

**Vayehi 5774 Palm Reading**  
**December 14, 2013**

A few years ago, I attended a major Jewish fundraiser. It was a carnival of desserts, featuring various kosher delights from chocolate rum injected strawberries to more traditional fare, as well as music and entertainment.

There was even a palm reader. While some might find this as problematic from a Jewish perspective, I think it was OK since it was seemingly for entertainment.

I watched as he read people's palms, interpreting the various lines that weave their way on the insides of our hands, while making interesting comments sprinkled with humor. It seemed like fun, something I'd always wanted to do, but never had. So I got in line.

When my turn came, I was a bit nervous. What happens if I don't like what he says? What if the future, according to his reading of my palm is not positive? What happens if he knows what he is talking about and accurately portrays my life, but it's not really what I want to hear?

With a deep breath, I sat down. Taking my left hand into his, he began to narrate a story about me. He interpreted my personality. Now perhaps he could determine some of this from my appearance, from the way I was speaking, but he actually summed me up pretty nicely – it was quite surprising.

Then he looked at me and asked, "Is your father a rabbi?"

That was strange. How did he know that?

For a moment, I thought I was on Candid Camera.

He continued: "And you're a rabbi too?"

A friend of mine who was standing nearby – as unsettled as I was – later suggested that "he must have memorized a list of the guests and their occupations and read your nametag," which listed first and last names only.

I don't know which would have been more impressive – this major feat of memorization or figuring out that my father is a rabbi by reading my palm.

I left the experience mildly amused and somewhat frightened. Was there truth in what he said about my future?

Should I look forward to the positive things that he told me?

And what about the things that I didn't like so much?

\* \* \*

In this morning's Torah reading, we find our forefather *Ya'akov*, Jacob, in Egypt where he had been finally reunited with his beloved son Joseph, as we read in last week's *parashah*. Nearing the end of his life, Jacob summons Joseph and delivers his final message.

Pointing to Joseph's two sons, he asks Joseph who these two boys are. The question is why does Jacob ask? He knows his grandsons whom he had met, as we read in last week's *parashah*.

One explanation proposes that, since Joseph's sons were part of the Egyptian royal court, they normally wore Egyptian clothes. Whenever they went to visit their grandfather, they would change into the traditional garments of their people. But this time, since Joseph heard that Jacob was on his deathbed, Joseph grabbed his two sons and they didn't have time to change.

Joseph and his sons lived in two worlds symbolized by their different wardrobes. Although they appeared to be Egyptians in their public lives, at their core they were Israelites, retaining their Hebrew names and donning the distinctive dress of their people when appropriate.

Elaborating on this idea, another Midrash teaches us that we should always keep our Hebrew names and language.

These are still important bulwarks against assimilation today in the US, just as they were almost four thousand years ago in Egypt.

\* \* \*

In any case, once informed of his grandsons' presence, Jacob asks for God's blessings upon them. Then we read a fascinating verse. "*Viyikra Ya'akov el banav vayomer, 'hei'asfu v'agidah lakhem et asher yikra b'aharit hayamim*" – "And Jacob called his sons and said to them, 'Come together that I may tell you what is to befall at the end of days.'"

Now, that's pretty exciting! Blessed with the gift of prophecy, Jacob will now tell his sons what the future will bring.

But, then, just when they are waiting with bated breath, he doesn't tell them the future.

Instead, he speaks to the character of each of his sons – each son's unique gifts and talents, and even faults, hoping that they will improve and become better people.

This is all quite interesting, these fascinating personality studies, but not *nevuah*, prophecy about what will happen at the end of days.

The midrash picks up on this gap in the text and asks the same question. Why doesn't Jacob reveal what will happen at the end of time? The midrash answers that Jacob had lost his ability to see the future. He had lost his power of *nevuah*, of prophecy.

One Hasidic commentator suggests that this is because Jacob is now in *galut*, or in Yiddish, *galus*, in the Diaspora, in exile. He is no longer in the land of Israel. He no longer has the gifts that the sacred soil of his father and grandfather had brought him. And another Hasidic commentator suggests that there is no prophecy in Egypt because the Israelites would suffer hundreds of years of slavery there.

Jacob finds himself in Egypt. Some see the word "Egypt," in Hebrew, "*Mitzrayim*," to be related to the word "*tzar*," or narrow, making "Egypt" into "a narrow place," a place where one cannot see ahead, a place without vision. And therefore, Jacob can no longer see the future.

Yet another midrash teaches us that Jacob could see the future, that it would bring sadness and wars to the Jewish people and that we would suffer for thousands of years. With the future dark and his death imminent, he chooses not to relate this sad prophecy to his sons.

Rashi makes an intriguing comment here. He states: “*Beekeish Ya’akov legalot et ha-ketz v’nistalka mimenu shekhinah v’hithil devarim aheirim* – Jacob wanted to find out what would happen at the end of days, but the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, disappeared and instead, he spoke other words.”

To my modern mind, Rashi is making a truly insightful comment. Jacob did not reveal the truth about the future because he could not reveal the future. And in essence this is an important statement about free will.

We, individually and collectively, determine our future. We determine what will happen, *b’aharit hayamim*, at the end of days and at the end of our days, our own future.

The future is not in our palms, waiting to be read, but in our hands, waiting to be shaped. Judaism teaches us that we have the power to use our own abilities to bring about a better future.

Jacob’s discussion of the good and the bad qualities of each son is an important statement about the future. Jacob is telling them and, by extension, all of us, that we are all limited by who we are and what we have done, but it is unwise to have that determine our future.

Hopefully, we can all use the gifts that we have been given and our own experiences to work to improve ourselves and from there, to repair the world. Saying that the future is immutably set by who we are today is neither true nor wise, but doing so is a great temptation.

We often do this and we all do this. We pick stocks or mutual funds based on past performance. We hire people to work for us based on what they have done in the past. But that, of course, is limiting. As mutual fund commercials often remind us, “past results are no guarantee of future success.” The future is truly unwritten; we cannot know what will occur.

The great medieval writer, rabbi, and philosopher, Gersonides, wrote in his masterful work, *Milhamot Hashem, The Wars of the Lord*, that even God does not know future contingencies.

Challenging centuries and, in fact, millennia of Jewish and secular philosophy, Gersonides says that for there to really be a future and for there to truly be free will, even God cannot know simple future contingencies like what you will have for dinner and every minute decision we make. God might know what you are most likely to eat and God might know the big picture about human beings and the entire universe. But the small details, whether one person will do good or not, God simply does not know.

Why?

Because if God were to know those future contingencies, there would be no free will. It would all be predetermined. We would be angels – good angels or bad angels – but angels nonetheless, without the ability truly to make our own decisions.

And the gift we all have been given is free will. We can use it for good or we can use it for evil, but that future is very much in our hands.

Commenting on this same verse about Jacob not revealing the future, the *Kotzker Rebbe* teaches that it is better not to know what the future will bring. This way we will always long for a better tomorrow. Building on statements in the Midrash, the *Kotzker Rebbe* teaches us that we need to yearn for a perfected world. That longing will lead us to act, bringing about a repaired and healed world.

According to the *Kotzker's* interpretation, the Torah instructs us that futures are not in our palms or in anyone's prophecy, but they are in our hands. When we pray for a better world, when we fulfill the *mitzvot* – both those between ourselves and God, as well as those between ourselves and others – if we do these activities, then we become partners with God reshaping the world.

Whether it's feeding the hungry, advocating for a peaceful and secure Israel, protecting the environment and animals or, on this Shabbat, the one year anniversary of the tragedy in Newtown, advocating for sensible gun legislations, we should be raising up our hands and acting.

When we open our hands and begin God's work, spending less time reading our palms, we help bring about that perfected world.