



## Pareshat 'VaYechi': January 2012

### For Oscar and Lilli Unterhalter.

This is the end of the Book of Genesis – the end of the Beginning of the Jewish People. It's essentially a family story – and not always a very edifying one. The patriarchs and the matriarchs are not, let's face it, very good parents. Being their children isn't easy; being *anyone's* children isn't easy. Childhood quite often feels like a game where they haven't finished teaching you the rules – which in fact is exactly what it is. Now of course there are reasons for this; some rules only make sense, or even apply, as you get older, and others you have to learn for yourselves – it's called experience. But there's another and more uncomfortable truth here; sometimes there aren't any rules except the ones you make for yourself in times of great trouble or great need.

Jacob is the big rule-breaker, and the rule that he breaks is at the foundation of his society, and of many other societies before and since. It is the law of succession, of inheritance, of how families, clans, even nations, pass on their name, their wealth, their identity. This is a big thing to tamper with. And Jacob tampers with it twice, at both ends of his life. As a young man, egged on by Rebeccah his mother, he deceives his father Isaac into giving him the birthright of the Firstborn which belongs to his elder brother Esau. 'This is *my* destiny', he says, 'because I choose to take it.' And God seems to agree.

And on his deathbed, in the final chapters of Genesis, he does a sort of mirror-image replay with his grandsons. Here we have Jacob in the role of Isaac – except that he isn't blind and he isn't feeble. Joseph brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to be blessed by Jacob, which essentially means confirming the hereditary right of Manasseh as the firstborn son. But Jacob deliberately crosses his hands, and confers the blessing on Ephraim, because he foresees that the Tribe of Ephraim will become much more powerful than the Tribe of Manasseh, as was indeed the case. God seems to agree again.

What are the Genesis writers trying to tell us here? They're not preaching anarchy, but they are at home with subversion. Rules, they seem to be saying, are fine as long as they work. But they're there to serve us, not the other way around. Knowing when, and how, to break them is the secret of history. As Jews, over the centuries, we've been apt to forget this; for many centuries we forgot the lesson of Genesis, that



# Shir Hatzafon

Progressiv jødedom i Danmark

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risk and vision are ultimately what carry you forward. We put fences around our fences, we piled safeguard on top of safeguard, until the wall of the Halakhah practically blocked out the sky. For some people, it still does. But over the last two hundred years, in many places, that wall has been coming down; we have stepped out, and the world has stepped in. Progressive Jews are still weighing the bricks and deciding which ones to keep and, occasionally, which ones to heave at the opposition. But at a very fundamental level, it's been about breaking rules. And exploring the consequences.

Just being here today, we've broken so many of our traditional rules that it makes your head spin: we're standing knee-deep, metaphorically, in the wreckage of our own rejected Halakhah. I shouldn't be standing here as the Rabbi (I'm a woman); Lilli shouldn't have read from the Torah (ditto), Oscar shouldn't play his cello (no musical instruments on Shabbat). And none of us should have carried so much as a handkerchief in the street today (no carrying in public places on Shabbat).

A life worth living; a God worth serving; we can only arrive at these things through understanding and experience, through trial and error. There are no shortcuts and there are no guarantees. Ultimately you have to suck it and see. It takes a lifetime; but the good news is that you've got a lifetime, however long or short it may be. We all grow up. But 'Coming of Age' doesn't happen when you're twelve or thirteen, or when you're eighteen, or even eighty. Jacob found out, when his long and turbulent life finally slid into focus. It happens on your deathbed, and we've all got it to look forward to.

Tirzah Ben-David

7<sup>th</sup> January 2012  
11<sup>th</sup>. Tevet 5772.