



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

12 VaYechi — Blessings and Bones

Text

בראשית מ"ח

א ויהי אחרי הדברים האלה ויאמר ליוסף הנה אביך ח' לה ויקח את-שני בניו עמו את-מנשה ואת-אפרים. ב ויגד ליעקב ויאמר הנה בנך יוסף בא אליך ויתחזק ישראל וישב על-המטה. ג ויאמר יעקב אל-יוסף אל שדי נראה-אלי בלח בארץ כנען ויברך א' תי. ד ויאמר אלי הנני מפרך והרביתך ונתתיך לקהל עמים ונתתי את-הארץ הזאת לזרעך אחריך אחזת עולם. ה ועתה שני-בניך הנולדים לך בארץ מצרים עד-ב' אי אליך מצרימה לי-הם אפרים ומנשה כראובן ושמעון יהיו-לי. ו ומולדתך אשר-הולדת אחריהם לך יהיו על שם אחיהם וקראו בנחלתם. ז ואני בב' אי מפקדן מטה עלי רחל בארץ כנען בדרך בעוד כברת-ארץ לב' א אפרתה ואקברה שם בדרך אפרתה הוא בית לחם. ח וירא ישראל את-בני יוסף ויאמר מי-אלה. ט ויאמר יוסף אל-אביו בני הם אשר-נתן-לי אל' הים בזה ויאמר קחם-נא אלי ואברכם. י ועיני ישראל כבדו מז' קן ל' א יוכל לראות ויגש א' תם אליו וישק להם ויחבק להם. יא ויאמר ישראל אל-יוסף ראה פניך ל' א פלתי והנה הראה א' תי אל' הים גם את-זרעך. יב ויוצא יוסף א' תם מעם ברכיו וישתחו לאפיו ארצה. יג ויקח יוסף את-שניהם את-אפרים בימינו משמ' אל ישראל ואת-מנשה בשמ' אלו מימין ישראל ויגש אליו. יד וישלח ישראל את-ימינו וישת על-ר' אש אפרים והוא הצעיר ואת-שמ' אלו על-ר' אש מנשה שכל את-ידיו כי מנשה הבכור. טו ויברך את-יוסף ויאמר האל' הים אשר התהלכו אב' תי לפניו אברהם ויצחק האל' הים הר' עה א' תי מעודי עד-היום הזה. טז המלאך הג' אל א' תי מכל-רע וברך את-הנערים ויקרא בהם שמ' נשם אב' תי אברהם ויצחק וידגו לר' ב בקרב הארץ. יז וירא יוסף כי-ישית אביו יד-ימינו על-ר' אש אפרים וירע בעיניו ויתמך יד-אביו להסיר א' תה מעל ר' אש-אפרים על-ר' אש מנשה. יח ויאמר יוסף אל-אביו ל' א-כן אבי כי-זה הבכ' ר שים ימינך על-ר' אשו. יט וימאן אביו ויאמר ידעתי בני ידעתי גם-הוא יהיה-לעם וגם-הוא יגדל ואולם אחיו הקט' נ יגדל ממנו וזרעו יהיה מל' א-הגוים. כ ויברכם ביום ההוא לאמור בך וברך ישראל לאמר ר' שמך אל' הים כאפרים וכמנשה וישם את-אפרים לפני מנשה. כא ויאמר ישראל אל-יוסף הנה אני כי מת והיה אל' הים עמכם והשיב אתכם אל-ארץ אב' תיכם. כב ואני נתתי לך שקם אחד על-אחיך אשר לקחתי מיד האמ' רי בחרבי ובקשתי.

בראשית ט"ו

ויראו אחי-יוסף כי-מת אביהם ויאמרו לו ישטמנו יוסף והשב וישב לנו את כל-הרעה אשר גמלנו א' תו. טז ויצו אל-יוסף לאמר ר' אביך צנה לפני מותו לאמר ר' יז כ' ה-ת אמרו ליוסף אנא שא נא פשע אחיך וחטאתם כי-רעה גמלוך ועתה שא נא לפשע עבדי אל' הרי אביך ויברך יוסף בדרם אליו. יח וילכו גם-אחיו ויפלו לפניו ויאמרו הננו לך לעבדים. יט ויאמר אליהם יוסף אל-תיראו כי התחת אל' הים אני. כ ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אל' הים חשבה לט' בה למען עשה כיום הזה להחית עם-רב. כא ועתה אל-תיראו אני כי אכלכל אתכם ואתם טפכם וינחם אותם וידבר על-לבם. כב וישב יוסף במצרים הוא ובית אביו ויחי יוסף מאה ועשר שנים. כג וירא יוסף לאפרים בני שלשים גם בני מכיר בן-מנשה ילדו על-ברכי יוסף. כד ויאמר יוסף אל-אחיו אני כי מת ואל' הים פק' ד יפק' ד אתכם והעלה אתכם מן-הארץ הזאת אל-הארץ אשר נשבע לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב. כה וישבע יוסף את-בני ישראל לאמר פק' ד יפק' ד אל' הים אתכם והעלתם את-עצמ' תי מזה. כו וימת יוסף בן-מאה ועשר שנים ויחנטו א' תו וישם בארון במצרים.



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Genesis 48

¹ Some time afterward, Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ² When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to see you," Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. ³ And Jacob said to Joseph, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me, ⁴ and said to me, 'I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.' ⁵ Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon. ⁶ But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead of their brothers in their inheritance. ⁷ I [do this because], when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath" — now Bethlehem. ⁸ Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, "Who are these?" ⁹ And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." "Bring them up to me," he said, "that I may bless them." ¹⁰ Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So [Joseph] brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹ And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well." ¹² Joseph then removed them from his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground. ¹³ Joseph took the two of them, Ephraim with his right hand — to Israel's left — and Manasseh with his left hand — to Israel's right — and brought them close to him. ¹⁴ But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head — thus crossing his hands — although Manasseh was the first-born. ¹⁵ And he blessed Joseph, saying:

"The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day —
¹⁶ The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm —
Bless the lads. In them may my name be recalled,
And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth."

¹⁷ When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it wrong; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's. ¹⁸ "Not so, Father," Joseph said to his father, "for the other is the first-born; place your right hand on his head." ¹⁹ But his father objected, saying, "I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations." ²⁰ So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. ²¹ Then Israel said to Joseph, "I am about to die; but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers. ²² And now, I assign to you one portion more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow."



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Genesis 50

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" ¹⁶ So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: ¹⁷ So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? ²⁰ Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result — the survival of many people. ²¹ And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. ²² So Joseph and his father's household remained in Egypt. Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. ²³ Joseph lived to see children of the third generation of Ephraim; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were likewise born upon Joseph's knees. ²⁴ At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." ²⁵ So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." ²⁶ Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Context

As Yakov ages in Egypt, he has Yosef swear to take his body back to Canaan to bury him in the Cave of Machpela that Avraham had bought to bury Sara. Yosef brings his two sons to Yakov's sick-bed for blessings. After a complicated scene, Yakov calls his other children to his bed-side in order that he may speak his last words to them. In the hours before his death Yakov reveals his feelings with honesty to each of his children in turn. Yakov rebukes some-- Reuven, his first-born for sleeping with Bilha, Yakov's concubine, Shimon and Levi for their anger and cruelty. He foresees the destiny of others—Yehuda will rule; Zevulun will dwell by the sea; Dan will judge people. Yakov is to be buried with all of the other patriarchs and matriarchs except for Rachel who died on the road near Beit Lechem—Avraham and Sara, Yitzchak and Rivka, and Leah. There is great mourning for Yakov, first in Egypt, and then in Canaan when Yosef leads his siblings and a tremendous entourage to bury their father. Afterwards, in spite of their fear that Yosef will wreak vengeance on the siblings for their meanness now that their father has died, Yosef reassures them that it was all part of the divine plan. He dies and is embalmed with the promise that his descendants will eventually take his bones back to Canaan.

Explorations

This parasha concludes the book of Bereishit by wrapping up the stories of the first Jewish families and prepares for the national narrative of the Jewish People in the book of Exodus. The deaths of Yakov and Yosef mark the end of the Bereishit chapters. The Torah treats each death very differently; Yakov's death occasions momentous blessing scenes and great mourning, whereas Yosef's death is modest and ends with a simple but potent oath.

The passage in our parasha leading up to Yakov's death, and another passage that describes Yitzchak's death (Ber. 27:1-4) describe blessings passing from patriarchs to their male inheritors. The text does not record the blessings of matriarchs. Indeed, women tend to disappear from the



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narrative. Perhaps embarrassed that the Torah neglects to mention the matriarch Leah's own death, the Ramban interprets that the death of her nurse, Devora, alludes to Leah's death (on Ber. 35:8). Dina is missing from among her brothers who receive blessings; her absence is not mentioned though she is one of the direct descendants of Yakov, the possible progenitor of a tribe. In spite of the biblical neglect, there is an often-cited midrash that Dina conceived a child when she was raped by Shechem, and bore Osnat who became Yosef's spouse (stated for example in Targum Yonatan ben Uziel, 50, 46:20 and Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezer 35 & 37). By this account, Dina was the grandmother of two of the tribes, Efraim and Menashe. These stories about Leah and Dina record rabbinic traditions that seek to include women whose absence is untenable in their view.

In the death-bed scene with Yosef, Yakov explains his decision to bless Yosef's children first—it is on account of Rachel that Yakov puts his grandchildren before his own firstborn. Rachel had died while giving birth to Binyamin—in the process of giving life, she is overtaken by death. Due to his tremendous love for Rachel, Yakov has always favored Yosef. Here Yakov honors the children of *Rachel's* firstborn with his first blessing.

Even as he steps forward with his own children ahead of Reuven who is Yakov's firstborn, Yosef expects his father to respect their birth order. Yet, as a final reversal, Yakov defies the rule of the firstborn inheritor and switches Efraim for Menashe. In one of the most fulfilling scenes of his life, Yakov stretches his hands out to reach for the heads of his grandchildren. He establishes a paradigm for Jewish parental blessings for future generations:

And he blessed them on that day, saying, “In/through you Israel will bless saying, ‘May God place you as Ephraim and as Menashe.’” (Genesis 48:20)

Rashi interprets this verse to mean that future Jews should use the formula when they bless their children, “May God place you as Ephraim and as Menashe.”

The Torah tells very little about Ephraim and Menashe, their character and deeds. However, they are the first siblings among the biblical families in Bereishit who do not express enmity or violence. They also retain their Jewish identity while they have grown up in a foreign culture. In the traditional blessing formula, the sages themselves substitute Ephraim and Menashe for the obvious primary candidates-- the three patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yakov.

In traditional Jewish households, parents bless their children on Friday nights with the priestly blessing for both sons and daughters:

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ

יֵאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֲלֶיךָ, וַיַּחֲנֶךָ

יֵשָׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֲלֶיךָ, וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

May God bless you and guard you.

May God make shine His/Her face upon you and be gracious to you.

May God lift up His/Her face to you and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

While the *content* of the parental blessing is the same ancient formula for both sons and daughters, parents are to introduce the blessing for sons and daughters differently. Daughters are to be like the matriarchs, Sara, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah, while the sons are to be as Ephraim and Menashe. This



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type of differentiation between sons and daughters is one way that society constructs and perpetuates roles, particularly gender, power and property. Overturning the firstborn inheritor rule is one of the dominant themes in the book of Bereishit. In each generation, the matriarchs and patriarchs bypass the oldest child and award their spiritual and material inheritance to the younger sibling: Avraham and Sarah opt for Yitchak rather than Yishmael; Rivka chooses Yakov over Esav.

Yosef does not bless his family, but rather ends his life with a final request. The oath that his siblings swear to take his bones for burial in Canaan presages the fulfillment of God's promise to Avraham, the promise that launches the Jewish journey—ultimately, the Children of Israel will leave Egypt and return to the land of their ancestors.

Questions for Discussion

1. Ought parents to make any distinctions among children and the blessings they bestow upon them? If so, on what basis? Is birth order a relevant distinction? Consider your experience in your own family, and among your relatives and friends.
2. How might each matriarch have blessed her family? And today?
3. For what qualities do we invoke divine blessing for our children? What other biblical, historical, or ancestral figures do we want our children to emulate? What are the pros and cons of blessing people to be like others?
4. Why and ought parents to invoke a different blessing for a son than for a daughter? What blessings might we use for children of both genders? On Friday night, consider blessing both boys and girls to be like Ephraim, Menashe, and Sara, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. Consider including other role models of both genders in your blessings. With respect and sensitivity, discuss and experiment with children blessing parents, guests blessing hosts and hosts blessing guests, family members blessing each other etc.
5. Most Jewish prayerbooks include a blessing for the government and our leaders. Discuss the significance of those with less power blessing those with greater power and higher status – our parents, political and religious leaders? With what would we bless them?
6. How can we create more opportunities to convey blessings of affirmation, criticism, and hope?

There is a famous story told of Reb Zushia, a hasidic master who lived in Anapoly during the 18th century: Reb Zushia was on his deathbed and he couldn't stop crying. One of his talmidim asked: "Rav, why are you crying?" Reb Zushia answered: "When I get to the heavenly court, they won't ask why weren't you Moshe our Master or why weren't you the Rambam. They will ask me why weren't you Zushia? Why weren't you the best Zushia you could be?"

Zushia is most disturbed about facing his maker and being held accountable not for being like others, but for being himself. Explore unique aspects of ourselves that we need to fulfill better.



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Study Links

In 1986, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz titled a collection of feminist essays, *The Tribe of Dina: a Jewish Women's Anthology* affirming women's participation in Jewish life. According to Phyllis Chesler, this book inaugurated [feminist identification with and resurrection of Dina](#).

Eileen Soffer prepared this [Parent Blessings Handbook](#) focusing on Bat and Bar Mitzva.

Evelyn Cecil has written a book about [Primogeniture](#) in which she explores the gender issues extensively.

Summary of Issues

Investigating family blessing exposes a method by which cultures pass on their norms and roles. This ritual is particularly available for thoughtful innovation--in ancient and contemporary periods.

Methods & Observations

In the blessing scenes of Bereishit, the text both affirms the concept of primogeniture—firstborn inheritance, and undermines it. This ambiguity emphasizes the iconoclasm of the first Jewish families against the backdrop of a dominant cultural practice.

Where stories of women are missing from the Torah narrative, midrash often fills in important pieces. Perhaps the sages were motivated by similar sensibilities to our own. We cannot read the Torah text naked if we want to have an adequate view of Jewish tradition.

Contact

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