

Jacob's Predictions

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Book of Bereishit ends with Yaakov and Yosef's deaths. Just before he dies Yaakov blesses his sons but in so doing makes important comments on past events and significant predictions about the future.

Most of the sons are given two or three lines like Reuven, the first born, who is dismissed as unstable. An obvious justification for the first born being passed over. He plays little part in the future of the Jewish people because his interest was purely material (the tribe preferred to stay on the East bank of the river Jordan where the grazing was better instead of joining the others in the hills on the West). Apart from attacking Simon and Levy for their violence at Shehem, he tells each the tribes, briefly, about their future, where they will live or what their role or professions will be.

But Judah and Joseph are given five lines. As we know, some five hundred years later the monarchy would begin with Saul (of the tribe of Benjamin) but then pass to David of Judah and remained with his dynasty until the Babylonian exile in 586. But after David's son Solomon the tribes split into two separate countries. Judah in the south and the ten tribes who were identified with Joseph in the North. So, Jacob's predictions came true. Judah and Joseph did become the dominant tribes of our people.

Jacob also says that Judah would rule from "when they come to Shiloh" or "until the coming of Shiloh." Shiloh was where the Tabernacle was for most of the time before it ultimately became absorbed into the Temple. What did Jacob mean? That Temple in Judah would then take over from Shiloh? Or as some commentators suggest until the Messiah comes (Shiloh became a code word for that). But it's strange that nowhere else in the Torah is there any mention of a Messiah in the sense that we use it today.

Academics, or cynics might say that these predictions were in fact later insertions to justify the historical outcome and to give messianic hope in exile. There are always two ways of looking at things, the scientific and the spiritual. I believe both are valuable. We can use our brains and our souls to experience the world we inhabit and to derive spiritual guidance to cope with the challenges.