



## Parshat Vayechi

# Why Do We Bless Our Sons to be Like Ephraim and Menashe?

### Dear Rebbetzin,

I was wondering why we bless our sons Friday night to become like Ephraim and Menashe. Who were they and why do we wish that our sons emulate them? Is it only the father who can bless his children? What if the mother would like to bless her children as well?

**Bracha Gittelson** (name changed)

### Dear Bracha,

I'm glad you asked, since one of the most beautiful Jewish customs is the blessing parents impart to their children at the onset of the Friday night Shabbat meal. Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning behind the words of the blessing. Before his passing, Ya'acov imparted a special blessing to Yosef's sons: Ephraim and Menashe (*Bereishit*, Chapter 48). Ya'acov proclaimed that these two grandsons were like his own sons. "Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Reuven and Shimon" (*Bereishit* 48:5). This is how Menashe and Ephraim became two independent tribes with their own portions of land in Israel. Before his blessing, Ya'acov added the following words:

...בראשית פרק מח פסוק כ... בְּךָ יִבְרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמֶר יִשְׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וּכְמִנְשֶׁה...

"...By you, Israel will bless, saying, May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe... (*Bereishit* 48:20).

"When one wishes to bless his sons he will bless them by reciting the formula with which they were blessed – a man will say to his son, 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe!'" (Rashi). Daughters receive the blessing: "May G-d make you like Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah!" What happened to the patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'acov? Why does the blessing mention Ephraim and Menashe instead?

### Brothers of Peace

Ephraim and Menashe were the first Jewish brothers who got along. The discord between Avraham's sons, Yitzchak and Yishmael forms the basis of the Arab-Israeli conflict until today. Regarding the second generation, Esav repeatedly sought to kill Ya'acov. In the third generation, the jealousy and animosity of Yosef's brothers caused them to sell him into slavery. The brotherhood of Ephraim and Menashe breaks this pattern. When Ya'acov switched his hands, blessing the younger Ephraim with his right hand before the older Menashe, he highlighted that these siblings had no rivalry (*Bereishit* 48:13-14). Ya'acov stated about Ephraim, "...truly his younger brother shall be greater than he..." (*Bereishit* 48:19). Because Ephraim accepted being younger and made himself small, he merited greatness (Chafetz Chaim on the Torah). Ephraim could have become haughty and lorded over Menashe, who in return could have been jealous of Ephraim for having surpassed him. Their greatness was that Menashe acknowledged the achievements of Ephraim, and Ephraim did not pride himself over having surpassed his brother (Rav Tzvi Elimelech of Dubno, *Agra d'Kalah, Vayichi*). Ya'akov was thus able to bless Ephraim before Menashe, and this itself is the blessing. "How good and pleasant for brothers to live peacefully together" (*Tehillim* 133:1). There is no greater blessing than peace among siblings. Parents' greatest desire is that our children live in mutual respect and shalom. Therefore, we bless them to be like Ephraim and Menashe.

## Exile Survival

Throughout the ages, Jewish parents have prayed that their children withstand the temptations of exile, and keep a strong, proud Jewish identity. Ephraim and Menashe were the first generation raised in exile. They grew up in Egypt, in a profoundly secular society, surrounded by lustful, immoral people. Yet, they maintained faithful adherence to Torah ideals and practice, as taught by their grandfather Ya'acov, and transmitted through their father Yosef. To be great among great people is a challenge, but to maintain a high level of spirituality and character among a society devoid of ethics is the real test. This is why Ya'acov chose these two boys to be as his own. They proved true strength of character. Therefore, we bless our sons to be like Ephraim and Menashe, expressing our hope for proud Jewish children – and grandchildren (Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch on the Torah). Ya'acov's twelve sons were the branches (*shevatim*), connected to the root of the three patriarchs. Ephraim and Menashe were the first fruits growing from these branches. We all want to bless our children to become as a fruit attached to the branches of Israel. Therefore, when we bless our children to be like Ephraim and Menasha we recognize that the grandchildren reveal the foundation and future direction of our family.

## Be Fish-like and Swim Upstream!

ספר בראשית פרק מח פסוק טז הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֵל אֶתִּי מִכָּל רָע יְבָרֵךְ אֶת הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בְּהֵם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וַיְצַחֵק וַיְדַגּוּ לָרֶב בַּקָּרֶב הָאָרֶץ:

“May the angel, who redeemed me from all evil, bless the youths; and let my name be called through them, and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak; and let them multiply like fish in the midst of the earth” (*Bereishit* 48:16).

It is the nature of fish to live under the water, and to be hidden from the eyes of people, who are unaware of the rich life beyond the surface of the water. The destiny of Israel among the nations is similar. During many generations, Israel lived among the gentiles (in the midst of the earth) like fish in deep water. They were part of a different world, which their gentile neighbors were unable to penetrate (Hirsch on the Torah). How do we know if a fish is healthy? If it can swim upstream, against the tide. This is what we wish for our children, too. We would love to protect them forever in our loving, nurturing environment. However, that is usually not possible – nor should it be. There will be times in their lives when their peers, society or the environment will challenge their beliefs and morals with which we raised them. Therefore, we bless and encourage them to become like Ephraim and Menashe – to have the strength to withstand the pressures of society in order to do what is right (Rabbi Shmuel Kogan, Chabad.org).

## Various Blessing Traditions

We complete the blessing for both sons and daughters with the blessings of the Kohanim: “May Hashem bless you and protect you! May Hashem shine his face upon you and be gracious towards you! May Hashem lift his face up to you, and give you peace!” Different families have varying traditions. Often, only the father blesses his children. This is how it was in our family at first. Yet, I’m really happy that our youngest son requested that I bless him as well, for I treasure that special moment of bestowing him all my love and blessing. Of course, there is absolutely no halachic problem for a mother to bless her children. It is part of the privilege of being ba’alei teshuva to choose our own minhagim (customs). My Sephardic daughter-in-law told us that in their family tradition, the grandmothers also bless their grandchildren on Friday night. Usually, we give the blessing while placing both our hands on the child’s head or just above it. Some parents bless each child in succession, from oldest to youngest. Others bless all of the girls together, and all of the boys together. After the blessing, some parents take a moment to

whisper words of praise, encouragement and love to their child. Most of us conclude the blessing with a kiss or a hug.