

When my wife was pregnant with our son, I had a habit: with my hand on her belly, I would imagine scenes of what life with this mystery person would be like.

Like scenes from a movie, I pictured

Bedtime - singing lullabies with a guitar

Morning - waking early to learn Torah together over hot chocolate

Friday night - My wife and I, over an immaculately set Shabbat table, saying the classic blessings: *Y'simcha Elobim ke'efraim v'chinnashe* - may you be blessed like Ephraim and Menashe.

Of course, these scenes went along with the images of A's on homework, a Talmud and sportstar, frum (but not *too* frum), a defender of Israel, fighter for justice, lover of organic food, etc.. etc... You know, the classic modern-orthodox Jewish parental expectations

Blessings and expectations for children are a key theme at the end of the book of Genesis, as the children of Israel transition from family to nation.

Let's take a closer look at the scene where the Torah introduces the blessing so many of us say, the blessing of Jacob to his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe:

Joseph is told that his father is dying, so he rushes his boys to get a blessing. It's a critical moment, a climax, perhaps, for the entire book of Genesis.

While Joseph, his brothers and his father have been reunited, there is a huge question mark about the future.

How will Joseph and the brothers be integrated over the long term? In order for this family to continue whole, Joseph's Egyptian children, born by Osnat, the daughter of the Egyptian high priest of On, will have to be integrated into the family mix. If these boys cannot be integrated into the family, into the story, the family will fall apart.

With all this hanging in the balance, Joseph enters the room with his sons for their blessing. Jacob summons his strength, sits up in bed, and prepares to bless. But before he blesses, he gives a little speech that describes his speaking of his profound aloneness while fleeing from home, and the protection from God he found in the wilderness. He tells of the love and traumatic loss of his beloved Rachel. Most painfully, he relates the family disruption and pain amongst his own sons. He then says about Ephraim and Menashe "*li hem... k'ruven v'shimon yihyu li.*" - they will be for me, taking the place of Reuven and Shimon they will be for me.

"Joseph," Jacob is saying, "your boys will take the place of Reuven and Shimon who disappointed me in their lack of leadership, their disobedience, their violence. Your sons will heal fulfill the promise of living in Eretz Jacob, the land that I left. Your children, perhaps they will be the ones who can finally bring me comfort and solace for Rachel who I lost."

Big expectations before the blessing is given!

Suddenly though, instead of the blessing, there is an interruption in the very next verse.

“Vayar Jacob et bnei Joseph vayomer - mi eleh?”

Jacob saw Joseph’s children and he said “who are these?”

Who are these??

They are Ephraim and Menashe, who Jacob was just talking about! The replacement Reuven and Shimon, the dwellers in the land, what does he mean “mi eleh?”

What a strange question. What a hurtful question!

According to Rashi, Jacob is saying: “Where did these come from that are not fitting for my blessing!?”

Where did these kids come from? Maybe, in their Egyptian dress, they didn’t look like Jacob expected. Maybe, growing up in a different society, they spoke a different language than Jacob. Maybe, growing up with an Egyptian mother in the royal courts, they had a different home life than Jacob remembered with Rivka in the tents.

These children look, sound, and think differently than what Jacob expected for his progeny. How will these strange looking children replace my Reuven and Shimon? How will these Egyptians settle the land of Israel? How will these strangers fill the hole in my heart?

It’s an ironic, tragic moment. Doesn’t Jacob know a thing or two about broken blessings? Doesn’t he know the pain, after all he went through with Yitzchak and Esav, of what it feels like to look different, act different, be different than what a parent, a father desires?

Imagine being in the room, at that moment. What would you say if you were Joseph?

What do you do if your father wouldn’t your children? What would you say if your father told you “Your children are not fit for my blessing?” What happens when your kids look different, speak different, think different than they are “supposed” to?

Maybe some of us look at our own families, even our own children, and have had these “mi eleh” moments. Who are these children? Who are these people in my family?

And at the same time - how many of us turned out differently than our parents expected? How many of us wore our hair longer or shorter than they would have liked, were in a relationship with someone they did not approve of, took a career path they did not initially support? How many of us did not fulfill a parental expectation of some kind or another?

Mi eleh?

Listen to Joseph’s amazing answer to this haunting question.

“Vayomer Joseph el aviv - banai hem asher natan li Elohim, bazeih”

These are the my children, that God gave me here.

Unequivocal. Unapologetic.

It was here that they were given by God, in these bodies. in this family, in this exile, in this unredeemed world. Given by god.

“Dad,” Joseph says, “put aside your expectations, your needs, your vision of what your descendants should look like for a minute. These children are not objects to solve your problems, to make up for your shortcomings, to heal your pain. These are precious children given to me, to us, by God.”

This is a lesson I’m trying to keep learning as a new father.

Music, Torah learning, those images I had of life as a father - it turns out an 8 month old is not so interested in those things. He’s mostly interested in eating. I try and learn a *sefer* with him on my lap, he tries to eat it. I take out my guitar, he tries to eat it. Unless I’m of course trying to feed him, then he’s much more interested in a *sefer* or a guitar.

Those scenes in a movie I had were beautiful manifestations of my dreams, hopes, and projects. But they were not my son. Those images, I’m trying to learn, are not the blessing.

The blessing **is** the child.

Joseph is teaching Jacob and us that the true blessing of children is not the potential fulfillment of parental desires, or the soothing of parental pain. Independent of what school he or she a parent hopes they get into, independent of what a parent perceives of as ability or disability, each child is a unique, Godly blessing.

If we can’t see this, if we focus only on the fulfillment of our own needs, we lose the blessing. If things don’t turn out the way we need or expect them to, we might find ourselves looking at our kids and asking - *mi eleh?* Whose are these?

Joseph’s message is not just for the parents. It’s also for children. Our worth as children is not connected to how much we please or don’t please our parents. Our worth comes from a much higher source.

Jacob’s eyes are failing, but now he sees the blessing in front of him. He says

“In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing:
‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’”

These very words, this is the blessing that I dreamed about saying, the blessing that Jewish parents have recited over sons for thousands of years. This line represents Jacob accepting and celebrating these strange children, and telling all the people of Israel that in their names, in their strange, Egyptian names, will Israel bless their children. Jacob has shifted. No longer from expecting these children to fulfill a role in his life, he is able to bless them on their own terms. Jacob is realizing that to be a part of this family, of this people, doesn’t have to mean looking a certain way, or having the right lineage. To bless a child doesn’t mean smothering them in our own hopes and fears. It means blessing them for who they are, giving power and voice to the unique blessing that lies in each of them, waiting to be expressed in the world.