

The Blessings of Ephraim and Menashe

CSS Awareness Shabbat 5779

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As we find ourselves in that period of the year between Chanukah and Purim, we have occasion to reflect upon these two rabbinic holidays, which both commemorate the miraculous survival of our people.

Beyond this common denominator, as is expressed so clearly in the Al ha-Nissim additions to our tefillot and birkat ha-mazon, Chanukah and Purim represent two distinct paradigms of threat to our nation: the former relates to the threat of spiritual destruction, as the Greeks sought to cause us to 'forget the Torah, and to divert us from the mitzvot', while the latter commemorate Haman's desire to utterly annihilate the Jewish people, 'to destroy, to kill, to vanquish all of the Jews, from young to old, children and women, on one day...'

In this week's sedra, we learn that Yaakov declares that the Jewish people should bless their children to be like Ephraim and Menashe, Yosef's sons. While we know little about these figures from the text of the Torah itself, the Midrashic tradition notes that Menashe and Ephraim had different areas of focus: Menashe, as cited by Rashi in Parshat Miketz, functioned as a translator in his father's court, participating actively in affairs of government and state. Ephraim, as cited by Rashi in this week's parsha, was wont to study with his grandfather Yaakov, far from the palace, in the more insular environment of Goshen. Together, Ephraim and Menashe represent the spiritual vitality of our people, reflected by the former's commitment to Torah study, as well as the need to be active in defending our people's safety and security, reflected by Menashe's role in the palace.

From time immemorial, the survival of the Jewish people has required careful attention and vigilance both with respect to our spiritual and physical welfare, to the worlds of both Ephraim and Menashe. Tragically, for much of our history, we were largely unable to secure our physical environment, and, the incredible suffering of the Jewish people, from the Destruction of both temples, to the Crusades, to the pogroms, and culminating in the greatest act of destruction our people has ever known, the Holocaust, is but a partial list of the travails of our people.

With gratitude to the Almighty, we are privileged to live in a generation where the desire of our enemies to destroy us has not waned, but our ability to protect ourselves, with thanks to the Israel Defense Forces, is greater than it has been in millenia.

And yet, as anti-semitism has reared its ugly head here in the United States, all of us must remember that those places which are most essential to our spiritual survival, our schools and synagogues, are also in need of physical protection.

We must call to mind the striking image from Sefer Nechemiah, which tells of the construction of the Second Temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, noting that as half of the Jews worked in construction, the other half stood guard.

We recognize our responsibility to ensure the safety of these sacred vehicles of our spiritual vitality, and, in so doing, remind ourselves of the blessings of Ephraim and Menashe, that we cannot choose between a focus on spiritual and physical survival, but must attend to both. Even as we appeal to the Almighty for his Divine protection, as well as His inspiration to reach ever greater spiritual heights, we know and recognize our own responsibility to do all in our power to secure our own sacred spaces.

'May the Almighty make you like Ephraim *and* Menashe', we bless our children, not like one or the other, for it is only through the combination of both of their strengths, a commitment to both the spiritual as well as the physical wellbeing of our people, that the continuity of our community is assured.