

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Vayechi

After delineating Jacob's blessings to his children, the Torah (Genesis 49:28) says he blessed "each according to his appropriate blessing." Ohr Hachaim (18th century) explains he gave each child a blessing that matched his nature, based both on his personality and life experiences. Depending on the child, he blessed them with leadership qualities, Torah scholarship, wealth, or strength of character.

Before Jacob blesses his twelve sons, he singles out Ephraim and Menashe to bless them, the only grandchildren who receive this honor from their grandfather. Jacob asks that his redeeming angel bless the boys, saying (48:16) "May my name be declared upon them and the name of my forefathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they multiply like fish within the land." Did this blessing have anything to do with Ephraim and Menashe's personalities and experiences, or did Jacob simply bless them in a general way?

Let us take a look at Rashi's (11th century) comments about these two sons of Joseph to see if we can find a correlation between their personalities and this blessing. Rashi (42:23) says Menashe served as Joseph's translator in the conversations he had with his brothers before they discovered he was indeed their brother and understood their language. As Joseph's right hand man, Menashe clearly played a role in the Egyptian government. On the other hand, Rashi (48:1) says Ephraim was the one who informed his father when Jacob became deathly ill, because Ephraim studied Torah with Jacob in the land of Goshen. While Menashe assists Joseph in political affairs, Ephraim studies Torah with Jacob, separated from the action in the house of Pharaoh.

We also see such a contrast in the way Rashi (48:19) explains Jacob's individual blessings to the boys. He says Hashem would miraculously enable Menashe's descendent Gidon to succeed militarily, referring to Gideon's small army defeating the much larger army of the enemy. But Ephraim's descendent, Joshua, would divide the land of Israel to the Jewish people and would teach them Torah. The blessing that Menashe's descendent would succeed as a military strategist matches Menashe's role as a politically involved person, and the blessing for Ephraim's descendent to teach Torah fits with Ephraim's own involvement in Torah study.

Although Jacob later blesses each boy separately (48:19), the opening blessing of 'hamalach' speaks to both boys together, so it cannot be relating to these differences. But although the two boys possessed different strengths and personalities, they shared similar life experiences and Jacob addresses this when he says his own name and the name of Abraham and Isaac will be "proclaimed upon" Ephraim and Menashe. How does this line relate specifically to the experiences of the two brothers?

Nachmanides (13th century) interprets this line to mean the descendants of Ephraim and Menashe will remain strongly committed to their heritage because they will remember the lessons of their forefathers. Ohr Hachaim, in a similar vein, says that the forefathers will be proud of the conduct of their progeny. Jacob blesses Ephraim and Menashe that the names of the forefathers will be associated with their children because they grew up in a pagan, immoral country without a Jewish infrastructure and yet still maintained a strong connection to their roots. Therefore, it suits them to be blessed that their descendants would always remain connected to the teachings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and live in a way that would make them proud.



# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

Jacob again alludes to Ephraim and Menashe's stalwart commitment to tradition against all odds when he says (48:20) that Jews will bless their children with the words, "May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Menashe." The widespread custom for a father to bless his sons upon returning home after synagogue on Friday night with this line comes from this blessing of Jacob.

In contrast, a father blesses his daughters, "May G-d make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah." At first glance, it would seem unfair to the boys that they do not receive a blessing to become like the patriarchs just like the girls receive a blessing to become like the matriarchs. But since Ephraim and Menashe serve as the paradigm of children who carry on the legacy of their ancestors, when we bless our children to become like Ephraim and Menashe, this implies they will emulate the forefathers as well.

Does the other blessing in the 'hamalach' verse, "You shall multiply like fish," relate to the life of Ephraim and Menashe, or does it relate to the life of their father Joseph? To answer this question, we must explain why Jacob employs the metaphor of multiplying like fish. When G-d blessed the forefathers, he said they would have children like the dust of the earth or like the stars above, but he never blessed them to increase like fish.

The Talmud says the fish metaphor indicates that Jacob blessed Joseph that his descendants, like fish, would not be affected by the evil eye. Just as the water covers the fish and protects them from the evil eye, so too Joseph's descendants will be unaffected by the evil eye. What is the evil eye and why are specifically Joseph's descendants blessed to not be affected by it?

R' Nachman of Breslov (18th century) says when someone envies another person, this "evil eye" can trigger a divine punishment to that person because he caused someone to envy him. He says the "victim" of the evil eye can protect himself from this evil eye if he holds himself back from being jealous of other people. If he does not envy the blessings of other people, then G-d will protect him from the evil eye that other people impose on him when they envy him. We learn this from Joseph, who held himself back from being jealous of Potiphar and thereby resisted the temptation of Potiphar's wife. Since Joseph conquered his own jealousy of Potiphar, Jacob blessed Joseph and his children that they would not be affected by the evil eye.

Although the first part of "hamalach" relates to Ephraim and Menashe, the blessing to "multiply like fish" relates to their father Joseph's experience. In fact, the verse preceding 'hamalach' (48:15) says Jacob blessed Joseph, implying that Jacob also blesses Joseph indirectly with the blessing he gives to Ephraim and Menashe. May we learn from the 'hamalach' blessing both the importance of clinging onto our heritage like Ephraim and Menashe and of avoiding jealousy of others like Joseph did.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Yosef Saltzman

3921 Fabian Way Suite A0-17  
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94303  
[www.jsn.info](http://www.jsn.info)