

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayechi

In this weeks Parsha, Parshat Vayechi, Jacob states, “Let G-d make you like Ephraim and Menasseh.” This is the format in which he instructs Israel to bless their children for all times. Why did Jacob choose Ephraim and Menasseh over his own twelve sons, the Tribes of Israel. Alternately why not choose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, similar to the blessing to daughters to be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah? What was so unique and special about Ephraim and Menasseh that caused Jacob to choose them as the epitome of blessing.

Ephraim and Manasseh were great men but when looking for the one thing that makes them different from others mentioned, the first observable difference was the setting of their upbringing. Ephraim and Manasseh were the first Jews to be raised their entire lives in exile. They grew up in a country that was filled with idol worship and promiscuity. They did not have Jewish neighbors and were not surrounded by Torah scholars. Despite this, Ephraim and Manasseh remained righteous and lived a true Torah lifestyle. Their greatness was so significant that Jacob stated that about Ephraim and Manasseh that they were as great as Reuben and Simeon. Typically, with each passing generation, people tend to be on a lower spiritual level. This was not the case with Ephraim and Manasseh. While they lived a generation later than Reuben and Simeon, they were on the same spiritual level as one of the sons of Jacob. This is a tremendous accomplishment, in and of itself, but even more so because it was accomplished, not in the safe-haven of the house of Jacob, but in the spiritual desert of Egypt. Despite this challenge they stuck to their values and remained pure and righteous.

This is the blessing Israel gives to their sons. “May you be like Ephraim and Menasseh. Despite the fact that today’s Jews are living in exile they are blessed to overcome all the pressures and challenges of the society around them and grow to be as great as Ephraim and Menasseh.

Another lesson from Ephraim and Menasseh is pointed out by Rabbi Shlomo Bloch (1890-1973). Just as Ephraim and Manasseh were as great and righteous as their father’s generation, this is the blessing to Israel’s sons to withstand the natural downward pull of each generation and grow to be as great as their forefathers.

Rabbi Zalman of Navardok (1887-1970) adds that there was a special measure of brotherly love between Ephraim and Menasseh. Earlier in the Parsha the Torah describes how Jacob



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placed his hands on Ephraim and Manasseh's heads. He placed his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left hand on Manasseh's head. Although Menasseh was older and therefore would appear to deserve to have the dominant hand on his head, Jacob placed his right hand on Ephraim's head. (This was because Ephraim's descendants would be greater and therefore deserved a greater blessing.) When Menasseh saw this he did not complain or protest. Rather, he stood by his brother's side silently and gladly allowed him to accept the greater blessing. This demonstration of brotherly love is comparable to Ahron's demonstration of love toward his younger brother, Moses, when he finds out that he will be the one to lead the Jews out of Egypt. The Torah explains that Aaron had only happiness in his heart for his brother's exalted position and there was no jealousy or resentment in his heart. It was in this merit that he merited to wear the holy breastplate over his heart in the Temple. This great show of brotherly love is in contrast to the jealousy and hatred that Joseph received from his brothers, which ultimately led to them selling him as a slave to Egypt. It is for this brotherly love that Israel blesses their sons. Only with this can they survive this long and bitter exile.

The question can be raised, why shouldn't children be blessed to be as great as the sages of more recent generations who were also raised in exile and still achieved great heights. Rabbi Moses Feinstein (1895-1986) answers that the Torah is teaching an important lesson in how to view one's children's Torah education. The only way to ensure that children are motivated to reach their fullest potential is to shoot for the absolute top. If parents bless their children to be like more recent Torah scholars they are being told not to shoot for the top because the earlier scholars were greater. Although a child's fullest potential may be much lower or equal to the present day sages, their goal must be to aim for the level of the most righteous individuals of all time. This will allow them to become the greatest people they can possibly be. The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel explains that this blessing is to be given to a baby on the day of his brit when he enters into the covenant of Abraham. The Beis Halevi, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1820-1892) uses this explanation to teach parents that their obligation to educate their sons begins on that day. Even at the young age of eight days old, a parent can begin to instill these important lessons that can be learned from Ephraim and Menasseh. It is with this blessing and focus that one can survive and strive for true greatness throughout our experience in exile.

Shabbat Shalom!

