

Einav's Bat Mitvah Dvar Torah, Dec, 2015

Shabbat Shalom and welcome.

This week's parasha is Vayechi. In this parasha we read about Jacob's death and the blessing of his sons and Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe. We also hear about Joseph's death.

One question that struck me as I was learning about my parasha was: Why are Ephraim and Menashe the role models for blessing boys on Shabbat? We bless girls to be like the foremothers but what about the forefathers?

There is one theory that I came up with. At the beginning of the parasha, Jacob blesses Ephraim and Menashe only. Later on in the parasha, Jacob blesses all of his sons. In the blessings that Jacob gives to his sons, many of them are in fact curses, which sum up their flaws and their good points. A lot of them are bad, or negative. However when he blesses his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe, there is nothing negative. In fact, there is barely anything at all. However, Jacob doesn't even mention any other grandchildren, only them, Joseph's sons.

In the other family relationships that we see in the Torah, there are major conflicts between brothers, sisters and parents. For example, Cain and Abel (possibly one of the worst) had an argument which ended in death. There is also Sarah and Hagar, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Rivkah and Yitzchak, Esav and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and most importantly Joseph and his brothers. I think that the lack of bad stories is proof that Ephraim and Menashe are the only brothers who didn't fight, which is why we bless our sons to be like them.

This brings me on to the second question, why and how did they not fight? This was confusing, because in my parashah, we encounter the verses where Jacob, who's lying on his deathbed, announces—in front of both of the grandsons—that Ephraim will be better than Menashe, even though he is younger.

“And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it on Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Menashe's head” (Bereshit, Chapter 48, verse 14)

“And when Joseph saw that his father was laying his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he held up his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Menashe’s head.” (ibid, verse 17)

“And Joseph said unto his father: Not so, my father, for this is the first born; put thy right hand upon his head.” (ibid, verse 18)

“And his father refused, and said: I know it, my son, I know it; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; howbeit his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations.” (ibid, verse 19)

This was a slightly careless action as it had the potential to cause a very big conflict between the two brothers and their descendants. However the Torah is silent and there is no mention of any disagreements between or their tribes. I think the main reason they did not argue was that Joseph told them stories of past rivalries that had happened between siblings, one in particular: the conflict between Joseph (their father) and his brothers. I think this relationship was one of the worst because the plan to harm Joseph was completely intentional, it was the brothers’ original idea and they weren’t that bothered about it. I know this because they threw Joseph in a pit without food or water while they went to have a meal and discuss his fate. And what’s really interesting is that Reuben was the only brother who was troubled by this and couldn’t eat. Reuben was also the one who suggested that they take Joseph back to his father instead of killing him, which could have saved his life, if the brothers had listened to him.

This brings me onto another question: Does Jacob ever find out what really happened to Joseph and how he got to Egypt? I think that Jacob never really found out what happened to his son, and whatever the brothers told him was not the exact truth. I think this because when Jacob is blessing his sons in Chapter 49, Reuben gets a very bad blessing. “Reuven, thou art my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength... unstable as water, thou shalt not excel.” (Bereshit, Chapter 49, verse 3)

This proves that Jacob knew nothing about what had happened, because if he had, he would have known that Reuben tried to save Joseph and he was the only one out of ten who didn’t like the idea of sitting down to a meal while

Joseph was stuck in a pit, starving. If Jacob had known, Reuben's blessing would have been better, positive not negative. This shows me that Jacob never knew the exact truth.

However, I think Ephraim and Menashe did know about what the brothers did to Joseph and this made them realise that they couldn't hurt each other—mentally or physically. They could empathise with Joseph's feelings and knew if they hurt each other the same way Joseph's brothers hurt him, they would feel the same way and they couldn't bear to do that to their own brother. They also didn't want to end up in the same situation as Joseph's brothers did, when they were helpless and Joseph had the power of life or death over them.

This brings me onto what my mother said before. My parents blessed me to be like Ephraim and Menashe, not the foremothers, mainly because, personally, I think Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah are not ideal role models because they all had conflicts with someone in their family or household. This (in a way) is suggesting that girls will have more conflicts and arguments than boys, because of the role models we bless them to be like. So if the Torah can't find good women to be role models for Jewish girls, then we should be allowed to be blessed like boys. I think that the qualities of a person are more important than the gender.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank Nachum for helping me to understand my parashah in detail and helping me to take it apart and think of it completely differently. I'd also like to thank Rabbi Joel for the extra knowledge that he gave me about the history of a bat/bar mitzvah. Also, thank you Jacky, for getting me started a whole year and a half ago. Finally, I'd like to say a huge thank you to my parents, who were probably the only people who were more stressed than me, from teaching me to leyn, to organising the whole weekend and helping me shop for a bat mitzvah outfit. I'd like to thank everyone for coming here today, especially those who travelled from abroad, thanks for listening and Shabbat Shalom.

Einav Diamond Limor

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