the actual blessing was quite different: "May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fat places of the earth and plenty of corn and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow to you…Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you." The blessing focuses entirely on worldly matters—prosperity, power, victory over enemies.

We gain insight into Isaac's thinking when we consider his words of blessing to Jacob later in the parasha. "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful, and multiply you that you may be a multitude of people; and give you the blessing of Abraham to you and to your seed with you that you may inherit the land in which you are a sojourner and which God gave to Abraham." In these words, Isaac invokes God's covenant with Abraham, that Abraham's message will reach multitudes of people, that Abraham's seed will dwell in their own land in strength and peace.

Isaac's blessings are twofold: first, he focuses on worldly matters; and then he speaks of the spiritual mission of Abraham and descendants. Peace and prosperity provide the physical foundations for spiritual growth.

The interconnection of physical and spiritual health is reflected in Maimonides' teachings on the messianic era (Hilkhot Melakhim 12:5): "In that era, there will be neither famine or war, envy or competition, for good will flow in abundance and all the delights will be freely available as dust. The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God. Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and know the hidden matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential, as Isaiah 11:9 states: 'The world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the ocean bed.'" With the blessing of peace and prosperity, people will be able to devote themselves more effectively to spiritual matters.

In “Halakhic Man,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik stresses Judaism’s rootedness in the realities of this world. He writes that halakha “fixes its gaze upon concrete, empirical reality and does not allow its attention to be diverted from it. Halakhic man…brings down eternity into the midst of time” (p. 92). Jewish spirituality is not an escape into the heavenly realms but a way of bringing the holy into the very real physical world in which we live.

Isaac’s blessings to Jacob reflect this general approach. He prays for prosperity, power and worldly success; these are the frameworks for a healthy spiritual life and for the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham. Concern for material well-being should be linked to concern for spiritual well-being.

We pray for peace and prosperity. We pray for spiritual elevation. We pray that God’s covenant with Abraham will continue to resound in our generation and for many generations to come.