

Parashat VeZot HaBracha

Moshe's Blessing to Bnei Yisrael

- How does the Torah conclude, and why?
- What is the connection between Moshe's blessing to Bnei Yisrael and the blessing of the forefathers?
- What kind of blessings does Moshe bestow upon Israel?

1. The Conclusion of the Torah with Moshe's Death

Parashat VeZot HaBracha is the concluding parasha of the entire Torah; the Torah ends with Moshe's blessing to Israel, and finally, his death. Moshe's death is a fitting end for the five books of the Torah because the entire Torah is his prophecy - upon his death, the Torah ends. After Moshe, God's prophetic connection with Israel was manifested on a normal, lower prophetic level.

The Ramban maintains that even passages in the Torah that do not mention Moshe, and even events that took place before his birth, are nonetheless prophecies that come from Moshe's lips:

...ועל כל פנים היה נכון שיכתוב בתחלת ספר בראשית "וידבר א-להים אל משה את כל הדברים האלה לאמר". אבל היה הענין להכתב סתם מפני שלא כתב משה רבינו התורה כמדובר בעד עצמו, כנביאים שמזכירים עצמם, כמו שנאמר ביחזקאל תמיד "ויהי דבר ה' אלי בן אדם", וכמו שנאמר בירמיה "ויהי דבר ה' אלי לאמר". אבל משה רבינו כתב תולדות כל הדורות הראשונים ויחוס עצמו ותולדותיו ומקריו כשלישי המדבר. ולכן יאמר "וידבר א-להים אל משה ויאמר אליו" כמדובר בעד שניים אחרים. ומפני שהענין כן, לא נזכר משה בתורה עד שנולד ונזכר כאילו אחר מספר עליו...
והטעם לכתוב התורה בלשון זה מפני שקדמה לבריאת העולם אין צריך לומר ללידתו של משה רבינו כמו שבא לנו בקבלה שהיתה כתובה באש שחורה על גבי אש לבנה. הנה משה כסופר המעתיק מספר קדמון וכותב, ולכן כתב סתם. אבל זה אמת וברור הוא שכל התורה מתחלת ספר בראשית עד לעיני כל ישראל נאמרה מפיו של הקב"ה לאזניו של משה.

In any case, it would have been correct to introduce the book of Bereshit with: "And God spoke all these words to Moshe, saying." However, it was written anonymously because Moshe

Rabbeinu did not write the Torah as if he were speaking, like prophets who mention themselves, as Ezekiel always says, “And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Son of Man,” and as it says in Jeremiah, “And the word of the Lord came to me, saying.” Rather, Moshe Rabbeinu wrote the history of the world and its first generations and its events in the third person. And therefore it says “And God spoke to Moshe and said to him” as if speaking about two others. And because this is so, Moshe is not mentioned in the Torah until he was born, and is mentioned as if another is telling about him... The reason for the Torah being written in this form [namely, the third person] is that it preceded the creation of the world, and, needless to say, it preceded the birth of Moshe Rabbeinu. It has been transmitted to us by tradition that [the Torah] was written with letters of black fire upon a background of white fire. Thus Moshe was like a scribe who copies from an ancient book, and therefore he wrote anonymously. However, it is true and clear that the entire Torah - from the beginning of Bereshit to "in the sight of all Israel" [the last words in Devarim] - reached the ear of Moshe from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He. (Ramban, Introduction to Bereshit)

With Moshe’s death the Torah is complete, and everything written afterwards is considered part of the works of prophets, “Neviim,” which does not have the same status as the “Torah.”

Moshe’s degree of prophecy was special,¹ and his leadership of Israel was special; the Torah chooses to conclude its words with a description of his great prophecy and leadership:

וְלֹא קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ ה' פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים: לְכֹל הָאֵתוֹת וְהַמּוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעֹה וְלְכֹל עַבְדָּיו וְלְכֹל אֶרְצוֹ: וְלֹכֵל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלֹכֵל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moshe, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moshe did in the sight of all Israel. (Devarim 34:10-12)

¹ The Ramban devotes a chapter and a half of his *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* to explaining the differences between Moshe and other prophets. Among the differences he lists: All other prophets prophesy through dreams and visions, and Moshe does not; other prophets receive prophecies in riddle form, while Moshe did not; other prophets are seized with fits and collapse during prophecy, while Moshe remains standing; other prophets prophesy on occasion, while Moshe prophesies when he wants to.

2. Moshe as a Father to Israel

Before his death, Moshe chooses to bless the tribes of Israel. In the Torah, we find that before their death, the forefathers bless their children. Moshe is not Israel's father, but throughout his life, he guided Israel and provided for all their needs, just as a father provides for his children, and thus Moshe decides to part from Israel: like a dying father blesses his children. Moshe's love for Israel and his concern for them, like a father's concern for his children, is expressed in his claims against God at times of crisis, when he feels that he cannot continue bearing responsibility for them:

הָאֲנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם אֲנֹכִי לִדְתִיָּהוּ כִּי תֹאמַר אֵלַי שָׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמָּן אֶת הַיָּנֵק...
Did I **conceive** all these people? Did I give them **birth**? Why do you tell me to **carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant**... (Bamidbar 11:12)

Moshe's father-son relationship with Am Yisrael is expressed all the days of his life and leadership: during their labor in Egypt (birthpangs); when he led them out of Egypt (birth); throughout their wanderings in the desert (their maturation process); until they become a mature, independent people, ready to enter their own land. Even before his death, Moshe relates to Israel like a father to his children, and blesses them.

As a leader, Moshe could have merely uttered a general blessing, but he chooses to relate to his people like a father who is familiar with the special personality and characteristics of each and every one of his children, and he blesses them accordingly. Moshe is familiar with the unique nature of each tribe, and even (prophetically) predicts their future, devoting a suitable blessing to each and every tribe.

3. A Study of the Blessings in the Torah

Concluding the Torah with a blessing

If the Torah were Moshe's "life story," it would be sufficient to read Moshe's blessings to Israel as a personal farewell from a great leader. However, "Moshe's Torah" is not merely his life story, but "God's Torah." Therefore, Moshe's blessings have a more profound dimension to them: they express the Torah's overview of each tribe. God concludes His Torah with words of blessing to Israel, which is a conclusion of special significance. In order to reach a deeper understanding of each blessings' significance, we will first explore the concept of blessing as it is manifested in the Torah.

The blessing "Be fruitful and multiply"

In parashat Bereshit, the Torah opens with a description of the creation of the world. With the conclusion of the creation narrative, immediately after the creation of man² - the purpose of creation – God commands him with His blessing:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ וּרְדוּ בָדָגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל חַיַּת הָרֶמֶשׂוֹת עַל הָאָרֶץ.

And God blessed them and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land and conquer it, and vanquish the fish of the sea and the bird of the skies and every animal that creeps upon the land. (Bereshit 1:28)

² However, the human was not the first to receive this blessing of fertility, as the birds and the insects were already blessed thus on the fifth day (1:22), however, there is a difference between the blessing received by humankind and the blessing received by the animals, as the Ramban comments on Bereshit 1:28:

"ויברך אותם אלהים" – זו ברכה ממש, לפיכך כתוב בה "ויאמר להם אלהים", אבל למעלה (ביום החמישי) כתוב "ויברך אותם אלהים לאמר", יפרש שהברכה היא המאמר שנתן בהם כח התולדה, לא דבור אחר שיהיו בו מבורכים.

This is an actual blessing, and therefore it is written that "And God said to them," but before, (on the fifth day), it is written, "And God blessed them, saying," which can be interpreted as the statement that endowed them with the power to reproduce, not another form of speech that causes them to be blessed.

For further discussion regarding the blessings given to humankind, see Rabbeinu Bahya ad loc.

What is the meaning of this blessing? Can God's blessing be interpreted as a human wish, or an expression of hope or prayer? Isn't everything created according to God's will?! The significance of God's blessing is rendering Shabbat the source of all blessing, as the Recanati describes:

“ויברך אותם א-להים” – לשון “ברכה” הוא מלשון בריכת מים, ורוצה לומר המשכת המקור מלמעלה למטה.
“And God blessed them” – the expression “blessed,” beracha, is related to the word **בריכת מים**, berecha, a “pool of water,” expressing how the source [of all blessing] is from above to below.
(Recanati, Bereshit 1:22)

Chazal may have interpreted the language of the blessing in the Torah as a *mitzvah* to be fruitful and multiply, but they obviously do not dismiss the plain meaning of the text. Besides a person's obligation to have children, there is a *blessing* here which endows humanity with the capacity to be fruitful and multiply.³

The blessing of fruitfulness is a special blessing, which expresses and fulfills the image of God that each person contains in his or her capacity to create and produce, continuing the act of creation that God Himself began.

The blessing of Shabbat

The next blessing in the Torah is bestowed upon the seventh day:

³ The accompanying mitzvah to the blessing is something given uniquely to humankind, which clarifies the fundamental difference between the blessing “Be fruitful and multiply” as given to the animals, which is the instinct to reproduce, and the blessing “be fruitful and multiply” given to the human, who has the capacity of choice. The *Or Hahayim* (Bereshit 1:28) also noted the duplication of the blessing and the commandment, and explained it in two ways, which differ slightly from our explanation: 1) the blessing is a kind of promise regarding the continual existence of the human race, and because of that, the human is commanded to be fruitful and multiply so that humanity will take responsibility for its growth and not become passive due to the blessing. 2. “Be fruitful and multiply” is what *created* human ability to reproduce, and therefore, it is fitting to command them to reproduce only once they are capable of reproduction.

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ שָׁבַת מְכַל מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא אֱ-לֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת.

And God blessed the seventh day and consecrated it, for upon it He rested from all His Work that He had created to do. (Bereshit 2:3)

What is the meaning of the blessing that God bestows upon the Shabbat day?

In the Radak's opinion, this blessing is also related to fertility, but as opposed to the physical fertility of "Be fruitful and multiply," this concerns fertility of the spirit:

"And he blessed" – the blessing is a good addition, and the Shabbat day was added for the good of the spirit, who on this day can rest from the dealings with this world, and can deal with the wisdom and words of God. (Radak, ad loc.)

The Radak explains the Shabbat's main virtue as a day from rest from the bustle of the physical world, and such rest *enables* the spirit to flourish.

However, Rabbeinu Chaim ben Atar, whose commentary "Or HaChayim" is based on kabbalistic teaching, prefers to explain the Shabbat's virtue as an inherently spiritual sanctity, and therefore there is a need for a blessing of material wealth:

...והנכון במשמעות הכתוב הוא כי להיות שהעולם הזה צריך הוא לשפע המקיים, והוא בחינת האכילה והשתיה וצורכי האדם וכולן מושגים על ידי טורח ויגיעה הגשמית וחולין היא. וה' כשרצה לקדש יום השביעי קדם וברכו שלא יחסר בו דבר, הגם שאין טובת העולם השפל מושגת מהפרישות והקדושה אלא מעסק חול, אף על פי כן ברכו שלא יחסר טוב ועוד לו שהוא יתר על שאר הימים לחם משנה שלש סעודות ותענוגים יתירים וזו היא ברכתו והוא דבר הפך הסדר.

The correct meaning of the text is that to be in this world, one needs material wealth to exist, such as eating and drinking and human needs, all of which are achieved through physical and material toil, which is mundane. And when God wished to sanctify the seventh day first and bless that nothing will be lacking on it, for the goodness of the lowly world is not achieved through abstinence and sanctity but through mundane dealings, He still blessed it that no good will be lacking, and moreover that it would be even more good that the other days: two loaves of bread, three meals and other pleasures, and this is its blessing, which is antithetical [to the Shabbat's inherent nature]. (Or HaChayim, Bereshit 2:3)

The Or HaChayim goes on to explain, using kabbalistic ideas,⁴ that material wealth of the other days of the week is actually influenced by the holiness of the Shabbat:

ולמה שפירש בזהר (יתרו פ"ח) כי ביום השבת משתלשל השפע של כל ששת ימי המעשה, יכוין על זה אומרו "ויברך" כי בו צוה ה' את הברכה לחיות העולמות.

What it says in the Zohar (Yitro 8), that the material wealth of all six days is derived from the Shabbat day, refers to the word "and He blessed," for on [the Shabbat day] God commanded the blessing for all eternity.

The Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the word "blessing" is particularly interesting, both in regard to Shabbat and in general:

"ויברך א-לוהים" – פירוש ברכה תוספת טובה, וביום הזה תתחדש בגופות דמות כח בתולדות, ובנשמות כח ההכרה והשכל.
"And God blessed" – the meaning of "blessing" is a good addition, and on this day there is physical renewal, fertile power, and in souls, spiritual [renewal] of knowledge and intellect. (Ibn Ezra, ad loc.)

According to the Ibn Ezra, the blessing of Shabbat is twofold – when both physical fertility and spiritual and intellectual fertility are renewed as one. His words are consistent with those of the kabbalists who explain the connection between physical and spiritual fertility.

God's blessing to Noach

After Creation, the world continues to exist through the power of the primal blessings that were bestowed during Creation. The flood, which destroys the world and wipes out nearly all life on the face of the earth, violates the blessing of "be fruitful and multiply" that was given at the end

⁴ The Ramban, preceding him, already explained Bereshit 2:3 thus:

והאמת, כי הברכה ביום השבת היא מעיין הברכות, והוא יסוד עולם... ותשכיל כי בשבת נפש יתירה באמת...
And the truth is that the blessing on Shabbat is the source of all blessing, the foundation of the world... and know that on Shabbat there is truly an extra soul...

of the six days,⁵ and therefore, immediately after the flood, when Noah leaves the ark and the world begins to rebuild itself, God renews His blessing to humanity:⁶

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת נֹחַ וְאֶת בְּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ: וַיִּמְרָאֲכֶם וַחֲתָכֶם יִהְיֶה עֲלֵי כָל חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וְעַל כָּל עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּכְלֵי אֲשֶׁר תִּרְמָשׁ הָאָדָמָה וּבְכֹל דְּגַי הַיָּם בְּיַדְכֶם נִתְּנוּ.

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land. And fear and dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and every bird of the sky, all that creeps upon the earth and all the fish of the sea is given into your hands. (Bereshit 9:1-2).

From the power of God's blessing to Noah, humankind continues to multiply and to develop.

God's blessing to Avraham

The next blessing is God's blessing to Avraham:

וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמֹךְ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מִבְּרַכְיֶךָ וּמִקְלָלֶךָ אֲאִר וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה. וְאֶשְׁפָּךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמֹךְ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מִבְּרַכְיֶךָ וּמִקְלָלֶךָ אֲאִר וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה.

And I shall make you into a great nation and I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse, and all families of the earth shall be blessed through you. (Bereshit 12:2-3)

Because this blessing was contingent upon the command: “Get thee out of your land and your birthplace and the house of your father,” it is said in the future tense – “and I will bless you.”

Even so, the similarities between it and the blessing given to Adam and Noah cannot be

⁵ As the *Or Hahayim* explains (in his commentary on Bereshit 1:28, mentioned above in comment 3), that the blessing is a promise that humankind will not become extinct.

⁶ The Radak explained thus (Bereshit 9:1):

“וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים” – אעפ”פ שכבר היו ברוכים בתחילת הבריאה, עתה היה להם כתחלת הבריאה כי נתחדש העולם אחר שהיה תהו ובהו שהרי נתכסתה הארץ במים. והברכה מה שאמר להם פרו ורבו ומוראכם וחתכם.

“And God blessed them” – even though they were already blessed at the beginning of creation, now it was like the beginning of the world for it was renewed after the chaos, for the world had been covered in water. And the blessing is what He said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, the fear and dread of you...”

overlooked;⁷ the first promise God makes to Avraham is “And I will make you into a great nation” – a blessing of fertility and proliferation, similar to the blessings of Adam and Noach. However, this blessing is not bestowed upon all of humanity, but is intended for a specific family within humanity. Moreover, Avraham receives a special blessing: “and you shall be a blessing...and all families of the earth shall be blessed through you,” that is: Avraham becomes a source of blessing.

This aspect recalls the kabbalistic interpretation of the blessing of Shabbat, as the aforementioned Or HaChayim explains it, for example: just as Shabbat is blessed with special spirituality and additional holiness, so Avraham is blessed with special spirituality, with a special connection to God;⁸and just as Shabbat is the source of all blessing and abundance for the world, so Avraham becomes a source of blessing for the rest of humankind. The special spiritual connection with God is what enables the transmission of blessing to the world.

God continues blessing Avraham many times over the course of his life, with three different blessings: blessings of fertility and proliferation; of the Land; and of the covenant with God.⁹

While Avraham’s blessing is a continuation of Adam and Noach’s, it is also a turning point: from now on, the blessing is not intended for the entire human race, but for Avraham’s family, which later becomes Am Yisrael. This family receives the blessing of fertility and proliferation

⁷ According to Rashi and Radak, “And I will bless” means that God will bless Avraham with material wealth. However, it may be that the expression means that God will bestow additional blessing upon him in the future, which has not yet been granted to him. And indeed, later on, as we shall see, God blesses Avraham with additional blessings.

⁸ The origins of this special blessing can be found in Noach’s blessing to Shem, who Avraham is descended from: “And he said, Blessed is the Lord, God of Shem” (Bereshit 9:26).

⁹ See these sources (in Bereshit): 13:14-17; 15:5; 17:4-8; 15-21; 22:16:18.

in addition to a spiritual blessing and the blessing of the Land. Similarly, Avraham receives the ability to bless, and thus becomes a source of blessing for the other nations and the entire world, as the Midrash expresses:

“והיה ברכה” – א”ל הקב”ה: משעה שבראתי עולמי הייתי זקוק לברך בריותי. ברכתי לאדם וחיה דכתיב “ויברך אותם א-להים”, לנח ובניו דכתיב: “ויברך א-להים את נח ואת בניו”, מכאן ואילך אתה היה עשוי על הברכות...
“And be a blessing” – God said to him: from the time I created the world, I needed to bless my creations. I blessed Adam and Eve, as it says “and God blessed them,” and Noah and his sons, as it says: “And God blessed Noah and his sons,” and from now on, you will be responsible for the blessings... (Midrash Tanchuma [Warsaw], parashat *Lech Lecha*, 4)

God’s blessing to Yitzchak

God’s blessing to Avraham’s family passes on to Yitzchak,¹⁰ as is mentioned in several places in Bereshit:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרַי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ...
...and it came to pass after the death of Avraham that God blessed his son Yitzchak (Bereshit 25:11)

And it came to pass after Avraham’s death that God blessed his son Yitzchak (Bereshit 25:11)

¹⁰ Note that Avraham does not transfer the blessing to Yitzchak himself, but God blesses Yitzchak with Avraham’s blessing. Avraham only takes care that Yitzchak marries a worthy woman (21:1-9), and similarly, he sends the sons of his concubines away (25:5-6), thereby ensuring that Yitzchak will be his only heir. The Tanchuma relates to this point:

כיון שעמד יצחק ביקש אברהם לברכו, צפה שעשו ויעקב יוצאין ממנו ולא ברכו, אמר אברהם יבא בעל העולם ויברך מי שירצה. משל למלך שהיה לו פרדס נתנו לאריס לעבדו ולשמרו, היה בתוך הפרדס אילן של סם חיים ואילן של סם המות דבקים זה בזה, אמר האריס מה אעשה: להשקות אילן של חיים ולהניח את זה אי אפשר שמים שזה שותה זה מינק ממנו, אלא אניח אותם עד שיבא בעל הפרדס ומה שירצה יעשה. כן אברהם אמר: שלא לברך את יצחק אי אפשר שעשו יוצא ממנו, אלא הריני מניחו לבעל הברכה עד שיעשה הקב”ה מה שיחפוץ. כיון שנסתלקו אברהם ויצחק ברך הקב”ה ליעקב לעצמו...

Avraham foresaw that Esav and Yaakov would come from Yitzchak and did not bless him. Avraham said, the Master of the world will come and bless whoever He wants. This can be compared to a king who had an orchard and appointed a tenant to tend to it. In the orchard grew a tree that produced a life-giving elixir and a tree that produced an elixir of death that grew intertwined. The tenant said, What should I do – I cannot water the life-giving tree and leave the other one, for it drinks water from the other, but I will just leave them until the owner of the orchard comes and tells me what he wants me to do. Thus said Avraham: I cannot bless Yitzchak for Esav will be born of him, but I shall leave it for God to decide what He wishes to do. Because Avraham and Yitzchak did not do so, God blessed Yaakov Himself.

גור בארץ הזאת ואהיה עמך ואברכך כי לך ולזרעך אתן את כל הארצות האל והקמתי את השבעה אשר נשבעתי לאברהם אביך:

והרביתי את זרעך ככוכבי השמים ונתתי לזרעך את כל הארצות האל והתברכו בזרעך כל גווי הארץ...

Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Avraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (Bereshit 26:3-4)

וירא אליו ה' בלילה ההוא ויאמר אנכי א-להי אברהם אביך אל תירא כי אתך אנכי וברכתיך והרביתי את זרעך בעבור אברהם עבדי.

That night the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Avraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Avraham." (26:24)

Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov

Yitzchak passes on the blessing to his sons before his death. He expects to bless Esav (27:1-4), but Yaakov manages to secure the blessing:

May God give you heaven's dew and earth's richness, an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." (27:28-29)

This blessing is one of material wealth and power, not at all like God's blessing to Adam and Noah,¹¹ nor even that of Avraham. It seems that Yitzchak intended this material blessing for Esav, and planned to give Yaakov the blessing of Avraham, including the blessings of seed, Land and covenant with God. As he indeed blesses him later:

¹¹ While God blessed Adam and Noah with a blessing of dominion, the blessing in question concerned human dominion over everything else living and over nature, while the blessing here refers to one nation ruling over another.

וַיִּקְרָא יִצְחָק אֶל יַעֲקֹב וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ וַיְצַוֵּהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תִקַּח אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת כְּנָעַן... וְאֵל שׁ-דִּי יְבָרֶךְ אֶתְךָ וַיְרַבְּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְקַהֲל עַמִּים: וַיִּתֵּן לְךָ אֶת בְּרַכְתּוֹ אֲבִרְהָם לְךָ וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אֶתְךָ לְרִשְׁתָּךְ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱ-לֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם.

May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Avraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Avraham.” (Bereshit 28:3-4)¹²

Yaakov essentially receives two blessings: One is Avraham’s threefold blessing of seed, Land and covenant; the second is a blessing of material wealth and power – the blessing Yitzchak intended for Esav.¹³

Yaakov’s blessing to his sons

¹² And even God blesses Yaakov with this blessing (Bereshit 28: 13-15):

וְהָיָה ה' נֹצֵב עָלַי וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵי אֲבִרְהָם אָבִיךָ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנָּה וּלְזַרְעֶךָ: וְהָיָה וְרָעַד כַּעֲפַר הָאָרֶץ וַיִּפְרָצֶת יָמָה וַקְדָּמָה וַצִּפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה וְנִבְרָכְךָ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה וַיְבָרֶךְ עַד: וְהָיָה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמְרָתִיךָ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְךָ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעְזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם עָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי לְךָ.

There above it stood the Lord, and he said: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Avraham and the God of Yitzchak. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Similarly, Yaakov testifies that he has received this blessing (48:3-4):

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל יוֹסֵף אֵל שׁ-דִּי נִרְאָה אֵלַי בְּלוּז בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתִי: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי הִנְנִי מִפְּרֶךְ וְהִרְבִּיתִךְ וְנִתְתִּיךָ לְקַהֲל עַמִּים וְנָתַתִּי אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְזַרְעֶךָ אֶתְרִיךְ אֶחְזֹזת עֹלָם.

Yaakov said to Yosef, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me and said to me, ‘I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.’”

¹³ In this context, see Rav Yaacov Medan’s article (in Hebrew) “Regarding the Struggle between Yaacov and Esav” on Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Virtual Bet HaMidrash website: www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/parsha_bereshit.html

Like his fathers before him, Yaakov also blesses his sons before his death. First of all, he blesses Yosef and his sons:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱ-לֹהִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלַּכְוּ אֲבֹתַי לְפָנָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיְצַחֵק הָאֱ-לֹהִים הַרְעָה אֹתִי מֵעוֹדֵי עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: הַמְלֶאֶךְ הַגָּאֹל
אֹתִי מִכָּל רָע וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בְהֵם שְׁמֵי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וַיְצַחֵק וַיִּדְגֹּו לְרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ...
Then he blessed Yosef and said,

“May the God before whom my fathers Avraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm - may He bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.” (Bereshit 48:15-16)

That is, Yaakov blesses Yosef and his sons with the blessing of fertility and proliferation.¹⁴

Afterwards, Yaakov turns to all his sons and passes the blessing onto them as well, as the Torah emphasizes through the conclusion of the blessings:

כָּל אֵלֶּה שְׁבֻטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁנִים עָשָׂר וְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אֲבִיהֶם וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כְּבִרְכָתוֹ בָּרַךְ אֹתָם.

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him. (Bereshit 49:28)

However, these blessings are not introduced with the verb “blessed”; rather, with the verb הגד, “told”:

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בְּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאִסְפוּ וְאִגְיְדָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים: הֲקִבְצוּ וְשָׁמְעוּ בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב וְשָׁמְעוּ אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲבִיכֶם.

Then Yaakov called for his sons and said: Gather around so I can *tell* you what will happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, sons of Yaakov; listen to your father Israel. (Bereshit 49:1-2)

¹⁴ Yaakov later adds: “And he blessed them on that day, saying, In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.’ This blessing recalls Avraham’s blessing, “And all families of the earth shall be blessed through you.”

It seems that Yaakov's words are introduced thus, and not with the verb "blessed," because some of his sons are not blessed, but reprimanded.¹⁵ Even his words of praise are not referred to as a "blessing" – in his words to Yosef alone he uses this verb, and even repeats it several times:

מֵאֵל אָבִיךָ וְיַעֲזְרֶךָ וְאֵת שְׁ-יְדֵי וַיְבָרְכֶךָ בְּרִכַּת שָׁמַיִם מֵעַל בְּרִכַּת תְּהוֹמוֹת רִבְעֵת תַּחַת בְּרִכַּת שְׂדֵיִם וְנַחֲמִים : בְּרִכַּת אָבִיךָ גְּבֹרֵה עַל בְּרִכַּת הַוְּרֵי
עַד תֵּאֲנוֹת גְּבֻעַת עוֹלָם תִּהְיֶינָה לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף וּלְקֶדֶד נְזִיר אֶחָיו.

Because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the blessings of my parents. Let all these rest on the head of Yosef, on the brow of the prince among his brothers. (49: 25-26)

Yosef receives the blessing of fertility and proliferation from Yaakov ("blessings of the breast and womb") which was transmitted to Avraham from Adam and Noach, as well as the special blessing bestowed upon Avraham and Yitzchak ("my parents"), which includes a blessing of material wealth (that Yitzchak intended for Esav).¹⁶

Yaakov reveals the unique characteristics of the other tribes and the future good that will come of them (or the evil that may arise from their negative traits), while the actual *blessing* is transmitted to Yosef. Because of this, Yaakov concludes his words with a generic blessing for all the brothers, as Rashi explains:

“וְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אָבִיהֶם וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם” – והלא יש מהם שלא ברכם אלא קינטרין? אלא כך פירושו: “וְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אָבִיהֶם” מה שנאמר בענין. יכול שלא ברך לראובן שמעון ולוי, תלמוד לומר לומר ויברך אותם, כולם במשמע.
“And this is what their father said to them, and he blessed them” – Aren't there those that he did not bless, but rather chided? Rather, this is what is intended: And this is what their father spoke to them - what is related in this section. One might think that he did not bless Reuven, Shimon, and

¹⁵ See verses 3-7.

¹⁶ According to the interpretations of Rashi and the Rashbam on verse 26, which explain that “your father's blessing” refers to the blessing that Yaakov received from God, “have exceeded the blessings of my parents” are the blessings of Avraham and Yitzchak, and the two blessings, both Avraham and Yitzchak's in addition to Yaakov's additional blessing – “shall rest upon Yosef's head, on the brow of the prince of his brothers.”

Levi. Therefore, it states in the Bible: And he blessed them, meaning all of them. (Rashi, Bereshit 49:28)

Once we have mentioned all the blessings in the Torah until this point, we can now discuss Moshe's blessing.

4. Moshe's Blessing to Israel

A continuation of the forefathers' blessing

Moshe, before his death, carries on the forefathers' tradition to bless their sons.¹⁷ However, as opposed to Yaakov, Moshe's words to the people are initially defined as a blessing, and his blessing to some of the tribes is explicitly described with this verb root:

וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַךְ מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֶלֶּהִים אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָנָי מוֹתוֹ...

This is the *blessing* that Moshe, the man of God, *blessed* Bnei Yisrael before his death.

¹⁷ The continuity of the blessing is expressed beautifully in *Devarim Raba* [Vilna], *VeZot HaBracha*, 11:1:

...מאבות העולם... שלא היה אחד מתחיל אלא ממקום שפסק חבירו. כיצד?
אברהם בירך את יצחק, מנין דכתיב (בראשית כה): "ויתן אברהם את כל אשר לו ליצחק". ומה נתן לו? ר"י אומר בכורה נתן לו... ר' נחמיה אומר ברכה נתן לו...
עמד יצחק לברך את יעקב, אמר: ממקום שפסק אבא משם אני מתחיל. אבא הפסיק ב"ויתן" אף אני מתחיל ב"ויתן"... שנאמר: "ויתן לך אלוקים". ובמה חתם יצחק? בקרייה, שנאמר "ויקרא יצחק אל יעקב ויברך אותו".
עמד יעקב לברך את השבטים אמר: איני פותח אלא בקרייה, שנאמר: "ויקרא יעקב אל בניו" ובמה חתם? ב"זאת" שנאמר: "וזאת אשר דבר להם אביהן".
עמד משה לברך את ישראל, אמר: איני פותח אלא "בזאת", מנין? ממה שקרינו בענין "וזאת הברכה".

...From the forefathers of the world...one began where the other left off. How?

Avraham blessed *Yitzchak*, as it is written (Bereshit 25): "And Avraham gave all he had to Yitzchak." And what did he give him?... R"Y says, He gave him the birthright... R. Nehemiah says, He gave him the blessing...

Yitzchak was about to bless *Yaacov*, and said: Where Father left off, there I will begin. Father stopped at "ויתן", I will begin with "ויתן" as it says, "וייתן לך אלוקים" – May God give you." How did *Yitzchak* conclude? With calling, as it says, "And *Yitzchak* called *Yaakov* and blessed him."

Yaakov was about to bless the tribes, and said: I will begin with calling, as it says: "And *Yaakov* called his sons," and How did he conclude? With "זאת," as it says, "וזאת אשר דבר להם אביהן" - and this is what their father spoke to them."

Moshe was about to bless Israel, and said: I will begin with "זאת," from where? From where we begin reading, "וזאת הברכה."

(Devarim 33:1)

בָּרַךְ ה' חֵילוֹ וּפְעָלָיו וְיִדּוֹ תִרְצֶה...
Bless all his skills, Lord, and be pleased with the work of his hands. (33:11)

Bless all his skills, Lord, and be pleased with the work of his hands. (33:11)

וַלְיוֹסֵף אָמַר מְבָרַכֶת ה' אֶרְצוֹ...
To Yosef, he said: “May the Lord bless his land... (13)

To Yosef, he said: “May the Lord bless his land... (13)

וּלְגַד אָמַר בְּרוּךְ מְרַחֵב גְּדוֹ...
To Gad, he said: “Blessed is he who enlarges Gad’s domain! (20)

To Gad, he said: “Blessed is he who enlarges Gad’s domain! (20)

וּלְנַפְתָּלִי אָמַר נִפְתָּלִי שָׁבַע רְצוֹן וּמְלֵא בְרָכָת ה'...
To Naphtali, he said: “Naphtali is abounding with the favor of the Lord and is full of his blessing;

To Naphtali, he said: “Naphtali is abounding with the favor of the Lord and is full of his blessing;
(23)

וּלְאַשֵׁר אָמַר בְּרוּךְ מְבַנִּים אֲשֶׁר...
To Asher, he said: Blessed among sons is Asher... (24)

To Asher, he said: Blessed among sons is Asher... (24)

Moshe blesses each tribe with a unique blessing, but when reading the blessings as a whole, it can be discerned that they encompass the three elements of the forefathers’ blessing: the blessings of fertility and proliferation, the Land, and the covenant with God. The general blessing of material wealth, which Yaakov received from Yitzchak, is also transmitted to the tribes of Israel, so that Moshe is, in fact, passing on the complete blessing of the forefathers. The blessings of fertility and proliferation appears in Moshe’s blessing to Reuven and Yosef:

יְחִי רְאוּבֵן וְאַל יָמֹת וַיְהִי מִתּוֹ מְסָפֵר.
Let Reuven live and not die, not his numbers be few.¹⁸ (6)

Let Reuven live and not die, not his numbers be few.¹⁸ (6)

וַלְיוֹסֵף אָמַר... וְהֵם רַבְבוֹת אֶפְרַיִם וְהֵם אֲלָפֵי מְנַשֶּׁה.
To Yosef he said... Such are the myriads of Ephraim; such are the thousands of Manasseh”

To Yosef he said... Such are the myriads of Ephraim; such are the thousands of Manasseh”

(13)¹⁹

¹⁸ Rabbeinu Bahya, ad loc., explains that according to *peshat*, it means long life, but Rashi explains otherwise.

The main content of the blessings deals with the special bond between Israel and God (spiritual blessing and the blessing of God's covenant), as well as the blessing of the Land.

The spiritual blessing

Blessings of spirituality appear in Moshe's blessing to Levi and Binyamin:

וּלְלֵוִי אָמַר... יִרְוֶה מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְיַעֲקֹב וְתוֹרָתְךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל יְשִׁימוּ קְטוֹרֶת בְּאַפְּךָ וְכָלִיל עַל מִזְבִּיחֶךָ.
To Levi, he said... He teaches your precepts to Yaakov and your Torah to Israel. He offers incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar. (8)

לְבִנְיָמִן אָמַר יְדִיד ה' יִשְׁכֵן לְבֶטֶח עָלָיו חֲפָף עָלָיו כָּל הַיּוֹם וּבֵין כַּתְּפָיו יִשְׁכֵן.

To Binyamin, he said: "Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders." (12)²⁰

Moreover, the opening of the blessings describes the special connection between God and Am Yisrael, which is chiefly expressed through the receiving of the Torah:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' מִסִּינַי בָּא וְזָרַח מִשְׁעִיר לָמוֹ הוֹפִיעַ מֵהַר פָּאָרָן וְאָתָה מִרְקַבַת קִדְשׁ מִיַּמִּינוּ אֵשׁ דֵּת לָמוֹ: אֵף חָבַב עַמִּים כָּל קִדְשׁוֹ בְּיַדְהֶם תִּכּוּ לְרִגְלֶךָ יִשָּׂא מִדְּבָרְתֶיךָ: תוֹרָה צָנָה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מוֹרְשָׁה קִהַלְתָּ יַעֲקֹב: וַיְהִי בִישְׂרוֹן מִלֶּךָ בְּהַתְּאֶסֶף רָאשֵׁי עַם יַחַד שְׁבֹטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...
And he said, The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, with a fiery law for them.²¹ Surely it is You who love the people; all the holy ones are in Your hand.²² At Your feet

¹⁹ The Ibn Ezra and the Kli Yakar explained that it refers to the blessing of proliferation; but Rashi explains that it refers to the myriads that Yehoshua killed during his conquest.

²⁰ Most commentators hold that Binyamin's blessing describes how the Divine Presence rests upon the portion of Binyamin, where the Bet HaMikdash was built.

²¹ Most commentators hold that this is a description of what happened at Har Sinai.

²² This verse expresses God's special affection for Israel. Rashi explains the verse thus:

“אֵף חָבַב עַמִּים” – גם חבה יתירה חבב את השבטים. כל אחד ואחד קרוי עם. “כל קדשיו בידך” – נפשות הצדיקים הגנוזות אתו...
“Surely it is you who love the peoples” – with much love he loved the tribes. Each one is called a people. “All the holy ones are in your hand” – the souls of the righteous who are concealed with Him...

Similarly, Rabbeinu Bahya explains:

“אֵף חָבַב עַמִּים” – יאמר מלבד מה שנתן להם התורה מימינו מתוך האש עוד חבב אותם מכל העמים שקראם “סגולה”...

they all bow down, and from You receive instruction,²³ the law that Moshe gave us, the possession of the assembly of Yaakov. He was king over Yeshurun when the leaders of the people assembled, along with the tribes of Israel. (2-5)

The blessings' conclusion²⁴ also mentions God's special bond with Israel, which is expressed through the protection that God extends over Israel:

אֵין כָּאֵל יִשְׁרוּן רֹכֵב שָׁמַיִם בְּעִזְרֹךָ וּבְגֹאֲוֹתוֹ שְׁחֻקִים...
“There is no one like the God of Yeshurun, Who rides the heavens to help you,
And in His excellency on the clouds. (26)

אַשְׁרֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי כְמוֹךָ עַם נוֹשָׁע בְּה'...
Happy are you, O Israel, who is like you, a people saved by the Lord. (29)

The blessing of the Land and material wealth

Many of Moshe's blessings mention the inheritance of the Land:

וּלְיוֹסֵף אָמַר מְבֹרָכַת ה' אֶרְצוֹ מִמֶּגֶד שָׁמַיִם מִטָּל וּמִתְהוֹם רֶכֶזַת תַּחַת: וּמִמֶּגֶד תְּבוּאָת שָׁמֶשׁ וּמִמֶּגֶד גֶּרֶשׁ יְרֻחִים: וּמֵרֹאשׁ הַרְרֵי קָדִם
וּמִמֶּגֶד גְּבֻעוֹת עוֹלָם: וּמִמֶּגֶד אֶרֶץ וּמְלֶאכֶה...
...וממגד גבעות עולם: וממגד ארץ ומלאכה...

To Yosef he said:

“Surely it is you who loves the peoples” – It can be said, besides giving them the Torah from His right hand from within the fire, He loved them more than all other nations, as he called them a “chosen” people...

In the Seforno's opinion, this is a comparison between Israel and the rest of the nations. “Loved the nations” describes God's affection for all the nations, and this verse comes to say that although God loves all the nations, He is especially fond of Israel.

²³ The Seforno explains: “At Your feet they all bow down” – they broke... they prayed with a broken spirit. “At Your feet” – fell at your footstool at Sinai. “From You they receive instruction, the Torah commanded to us by Moshe” – they said to the Blessed God, Let Moshe transmit your commandments, which is the Torah commanded to us, and he said your commandments, as it says, “And he heard the voice talking to him.”

²⁴ In the Seforno's opinion, verses 25-29, which are considered a “summary,” are the actual blessing that Moshe blessed Israel, and Moshe's words to the tribes are a prayer that precedes the blessing.

“May the Lord bless his land with the precious dew from heaven above and with the deep waters that lie below; with the best the sun brings forth and the finest the moon can yield;²⁵ with the choicest gifts of the ancient mountains and the fruitfulness of the everlasting hills;²⁶ with the best gifts of the earth and its fullness and the favor of him who dwelt in the burning bush. Let all these rest on the head of Yosef, on the brow of the prince among his brothers. In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he will gore the nations, even those at the ends of the earth. Such are the ten thousands of Ephraim; such are the thousands of Menashe.”

וְלִזְבוּלֹן אָמַר שְׂמַח זְבוּלֹן בְּצֵאתְךָ וְיִשְׁשַׁכֶּר זְבוּלֹן בְּאֵהָלָיִךְ : עַמִּים הֵר יִקְרָאוּ שָׁם יִזְבְּחוּ וְזָבְחֵי צֶדֶק כִּי שִׁפְעַת יָמִים יִינְקוּ וְשִׁפְוֵי טְמוּנֵי חוּל :

To Zevulun he said:

“Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out, and you, Issachar, in your tents.²⁷ They will summon peoples to the mountain and there offer the sacrifices of the righteous; they will feast on the abundance of the seas, on the treasures hidden in the sand.”²⁸

²⁵ Rashi interprets the verse thus:

“ומראש הררי קדם” – ומבורכת מראשית בשול הפירות שהרריה מקדימין לבכר בשול פירותיהם. דבר אחר מגיד שקדמה בריאתן לשאר הרים. “גבעות עולם” – גבעות העושות פירות לעולם ואינן פוסקות מעוצר הגשמים.

“With the best the sun brings forth” – that his land was exposed to the sun, which sweetens the fruits. “And the finest the moon can yield” – there are some fruits that ripen in the moonlight, which are squash and gourd.

²⁶ In Rashi’s opinion, this verse also discusses the bounty of the land:

“ומראש הררי קדם” – ומבורכת מראשית בשול הפירות שהרריה מקדימין לבכר בשול פירותיהם. דבר אחר מגיד שקדמה בריאתן לשאר הרים. “גבעות עולם” – גבעות העושות פירות לעולם ואינן פוסקות מעוצר הגשמים.

“the choicest gifts of the ancient mountains” – they are blessed with early ripening fruits, for on its mountains fruits ripen first. Another explanation is that these mountains were created first. “everlasting hills” – hills which are constantly producing fruit, and never cease to do so due to drought.

²⁷ In the Ramban’s opinion, this hints to the fact that Zevulun has a shore in his portion, while Yissachar has a good portion:

וטעם “שמח זבולן בצאתך” – בעת צאתך באניות סוחר, ירמוז כי לחוף ימים ישכון. ואתה “יששכר באהליך” – ירמוז כי ראה מנוחה כי טוב ואת ארצו כי נעמה, כברכת יעקב.

And the reason that Zevulun will rejoice in his going out - when you go out with your merchant ships, it hints that you will dwell by the seashore. And you, “Yissachar in your tents,” – hints that there will be welcome security and your land will be pleasant, as Yaakov’s blessing.

²⁸ The Seforno writes:

“עמים הר יקראו” – יששכר וזבולון יקראו אומות העולם אל ההר הטוב במיני סחורתם הבלתי נמצאים בין האומות. “כי שפע ימים יינקו” – יששכר וזבולון יהיה להם מיני סחורה הבאים מן הים ומהם שספונים וטמונים בחול כמו דם חלזון וזוכית לבנות בחולסית שבחול.

וּלְגַד אָמַר בְּרוּךְ מְרַחֵב גֹּדַל כְּלָבִיא שָׁכֵן וְטָרַף זְרוּעַ אֶף קַדְקֵד: וַיֵּרָא רֵאשִׁית לוֹ כִּי שָׁם חֵלְקַת מַחֲקָק סָפוּן...

To Gad he said:

“Blessed is he who enlarges Gad’s domain! Gad lives there like a lion, tearing at arm or head.²⁹
He chose the best land for himself; the leader’s³⁰ portion was kept for him...

וּלְנַפְתָּלִי אָמַר נַפְתָּלִי שָׁבַע רְצוֹן וּמְלֵא בְרַכְתּוֹ ה' יָם וְדָרוֹם יִרְשֶׁה:

To Naphtali he said:

“Naphtali is abounding with the favor of the Lord and is full of his blessing; he will inherit southward to the lake.”³¹

“They will summon people to the mountain” – Yissachar and Zevulun will summon the nations of the world to the good mountain for all the special merchandise that cannot be found amongst the nations.

“they will feast over the abundance of the seas” – Yissachar and Zevulun will have all kinds of merchandise that comes from the sea, and that is buried in the sand, such as the blood of sea-snails [which was a rare dye] and glass...

²⁹ The Seforno writes:

“ברוך מרחיב גד” – שנתן לו חלק גדול מחלק כל אחד משאר השבטים בעבר הירדן כי אמנם ארץ סיחון ועוג היתה גדולה בכמות אע”פ שלא היתה זבת חלב ודבש כמו עבר הירדן: כלביא שכן. ראוי הוא לזאת ההרחבה מפני שהוא שוכן בתוך האומות כמו אריה לאכול את סביביו.
“Blessed is He who enlarges Gad’s domain” – who gave him a bigger portion that the other tribes on the other side of the Jordan because although Sichon and Oz’s land was big, it was not as flowing with milk and honey as the other side of the Jordan: Like a lion dwells. He is fitting for a large portion because he lies amongst the nations like a lion consuming those around him.

³⁰ The Seforno writes:

“וירא ראשית לו” – וג”כ ראוי הוא לכך כי אמנם כשבחר גד את ארץ סיחון ועוג אע”פ שאינה כקדושת עבר הירדן היתה כוונתו להשיג דבר עקרי אצלו כי שם בארץ סיחון ועוג חלקת מחוקק ספון היתה אותה החלקה שהמחוקק קבור בה שהוא משה.
“He chose the best land for himself” – and he is also suitable for that, for when Gad chose the land of Sichon and Og, even though it did not have the holiness of the other side of the Jordan, he intended to acquire an important thing, for there in the land of Sichon and Og was the hidden portion of the lawmaker, where the lawmaker, who is Moshe, was to be buried.

³¹ The Seforno writes:

אתה נפתלי ירשת ים ודרום שבע רצון ומלא ברכת ה' ואיני צריך להתפלל על ברכת ארצך וזה כי בחלקו יהיו פירות גינוסר הראשונים להתבשל ומהם יהיו בכורים רצויים לפניו.
You, Naphtali, inherited the sea and its southern shore, and so much of God’s blessing, and I do not need to pray for the blessing of your land, for in your portion will be fruits of the Ginosar, the first to ripen, which will produce Bikkurim that will find favor before Him.

וּלְאֶשֶׁר אָמַר בְּרוּךְ מִבְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה רְצוּי אֶחָיו וְטָבַל בְּשֶׁמֶן רַגְלוֹ.

To Asher he said:

“Most blessed of sons is Asher; let him be favored by his brothers, and let him bathe his feet in oil.³²

(13-24)

These blessings, which discuss the portions each tribe will inherit, are connected, of course, to the blessing of the Land,³³ but many also promise material wealth, like Yaakov’s blessing.

The blessing of dominion

Some of the tribes are blessed with success in warfare, which is also related to the blessing of the Land (its conquest) as well as to Yaakov’s blessing of dominion over his enemies:

זֹאת לִיהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַע ה' קוֹל יְהוּדָה וְאֵל עַמּוֹ תְּבִיאֵנּוּ יְדֵיו רַב לוֹ וְעֶזֶר מִצָּרָיו תִּהְיֶה:

And this he said to Yehuda:

“Hear, Lord, the cry of Yehuda; bring him to his people. With his own hands he defends his cause. Oh, be his help against his foes!” (7)

וּלְלֵוִי אָמַר... מִחֶזֶק מַחְנֵם קָמְיוֹ וּמִשְׁנֵאָיו מִן קְיוּמוֹן:

To Levi he said:

³² The Seforno writes:

“ברוך מבנים אשר” – הנה אשר בזה יהיה ברוך מכל שאר העמים כי אמנם על כל עשיר תהיה קנאת אחיו ושנאתם בצד מה והפך זה יקרה לשבטו של אשר כי אמנם יהי רצוי אחיו: וטובל בשמן רגלו. וזה שהוא היה נותן זול בשמן בין אחיו לרב השמן אצלו.
“Blessed among sons in Asher” – in this Asher will be blessed amongst all other nations, for although every wealthy person is envied by his brothers, the opposite will be true of Asher, for he will be loved by them: for his feet will bathe in oil. He would give inexpensive oil to his brothers because he had so much oil.

³³ See Rabbi Menachem Liebttag’s article on our parasha, “The Order of the Tribes,” where he shows how the blessings deal with the conquest of the land, the goodness of the portion each tribe will receive, and the future role of the tribe within the nation.

... strike down those who rise against him, his foes till they rise no more.” (11)

וְלִיּוֹסֵף אָמַר... בְּכֹר שׁוֹרוֹ הִדָּר לוֹ וְקַרְנָיו רָאִים קַרְנֵי בָהֵם עַמִּים יִנְגַח יַחְדָּו אֶפְסֵי אֲרֶץ.
In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he will
gore the nations, even those at the ends of the earth. (17)

וְלָדָן אָמַר דָּן גִּיּוֹר אַרְיֵה יִזְנַק מִן הַבָּשָׁן :

To Dan, he said:

“Dan is a lion’s cub, springing out of Bashan.”³⁴ (22)

Moshe’s conclusion also blesses Israel in their entirety that God will help them be victorious
over their enemies:

בְּרִזָּל וּנְחֻשָׁת מְנַעְלֶיךָ וּכְיָמֶיךָ דְּבָאָךְ : אֵין כָּאֵל יִשְׂרוּן רֹכֵב שָׁמַיִם בְּעֲזָרְךָ וּבְנִגְאוֹתוֹ שְׁחָקִים : מַעֲנָה אֶל-לֵהִי קָדָם וּמִתַּחַת זְרַעַת עוֹלָם
וַיִּגְרַשׁ מִפְּנֵיךָ אוֹיֵב וַיֵּאמֶר הַשָּׁמַד : וַיִּשְׁפֹּן יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּטַח בְּדָד עֵין יַעֲקֹב אֶל אֲרֶץ דְּגָן וְתִירוֹשׁ אֶף שָׁמִיּוֹ יַעֲרְפוּ טָל : אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי
כְּמוֹךָ עִם נוֹשַׁע בְּה' מִגֵּן עֲזָרְךָ וְאֲשֶׁר חָרַב גִּאוֹתֶיךָ וַיִּכְתְּשׁוּ אֵיבֶיךָ לָךְ וְאַתָּה עַל כְּמוֹתֵימוֹ תִּדְרֹךְ.
The bolts of your gates will be iron and bronze, and your strength will equal your days.³⁵ “There
is no one like the God of Yeshurun, who rides across the heavens to help you and on the clouds in

³⁴ The Seforno writes:

“דן גיור אריה יזנק מן הבשן” – הנה האריה לא יזנק מן הבשן שהוא מקום מבחר המקנה... זולתי בהיותו בטוח לטרופי איזה טרף שידומן לו
חוץ לבשן. וכן יהיה דן בטוח לכבוש סביבותיו ויצא עליהן בטח.
“Dan is a lion cub, springing out of the Bashan” – the lion will not leave the Bashan, for it is a prime area for
cattle... for he is not sure that outside of the Bashan he will find prey. But Dan will be sure to conquer around him
and he will venture out with confidence.

³⁵ Rashi writes:

“ברזל ונחשת מנעלך” – עכשיו הוא מדבר נגד כל ישראל, שהיו גבוריהם יושבים בערי הספר ונועלים אותה שלא יוכלו האויבים ליכנס בה
כאלו היא סגורה במנעולים ובריחים של ברזל ונחשת.
“The bolts of your gate will be iron and bronze” – now this refers to all of Israel, for their warriors would
dwell in the outlying cities and fortify them so the enemies could not enter, as if it were bolted with locks and
bolts of iron and bronze.

The Seforno writes:

...שלא יכנסו בה אומות להלחם ולא יחמוד איש את ארצך מיראתך...כאלו תהיה הארץ נעולה במנעולי ברזל ונחשת... שלא תהיה מלכותך
עולה ויורד, כמו מלכות אומות העולם בעלות מזלם, ויורדת בירדתו, מפני שהם תחת הנהגת צבאות השמים. אבל אתה כימך שהם ימי
הנעורים ותחילת כניסתך לארץ, כן יהיה דבאך ועת זקנתך, כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים ונושנתם בארץ. וברכתי זאת תחול.
So the nations would not enter to fight and no one will desire your land out of fear from you... as if the land were
locked with bolts of iron or bronze...that your kingdom should not be unstable, like the empires of the nations who
are subject to the fates, rising and falling, as they are under the influence of the Heavenly hosts. But you, who are
young, and at the beginning of entering the Land, so you should also be when you are old, for you shall bear
children and grandchildren and you shall grow old in the Land. And this blessing should apply.

his majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.³⁶ He will drive out your enemies before you, saying, ‘Destroy them!’ So Israel will live in safety; Yaakov will dwell secure in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew. Blessed are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword.³⁷ Your enemies will cower before you,³⁸ and you will tread on their heights.”³⁹
(25-30)

Moshe’s blessing as a father and a man of God

Thus, Moshe blesses each tribe with a suitable blessing, and together as one, Bnei Yisrael receives the blessing of the forefathers from their leader father-figure: the blessing of the Land

³⁶ Rashi explains:

“מענה אלוקי קדם – למעון הם השחקים לאלוקי קדם, שקדם לכל אלוקים ובירר לו שחקים לשבתו ומעונתו, ומתחת מעונתו כל בעלי זרוע שוכנים. “זרעת עולם” – סיחון ועוג ומלכי כנען, שהיו תקפו וגבורתו של עולם, לפיכך על כרחם יחרדו ויזועו וכחם חלש מפניו. לעולם אימת הגבורה על הנמוך, והוא שהכח והגבורה שלו בעזרך.

“Which are an abode for the God who precedes all” - The skies are an abode for God who preceded (עָדָה) all other deities. He selected the skies [above] as His residence and abode, while all the strong men live below Him. “are the mighty ones of the world” - [Literally, “The arms of the world.” This refers to] Sihon, Og, and the kings of Canaan, who were [considered] the strength and might of the world. Therefore, despite themselves, they will tremble and quake, and their power will dwindle before God - the fear of one above always falls upon the one below, and thus, He to whom power and might belong is the one who helps you.

³⁷ The Seforno explains:

“עם נושע בה” – שלא תהיה תשועתך ע”י מלחמתך אבל ה’ ילחם לכם. “מגן עזרך” – הוא שעזר אותך בזמן החורבן שלא כלית כאמרו לולי ה’ שהיה לנו אזי המים שטפנונו עזרנו בשם ה’ (תהלים קכ”ד, ב-ה). “ואשר חרב גאותך” – והוא אשר יהי’ חרב גאותך שתרומם על האומות במלחמתו עליהם...”

“A people saved by the Lord” – that your salvation will not come from battle, but that God will fight for you. “He is your shield and helper” – He will be the one to help you in times of destruction, preventing your annihilation, as it says, “if the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us... the raging waters would have swept us away. Our help is in the name of the Lord” (Psalms 124: 2-8). “Who is the sword of your pride” – he shall be your proud sword, who will lift you up over the nations when He fights them.”

³⁸ The Chizkuni explains:

“ויכחשו אויבך לך” – מי שאויבים לך בלבם מכחשים לך מתוך יראה ומראים עצמם אוהביך ויהיו משועבדים לעשות רצונך.
“Your enemies will cower before you” – in your enemies’ hearts they will cower before you out of fear and show themselves as friends and they will be enslaved to do your will.

³⁹ The Seforno explains this as a general blessing: “Even their kings will surrender to you,” while Rashi explains that this refers to a specific event: “and you will tread on their heights” – as it says (Devarim 10:24) “put your feet on the necks of these kings.”

and the covenant with God; the blessing of material wealth and victory over their enemies, and even the primordial blessing of fertility and proliferation.

Moshe's blessing continues the blessing tradition of the forefathers, as well as God's way of blessing His world, and humanity in particular. Moshe serves as a father for Bnei Yisrael, but he is also a "man of God,"⁴⁰ and he blesses them in both senses. It is fitting that the Torah conclude with this blessing, which was first bestowed by God, passed on by the forefathers, and, finally, bequeathed to the entire nation by Moshe.

⁴⁰ As it says in the beginning of the blessings, "And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of God, blessed Bnei Yisrael before his death.