

MAY GOD MAKE YOU AS EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH

by Yitzchak Etshalom

I

EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH

“They are the sons G-d has given me here,” Yoseph said to his father. Then Yisra’el said, “Bring them to me so I may bless them.” Now Yisra’el’s eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Yoseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. Yisra’el said to Yoseph, “I did not expect to see your face; and here G-d has let me see your children also.” Then Yoseph removed them from his father’s knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. And Yoseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Yisra’el’s left hand and Menasheh on his left toward Yisra’el’s right hand, and brought them close to him. But Yisra’el reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Menasheh’s head, since Menasheh was the firstborn. Then he blessed Yoseph and said, “May the G-d before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the G-d who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.” (Beresheet 48:9-16)

This famous deathbed scene is etched into our consciousness and is replayed in Jewish homes every Friday night when we bless our children:

“May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.” (ibid v. 20)

Upon closer inspection, there are a few anomalies regarding this narrative which are worthy of our attention:

- 1) Why did Ya’akov embrace and kiss his grandchildren before blessing them? - we don’t find him doing this with his own children in the subsequent blessing scene (Ch. 49).
- 2) Why does it matter which hand is used to bless the “more deserving” child?
- 3) If Ya’akov wanted to raise the position of Ephraim over that of Menasheh, why didn’t he insist that they switch positions - why cross his hands? (This question is exacerbated by the end of v. 14 - he crossed his arms “since Menasheh was the firstborn” - why is Menasheh being the firstborn a reason for crossing his arms?)
- 4) Why did Ya’akov prefer Ephraim to Menasheh, giving him the “greater (right-handed) blessing”? When challenged by Yoseph, his response was:

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“I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.” (v. 19);

however, this response is enigmatic and puzzling. If Ya’akov had indicated that Ephraim was more worthy, more saintly or otherwise more deserving, we could understand. His answer indicates anything but; it seems that Ya’akov has elected to “go with the winner” and support the son who is destined for greatness - what can we make of his response and his thinking?

- 5) What was the blessing with which Ya’akov blessed his grandchildren while he had his hands on their heads? The text indicates that as he placed his hands on their heads, he blessed Yoseph (regarding their well-being) - but not them!

II

FLASHBACK: YITZCHAK'S BLESSING

Even a cursory reading of our text quickly brings to mind another blessing scene in Beresheet: Yitzchak blessing Ya'akov in the guise of Esav, followed by the actual blessing received by Esav. (I suggest a quick review of Chapter 27 before continuing).

In both scenes, the bestower of the blessing (Yitzchak, Ya'akov) suffers from poor eyesight, he embraces the recipient(s) of the blessing - and the text of the blessing is not mentioned in the text (see 27:23 and v. 27 carefully). More accurately, each scene includes two blessings (v.23 and 27; 48:15 and 20), neither of which is explicitly presented in the text.

There are several questions to be asked about the narrative in Chapter 27 (in addition to the parallel questions we have already raised from Ch. 48) - the resolution of which will help us understand Ya'akov's behavior with his grandsons:

6) Why was Rivkah so concerned that Ya'akov get that particular blessing, even at the risk of his being cursed instead?

7) What is the relationship - if any - between Ya'akov's purchase of the **כְּסוּדָה** (right of the firstborn) at the end of Chapter 25 and his deceptive taking of the blessing in Chapter 27?

[parenthetic note: the first episode of Ya'akov's life, the purchase of the b'khorah, involves an oath. After Esav agrees to sell his rights to Ya'akov, Ya'akov makes him recommit to that sale through an oath. The final scene of Ya'akov's life, beginning at 47:29, involves his request of Yoseph to be buried in the Land. After Yoseph commits to personally fulfill the request, Ya'akov makes him take an oath. Interesting bookends...but beyond the scope of this shiur.]

8) To paraphrase Esav's question (27:38), did Yitzchak have only one blessing to bestow? Why couldn't their father have repeated the same blessing - or given one of equal worth - to Esav?

III

THE B'KHORAH - WHERE DID IT GO?

I'd like to ask one more question before beginning to decipher our text.

As we see from Ya'akov gift of a double portion (Ephraim & Menasheh) of land to Yoseph, he was given the financial benefits of the b'khorah (see Devarim 21:17). The verse in **דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים** states:

The sons of Re'uvon the firstborn of Yisra'el. He was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Yoseph son of Yisra'el, so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright; though Yehudah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Yoseph. (Divrei HaYamim I 5:1)

Besides the financial benefits of the **כְּסוּדָה** (double inheritance), there seems to be a second component inherent in the b'khorah - political power. The verse indicates that although the financial rights of Re'uvon's **כְּסוּדָה** were bestowed to Yoseph, the political component was given to Yehudah, who **became prominent among his brothers**. The Midrash (Aggadat B'reisheet #83) adds a third dimension to the **כְּסוּדָה** - Kehunah (priesthood). (This is further demonstrated by the "switch" of these rights and responsibilities to the Levi'im [Bamidbar 3:41] - where it is clear that representation at worship was the duty of the **כַּהֲנָנִים**).

In other words, until Sinai, the firstborn in a family would inherit three rights: Double inheritance, political control over the family and representation of the family at sacrificial rites. On his deathbed, Ya'akov gave the financial- **כְּסוּדָה** to Yoseph and the **כְּסוּדָה** to Yehudah - but who received the worship- **כְּסוּדָה**?

IV

KEHUNAH - THE LEGACY OF EVERY FAMILY

We know that the families of Avraham and Yitzchak did not follow the ideal pattern for Jewish family life; in each case, only one son was chosen to carry on the tradition of the family and the rest were sent away. The conventional understanding is that the first proper family within our tradition was that of Ya'akov - 12 sons, all included and all maintainers of the tradition. We therefore expect the firstborn (Re'uven) to be accorded the usual rights appropriate for that position - and are surprised to see them taken away from him.

I'd like to propose another way of understanding Ya'akov's family. Just as Avraham and Yitzchak's job was to raise one son to follow in their respective footsteps, similarly Ya'akov had the responsibility to raise twelve sons to build upon the tradition he received. In other words, he was not raising one family - with the eldest occupying the conventional position of בכור; he was raising twelve families, each of which would have their own בכור. [Although Re'uven is called כסוד יעקב (e.g. Beresheet 35:23), this may be referring to simple birth order, not to position within the family.] This explains how Ya'akov "transferred" the נורה to Yoseph - something which is forbidden in Sefer Devarim - (see 21:17 again). He wasn't eliminating a כור - he was simply appointing the family headed by the financial wizard among the sons as "Chief Financial Officer" of his estate (Eretz Yisra'el). In the same way, he appointed Yehudah, who had earned the allegiance of his brothers, as the family that would rule over the other families - but only with regard to those issues which affect all twelve as a unit. Within each family, the כור would hold both financial and political rule. Regarding the Kehunah - the spiritual נורה - that remained within each of B'nai Yisra'el and became the responsibility of each of their ורות.

V

S'MIKHAH - EMBRACE AND TRANSMISSION

The S'forno (Beresheet 48:18), in explaining the importance of the right hand in Ya'akov's blessing, states:

Since אציקה with the hand focuses the spirit toward the object upon which it is placed, like *he placed his hands upon him* [referring to Mosheh's אציקה of Yehoshua' - Bamidbar 27:23] and the right hand is [generally] stronger than the left, therefore the אציקה of the right [hand] will focus more than the אציקה of the left.

אציקה is a Halakhah which first appears in the beginning of Vayyikra:

והטת ידו (He shall lay his hand) on the head of the burnt offering... (1:4)

The Halakhah of אציקה requires that in the case of any private offering, immediately prior to slaughtering the animal, the owner of the offering must lay his hands on the animal with all of his strength (MT Ma'aseh haKorbanot 3:13). In his explanation of the meaning behind animal offerings, Ramban (commentary to Vayyikra 1:9) suggests that the person bringing the offering should view himself as if he were on the altar. The catharsis of Korbanot is achieved when the owner experiences his own sacrifice vicariously through the offering. אציקה, performed immediately before the offering is slaughtered, is the process by which the owner transmits his energy into the animal in order that the offering truly represent him on the altar. [On the point of אציקה with all of one's strength - Think of how powerfully we hug a close friend or loved one at times of great sadness or joy - and think of how we hug a casual acquaintance when the occasion calls for it.]

There is another אציקה in Halakhah besides that preceding an offering. As S'forno points out, when Mosheh was preparing to transmit the mantle of leadership to Yehoshua', he performed אציקה on Yehoshua', laying his hands on Yehoshua's head. Following S'forno's reasoning, Mosheh was transmitting his energy/self, to Yehoshua', investing him with (at least) a connection to Mosheh's experience atop Sinai. Through the 1400 years when s'mikhah was operative (see BT Sanhedrin 14a), each recipient of s'mikhah was given a piece of the experience of Mosheh at Sinai, along with all of the others in the intervening chain. Each recipient had a direct link to the Revelation at Sinai and to the fount from which the Oral Law springs.

VI

THREE TYPES OF B'RAKHOT

Before Sinai, there were three types of b'rakhot bestowed by people:

- a) The conventional "well-wishing בְּרִיָּדָה", (e.g. Beresheet 47:7,10).
- b) The designation- בְּרִיָּדָה, (e.g. Ch. 49, where Ya'akov gave his children a בְּרִיָּדָה - which was, essentially, his last will and testament.) This designation- בְּרִיָּדָה was an assignment of duties, properties etc. within the family.
- c) The conferral- בְּרִיָּדָה - which was the model for the post-Sinaitic אֲמִידָה.

Unlike a well-wishing blessing, in which the person who is most deserving gets the finest "wish", this בְּרִיָּדָה is a real conferral of power and strength to the recipient. Since this conferral- בְּרִיָּדָה was a highly charged emotional experience, reflecting a deep connection between the two parties involved, in order for it to be effective, the bestower had to first have a direct connection to the recipient. S'forno (Beresheet 48:10) explains that Ya'akov requested that Yoseph bring his sons close in order to embrace them. The embrace was intended to create the proper emotional and spiritual connection between them to make the conferral-בְּרִיָּדָה effective.

We can now address those questions we asked about the Yitzchak-Ya'akov-Esav scenario:

Rivkah was aware that Ya'akov had purchased the כְּסוּדָה from Esav - meaning that he would be "in charge" of the family affairs, both financial and political. [Yitzchak was evidently unaware of the sale - see 27:19] The person in charge is in the greatest need of support and strength; there are always those who would overthrow him and he has nowhere to go but down. The "underdog", contradistinctively, can only move up. Rivkah was so concerned that Ya'akov receive Yitzchak's strength and power - through the conferral-בְּרִיָּדָה - that she was willing to risk the possibility of a curse.

When Ya'akov approached Yitzchak, his father *embraced him* (27:22), *attended to his voice* (ibid) - and "*blessed*" him. (This is apparently a conferral-בְּרִיָּדָה, as there are no blessing-words provided here). Yitzchak then ate and drank of the venison brought by Ya'akov, embraced him again, smelled his clothes - and "blessed" him again (vv. 25-27). Note that Yitzchak connected with Ya'akov using all four available senses. Subsequent to these בְּרִיָּדָה, which I am theorizing are both occasions of אֲמִידָה, Yitzchak stated:

May G-d give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you! (27:28-29)

These words are not the בְּרִיָּדָה - as he has already blessed Ya'akov. Rather, these words represent a verbal version of the strength he has given his son. Not only has he transmitted the ability to receive G-d's bounty - he has also given this son the strength to rule over his brother!

There is a textual hint to this idea - in 27:37, Yitzchak declares:

I have made him lord over you and have given all of his brothers to him as slaves - and with grain and wine אֲמִידָתִי (I have sustained him)...;

note that Yitzchak himself states that he has performed a type of אֲמִידָה on Ya'akov!

It is no wonder, then, that Yitzchak is "out of blessings" when the real Esav shows up! How can he give the same ruling strength to two people? The best that he can do is to give Esav the strength that:

...when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck (v. 40).

VII

EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH REVISITED

We can now go back to our Parashah and understand it in a new light:

A) *“They are the sons G-d has given me here,” Yoseph said to his father. Then Yisra’el said, “Bring them to me so I may bless them.”* (48:9)
Ya’akov wanted to confer the strength of leadership on Yoseph’s family.

B) *Now Yisra’el’s eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Yoseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them.* (v. 10)

In order to confer this strength, he had to first connect with these two sons of Yoseph - which he did by embracing them.

C) *Yisra’el said to Yoseph, “I did not expect to see your face; and here G-d has let me see your children also.” Then Yoseph removed them from his father’s knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.* (vv. 11-12)

Here we see that the original embrace (v. 10) was not merely a preparation for the **טִיטָה**, not the **טִיטָה** itself.

D) *And Yoseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Yisra’el’s left hand and Menasheh on his left toward Yisra’el’s right hand, and brought them close to him. But Yisra’el reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Menasheh’s head, since Menasheh was the firstborn.* (vv. 13-14)

Since Menasheh was the **בְּכוֹר**, he would always maintain that status and would be the spiritual leader of that family. Menasheh’s position in the family necessitated that he not be switched to the left side - so, in order for Ya’akov to give Ephraim the “stronger” **טִיטָה**, he had to cross his arms.

E) *Then he blessed Yoseph and said, “May the G-d before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the G-d who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.”* (vv. 15-16)

Note that here he is blessing Yoseph, not Yoseph’s sons; this is a well-wishing-**טִיטָה**, not the gist of the conferral-**טִיטָה** given to Ephraim and Menasheh.

F) *When Yoseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took his father’s hand, to remove it from Ephraim’s head to Menasheh’s head. Yoseph said to his father, “Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” But his father refused, and said, “I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.”* (vv. 17-19)

This (previously) enigmatic response is now clear:

Ya’akov is not “favoring the winner”; he is giving the greatest strength (his right hand, following S’forno’s explanation) to the son who will need it most - whose progeny will be more numerous and widespread.

G) *So he blessed them that day, saying, By you Yisra’el will invoke blessings, saying, ‘G-d make you like Ephraim and like Menasheh.’ “ So he put Ephraim ahead of Menasheh.* (v. 20)

Again, as in the Yitzchak-Ya’akov story, a second embrace leads to a second conferral-**טִיטָה**. Ya’akov then verbalizes a consequence of the **טִיטָה** - that these two boys will be the model of all blessings. This is, however, not the essence of the **טִיטָה**, which is the conferral of power.

VIII POSTSCRIPT

The Midrash Tanhuma indicates that *“his younger brother will be greater than he”* refers to Yehoshua’, who will come from the tribe of Ephraim and will conquer the Land. Interesting, is it not, that this **טִיטָה** was a forerunner to the first “official” **טִיטָה** given - as Moshe lay his hands on the head of Yehoshua’ and conferred upon him the mantle of leadership.

