

Parashat Vayechi

May God Make You Like Ephraim and Manasseh

by David Levy on Saturday December 22, 2007

13 Tevet 5768

Genesis 47:28 - 50:26

So [Jacob] blessed them that day, saying, *“By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’”* (Genesis 48:20)

Every Shabbat evening, Jews around the world recall this week’s Torah portion by blessing their sons with the words “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh,” fulfilling Jacob’s deathbed pronouncement. I did not grow up with this particular tradition in my family, so when I learned about it, two questions immediately sprang to mind: If Jacob says that all of Israel shall invoke blessings in this way, why do we limit our use of the blessing to boys? Perhaps more fundamentally, what’s so special about Ephraim and Manasseh that we pray to make our children like them?

The Torah itself gives us shockingly little information about these two brothers, the sons of Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph, and Joseph’s Egyptian wife, Asenath. We know that they lived their entire lives in Egypt, that Manasseh is the older of the two (although some scholars suggest they might have been twins), that they were born before the famine came to Egypt, and that Genesis and Chronicles disagree a bit about whether one of Manasseh’s descendants was his son or grandson. Otherwise, all we have are conjectures based on this one scene at their grandfather’s deathbed.

Still, if you’re only going to get one scene, at least it’s a memorable one. As soon as Joseph hears that Jacob is on his way towards shuffling off this mortal coil, he grabs the grandkids and runs to daddy’s side. Jacob wastes no time before relating a vision of God and then adopting the grandkids, effectively bumping them up one generation for the purposes of inheritance. One has to wonder what Jacob was thinking—has he forgotten that his own brother nearly killed him over monkeying around with inheritance customs? Or how his own sons nearly killed Joseph over Jacob’s favoritism? Jacob doesn’t seem to care, but some commentators see him as possibly addled at this point because of the next line:

Noticing Joseph’s sons, [Jacob] asked, “Who are these?” (Genesis 48:8)

These, of course, are the two darlings he feels so close to that he just adopted them, despite not being able to recognize them at arm's length. (More recent commentators note that changes in language between these two sections suggest that it was the editor who was loopy, and not Jacob.) Not satisfied with the inheritance-shuffling he's already done, Jacob one-ups himself by crossing his arms while blessing the boys, symbolizing the reversal of the usual pattern of bestowing the greater blessing on the older son. Joseph protests, but Jacob—a younger brother himself who's gotten screwed by ageism more than once in the past—is having none of it. He'll bless in his own way and that's that. "Sure, Manasseh will be great too, but Ephraim—that's where the real *naches* will be *shepped*."

Okay, so the boys get their one big scene in the Bible and they don't even get their own lines. But that's okay, because we learn a lot about them through the (hopefully not-too-added) perspective of their grandfather.

Commentators have had a field day with Jacob's "senior moment," asking the obvious question of why he wouldn't recognize his grandkids. One theory is that Manasseh and Ephraim, as children of intermarriage who grew up entirely immersed in Egyptian culture, looked Egyptian, and to Jacob, "those people" probably all looked alike. And yet, grandpa doesn't rail against them to strip off their jewelry and wipe off all that makeup—he accepts them as they are and blesses them anyway. Rabbi Harold Kushner sees in this scenario a blessing that is surely relevant for ourselves and our children today: May we be like Ephraim and Manasseh, able to proudly maintain our Jewish identities while living fully within our non-Jewish society. May we be like Ephraim and Manasseh, proudly living our lives with integrity, being fully ourselves at all times. How powerful this ritual could become for LGBT youth, hearing a weekly affirmation that their parents, and indeed their tradition, accept them for who they are.

Kushner also sees a blessing in the boys' relationship with each other. He suggests they become a source of blessing "perhaps because they were the first brothers in the Bible to get along peaceably, after the conflicts that marred the lives of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers." So it's possible the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh is one of peace and acceptance. When Jacob crosses his hand to bestow the greater blessing on the younger boy, neither boy complains (although their father does). They accept the blessing they are given, and given the lack of a story of brotherly strife, we assume it did not harm their relationship. May we be like Ephraim and Manasseh, at peace with our lot in life and in harmony with those we love. How powerful this ritual could become for our extended families, reminding ourselves weekly to celebrate our relationships regardless of the unexpected twists and turns they might take.

So if the blessing of being like Ephraim and Manasseh is a blessing of being proud and faithful to ourselves while living in peace and harmony with others, why not extend this blessing towards children of all genders instead of just boys? The traditional blessing offered to girls invokes the



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names of the matriarchs in place of Ephraim and Manasseh. On the one hand, at this point in the development of our tradition, it would feel odd to remove the names of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah from the counterpoint blessing offered to girls on Friday night. We have so few traditions in the names of the matriarchs as it is, I would never recommend lessening feminine presence in our liturgy. On the other hand, we must ask ourselves if this particular ritual need be gendered at all? Don't we hope that all children—and in fact, all people—grow up in a world of Ephraims and Manassehs? Are the positive qualities of the matriarchs not applicable to us all as well?

Throughout his life, Jacob embodied the idea of “queering” tradition. From his youthful refusal to accept the position society dictated for him to his deathbed assertion that even those with the most potential for alienation and marginalization were central to his family, Jacob never let something like convention get in the way of righting imbalances in tradition. Why should we? So this Shabbat evening, if you have someone to bless, why not be like Jacob and fiddle with tradition a bit? May we all be like Ephraim and Manasseh, may we all be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. And may we all be like Jacob, unafraid to adjust tradition for the good of our families and our people.



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