**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

PARASHAT VAYECHI

SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah z”l,

whose *yahrtzeit* is on 9 Tevet.

By Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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Yosef, Menashe and Efraim

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The names of the forefathers upon the children

And now, your two sons, Efraim and Menashe, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt – are mine; like Reuven and Shimon shall they be to me. (48:5)

And Yisrael beheld Yosef’s sons, and said, “Who are these?” And Yosef said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me in this place.” And he said, “Bring them, I pray you, to me, and I will bless them.” Now the eyes of Yisrael were dim from age, so that he could not see. And he brought them near to him, and he kissed them, and embraced them… And he blessed Yosef and said: “God, before Whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked – the God Who has been my shepherd all my life long until this day, the angel who redeemed me from all evil – may He bless the lads, and let my name and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, be named upon them, and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the land.” (48:8-16)

The great love that a grandfather feels for his grandchildren is a well-known and heartwarming phenomenon. Nevertheless, the Torah’s close attention to the matter in our *parasha* hints at additional lessons that we should learn.

We recall that the first two sons born to Yehuda from the daughter of Shu’a, the Canaanite, were born in the Valley of Elah – quite a distance from the location of Yaakov’s family. They were not able to be counted among Yaakov’s grandchildren (Bnei Yisrael) and died in their own sin, childless. Shela, their youngest brother, was born in Keziv, in the mountain of Chevron, and was therefore counted with the family of Yisrael who came down to Egypt (chapter 46), as well as with Bnei Yisrael who entered the promised land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness (*Bamidbar* 26). Yosef’s sons are born in Egypt, to Osnat, daughter of the Priest of On, during the time that Yosef is completely cut off from his father’s household. They grow up speaking the Egyptian language and imbibing Egyptian culture. Can it be possible that at such a late stage – when they are apparently already in their twenties – they might still be integrated and included within the house of Yisrael?

This is Yaakov’s first question, and this is Yosef’s answer and supplication to his father:

“And Yisrael beheld Yosef’s sons, and said, ‘Who are these?’ And Yosef said to his father, They are my sons, whom God has given me in this place.” “Who are these” – [meaning,] from where have these [young men] emerged, that they are not worthy of a blessing? “In this place” – [Yosef] showed [Yaakov] a document of engagement and a *ketuba*, and he asked for compassion in this matter, and the Divine spirit rested upon him. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 48:8-9)

Indeed, Yaakov kisses them and embraces them, and places his name and the name of his fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, upon them, and makes them part of God’s people, even though they were born in foreign parts.

We encounter a similar joining of the children of Menashe and the children of Efraim to the nation of God in *parashat Mas’ei*. Of these two tribes, who were not present at Sinai, some joined *Am Yisrael* at the ceremony held on the plains of Moav, while the others joined at the ceremony at Mount Eival, in the western part of Eretz Yisrael. (I will, please God, elaborate on this idea in a forthcoming VBM shiur on *parashot Matot-Masei*.)

1. Efraim before Menashe

And Yisrael stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon the head of Efraim, who was the younger, and his left hand upon the head of Menashe, changing his hands, for Menashe was the first-born. (v. 14)

And Yosef said to his father, “Not so, my father, for this is the firstborn; put your right hand upon his head.” And his father refused, and said, “I know it, my son, I know it; he too shall become a people, and he too shall be great, but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations.” And he blessed them that day, saying, “By you shall Yisrael bless, saying: May God make you as Efraim and as Menashe” – and he set Efraim before Menashe.” (vv. 18-20)

Why is Efraim mentioned before Menashe, the firstborn? Why does Yaakov place his right hand upon the head of Efraim? Throughout *Sefer* *Bereishit*, the matter of the birthright encounters the same problem again and again. God prefers the offering of Hevel, the younger son, over that of Kayin, the elder. According to most of the commentators, the plain text suggests that Yefet, son of Noach, was the eldest of the three brothers. However, the chosen son is Shem, the younger.

*Chazal*’s assumption that Yiska, daughter of Haran, is Sara, wife of Avraham, indicates that Avraham was the youngest of the brothers. The age gap between Avraham and Sara was ten years, and it seems reasonable to assume that a greater difference in age separated Haran and his own daughter.

Yitzchak was younger than Yishmael, and Yaakov was younger than Esav. Reuven was rejected as recipient of the birthright, and Yosef, his younger brother, replaced him. Now, following the same recurring pattern, Efraim is given preference over Menashe.

The anti-birthright struggle continues in the other *Chumashim*, as well. Moshe is younger than his siblings, and following the sin of the golden calf, the *Leviim* are chosen *en masse* to replace the firstborn.

The justifications for the anti-birthright struggle in the Torah are well known, and I will not repeat them here. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from an inquiry into each particular instance and its reasons.

The Torah tells us nothing about the lives of Menashe and Efraim that could distinguish one from the other. The only difference that is known to us concerns their naming – and perhaps this is the reason for Efraim being chosen:

And two sons were born to Yosef before the years of famine arrived; they were borne to him by Osnat, daughter of Poti-fera, priest of On. And Yosef called the name of the firstborn Menashe: “For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father’s house.” And the name of the second he called Efraim: “For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.” (*Bereishit* 41:50-52)

Menashe’s name expresses Yosef’s alienation from and anger towards his family. We may assume that the name is an accurate reflection of Yosef’s feelings when his son Menashe is born, and that Menashe grows up internalizing that consciousness. Efraim’s name expresses thanks to God, Who has stood by Yosef’s side. Despite the chronology of the text, which places the birth of the two sons in immediate succession, it may be that Efraim was born after Yosef’s encounter with his brothers, perhaps even after he reveals his identity to them (but certainly before Yaakov arrives in Egypt, as is clear from the text) – and perhaps this was Efraim’s advantage over his elder brother.

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The Torah elaborates concerning the incident of Yaakov’s crossed hands, with his right hand upon the head of Efraim, and the left hand upon the head of Menashe. The simple understanding of this image is that the right hand symbolizes greater strength and greater blessing, and is therefore worthy of the eldest son. However, the right hand may also symbolize another quality in relation to the left. In the directions that we find in the Torah, the right (or ‘Teiman’) side means south, while the ‘left’ refers to the north.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yaakov bequeaths to Yosef the Shomron, which is the land of Shekhem that is mentioned in the *parasha*. In the Shomron, Efraim will receive the south, the ‘right side’ – from Shekhem southward to Beit El. Menashe will receive the north, the ‘left side’ – from Shekhem northward to the slopes of the Gilboa. Yaakov will later speak with the Divine Presence that is revealed to him in Shilo, and Shilo is located south of Shekhem, in the inheritance of Efraim. Yaakov wanted Efraim to receive the resting place of the *Shekhina*.

If *Sefer Bereishit* had ended at Chapter 48 (where the father is called “Yisrael), without being followed by Chapter 49, where the father goes back to being “Yaakov” – then we might wonder whether the brothers had perhaps been justified in persecuting Yosef in their youth, when their father was “Yisrael,” and “Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his sons” (37:3). In Chapter 48, the elderly Yisrael, just prior to his death, calls only upon Yosef, speaks only of Rachel, embraces, kisses and blesses only Yosef’s sons, and awards Yosef his special inheritance – the plot of land that was purchased in full, and the land that he had conquered with his sword and his bow:

And the bones of Yosef, which Bnei Yisrael brought up out of Egypt, they buried in Shekhem, in a section of ground which Yaakov bought from the sons of Chamor, the father of Shekhem, for a hundred *kesita*; and they became the inheritance of the children of Yosef. (*Yehoshua* 24:32)

Moreover I have given you one portion (*shekhem echad*) more than your brothers, which I took out of the hand of the Emorites with my sword and with my bow. (*Bereishit* 48:22)

He conveys to Yosef the blessing that he had received from his father by the Divine Name “*E-l Sha-dai*,” the Name mentioned in connection with the sanctity of the covenant of circumcision, which symbolizes the sanctity of Avraham’s seed:

And the Lord appeared to Avram and said to him, I am E-l Sha-dai; walk before Me and be perfect. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. (*Bereishit* 17:1)

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and your seed after you, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you, and to your seed after you. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land in which you sojourn, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. And God said to Avraham, “You shall keep My covenant therefore, you and your seed after you in their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you, and your seed after you: every male child among you shall be circumcised.” (*Bereishit* 17:7-10)

And Yitzchak called Yaakov and blessed him… “And may E-l Sha-dai bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be a multitude of people, and give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your seed with you, that you may inherit the land in which you are a sojourner, and which God gave to Avraham.” (*Bereishit* 28:1-4)

And Yaakov said to Yosef: E-l Shadai appeared to me at Luz, in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, and said to me, Behold, I will make you fruitful, and multiply you, and I will make of you a multitude of people, and will give this land to your seed after you for an everlasting possession. And now, your two sons, Efraim and Menashe, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine – like Reuven and Shimon shall they be to me. (*Bereishit* 48:3-5)

However, Chapter 48 is followed by Chapter 49. Yaakov blesses all of his sons with God’s blessing, and with the blessing of inheritance in the land, and he commands all of them to bury him in the Cave of Makhpela, and mentions having buried Leah there. The atmosphere of this chapter is not the hatred that Yosef’s brothers formerly felt towards him, but rather their reunion and the renewed connection between them, forging all of them together into the tribes of Israel.

1. Chova, which is to the left of Damesek (see 14:15), is the same Chova that is to the north of Damesek. Giv’at ha—Chakhila, to the right of the Yeshimon (see *Shmuel* I 23:19) is to the south of Yeshimon. The directions consistently reflect the perspective of a person who is facing east; hence, east is called “Kedem” (forwards) while the west is ‘behind’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)