



YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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The Parsha in Practice

Grandparents

After some initial confusion, Yaakov bestows his blessing on the children of Yosef and says the following:

וַיְבָרֶכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְאִמּוֹר בְּךָ יִבְרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר יִשְׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה

So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."

A close reading reveals that there is actually no blessing being directly given to these two boys. Instead of blessing them directly, he instead says they are to be the exemplars and the epitome of what blessing will look like for others. Future generation will wish for their children the success and goodness that these two boys, Menashe and Ephraim, already possess. It seems that this beracha says less about the future of these two young men as much as it speaks of their impressive present. It forces us to wonder: what was so exceptional about these children?



There are many approaches that highlight what is special about these two boys, some of which I had the opportunity to share a couple of weeks ago.

- 1) Although these children did not grow up in the nurturing environment of Yaakov's large family, with tens of uncles, aunts, and cousins who shared a similar belief system and lifestyle, they still found their way to the same strength of religious conviction far from family and any larger support system. We therefore bless our children that they too can overcome such challenges to their Jewish identity.
- 2) This is the Torah's first set of siblings without any rivalry. Even though Yaakov had reversed their birth order with his hands, there was none of the jealousy, competition, or animus we witnessed with Kayin and Hevel, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yakov and Esav, or with the sons of Yaakov. So too, we bless our children to see past small things to keep the larger idea of family connection paramount.
- 3) Judaism usually assumes "Yeridat Hadorot," that the generations descend in spirituality and connectedness to G-d. In decreasing order, there are the Avot, then the Shevatim, and then subsequent generations at a lesser level than those before. These two boys were different.

Menashe and Ephraim elevated themselves to be considered Shevatim alongside their uncles (See 48:5). Remarkably, and against the norm, these boys had upgraded their status. Like these boys, we bless our children that they equal or surpass their parents in all they become.

All of these approaches speak to the greatness of these two boys. R' Soloveitchik points towards another element of this encounter, the connection between grandparent and grandchild. This is the first time in the 20+ generations described in Bereishit that we see a grandparent interacting with their grandchildren. As he writes: *"Abraham and Isaac transmitted their spiritual heritage to their sons, but not to their grandsons. The latter received it from their fathers, but there was no direct communication between Abraham and Jacob or between Isaac and Reuben and Simeon..."*

What is the significance of this grandparent-grandchild relationship? The Gemara (Kidushin 30a) says that *כל המלמד את בן בנו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קבלה מהר סיני*, *One who teaches his son's son Torah, the verse ascribes him credit as though he received it from Mount Sinai*. What is the difference between learning Torah and learning it from Sinai? One is the experience of learning information, but the other is learning the information of experience. A grandchild learning from a grandparent learns more than just data and facts. They are transmitted back in time to learn and observe generational values, and understand what is and long has been important to those who came before. They are connected to their history by connecting to one personality closer to it. The act of study transcends basic learning, and becomes about understanding who they are and where they are from. It's learning **of** Sinai, vs. learning **from** it.

Our younger generations are blessed to live in a world with grandparents. It was not long ago that most children had never met their grandparents and were fortunate enough that their parents had survived to begin again. Those family stories were stories of tragic generational pauses and attempted re-starts. Parents were challenged to mold their own children through memories of a time past without the benefit of displaying characters from it. Parents alone can teach their children Torah, but when grandparents do, and live the example, there is a connection forged beyond the subject alone. It's not just about an experience in the present, but it's proof of a past. This encounter with Yaakov and his grandchildren is the first we find of this critical chain-relationship.

This past year has generated an extreme focus on grandparents. Covid-19 has been a greater threat to that age group, and we are concerned with their safety and health. We have sacrificed experiences, celebrations, and momentous occasions over this year to ensure that they will be able to be healthy for many more such moments for years to come. How fortunate we are to live in a generation with grandparents and grandchildren and how stark a reminder this year has been of the importance of that relationship. May our children be like Ephraim and Menashe and continue to benefit from this critical relationship that stretches back through time.

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach