

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Hayyei Sarah

BLESSED IN ALL THINGS

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱת־אֲבְרָהָם בְּכֹל...

And God had blessed Abraham in all things. (Genesis 24:1)

Rabbi Yehudah said: It means that God gave him a daughter.

Said Rabbi Nehemiah to him: Did Abraham have a daughter at the center of his household, and yet nothing is recorded of her?! (That's impossible!) Rather, And God blessed Abraham in all things means that God had not given him a daughter.

Rabbi Levi said: It means, [God blessed Abraham] with three things. God made him master of his evil inclination, his son Ishmael reformed, and his storehouse was never diminished in any way.

Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Hama, the son of Rabbi Hanina: It means that God did not test him again.

(Bereshit Rabbah 49:7)

COMMENTARY: When the Torah asserts that someone has been "blessed in all things," we naturally want to know the specifics. What would it mean to live a completely blessed life? The difference of opinion about the nature of Abraham's blessing recorded in the source above reflects a difference of opinion among the rabbis about the good life.

Rabbi Yehudah argues that children are the ultimate blessing. Abraham had two sons already, and the birth of a female child represents the completeness of this blessing.

Rabbi Nehemiah disagrees. He points out that children bring responsibility and worries to their parents' lives. This was especially so for female children in the ancient world, since daughters were economically dependent upon their parents, and economically vulnerable once they married and left their parents' home. On Rabbi Nehemiah's view, being relieved of the responsibility of raising a daughter is a blessing.

Rabbi Levi rejects the idea that blessing refers to additional children or the lack thereof and offers a third opinion that broadens the notion of what it means to be blessed in all things. For Rabbi Levi, the verse teaches us that Abraham was blessed in all of the important areas of his life: his character, his family, and his material prosperity.

Finally, Rabbi Hama adds another view. For him, blessing means a life of peace and the absence of trying circumstances. Freedom from danger is the ultimate blessing.

QUESTION: Add your view to the rabbis' opinions listed above. How would you explain what it means to be "blessed in all things"?

Bonus text: A similar debate about the good life is found in the Talmud (Shabbat 25b):

Who is wealthy? Anyone who takes pleasure in what he has. That is Rabbi Meir's opinion.

Rabbi Tarfon says: Anyone who owns 100 vineyards, one hundred fields, and 100 servants working in them.

Rabbi Akiva says: Anyone with a spouse who does exquisite deeds.

Rabbi Yossi says: Anyone with a bathroom close by his dining room.