



Why is Blessing so Important in Judaism?

“You Shall be a Source of Blessing”

“I bless you to find your soulmate and establish a Torah home in Israel!” Words like these often emanate from my lips to students, clients and acquaintances alike. This blessing is also directed at you, dear reader, if applicable. Giving blessings is important in Judaism. It is one of the best ways to elevate our unique power of speech through prayerful communication with others. The ability to bestow blessings is integral to the very essence of the Jewish people. The very first Divine communication to Avraham, our father, established his mission to become a ‘blesser.’

“I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed by you” (*Bereishit* 12; 2-3).

“Until now blessings were in my power. I blessed Adam and Noach - but from now on you shall bless whoever you wish” (Rashi, *Bereishit* 12:2). Ever since Hashem entrusted the power of blessing to our father Avraham, we, Jews, bless Hashem, each other and everything on the earth. Through bestowing blessings, Avraham and the Children of Israel, after him, have the power to elevate the world. Rather than being separate from others, the role of being the chosen people entails bringing down G-d’s blessing to one and all. Yosef was a blessing to the whole of Egypt and when Ya’acov blessed Pharaoh the famine ceased. (Rabeinu Bachaya, *Bereishit* 12:3). We start in small ways by recognizing our own blessings and verbally thanking Hashem for them. We then look for every opportunity to bless others with health, happiness, safe travels, inspiring learning, good sleep, peace etc. Accustoming ourselves to constantly bless each other and ourselves is a way to see the good points in life and expand them. I trained myself and my children to say, “Baruch Hashem!” (Blessed be Hashem) for whatever comes our way. When I ask my granddaughters, “How are you?” and they answer something like, “fine,” I wait silently until they remember to add, “Baruch Hashem!”

The Blessing of Children

Whenever we have the privilege to have our son home from Yeshiva, or when graced by a visit from our married son and family, including our three granddaughters, I look forward to blessing them. It is a beautiful custom to bless our children every Friday night before Kiddush, and I treasure this enchanted, eternal moment of love and connection with our children and grandchildren. The origin of the custom can be traced all the way back to the Torah, *Parashat Vayechi*, when Ya’acov blessed his children and grandchildren.

ספר בראשית פרק מח פסוק יד וישלח ישראל את ימינו וישת על ראש אפרים והוא הצעיר ואת שמאלו על ראש מנשה...

פסוק כ ויברכם ביום ההוא לאמור בך יברך ישראל לאמר ישמך אלהים כאפרים וכמנשה...

“But Yisrael stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Menashe’s head... So he blessed them that day saying, ‘By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe...’” (*Bereishit* 48: 14, 20).

בְּךָ/*becha* – “in you” has the numerical value of 22, corresponding to the Hebrew letters of the Torah. Ya’acov blessed them to merit Torah. Whoever merits Torah will lack nothing. All the goodness, blessings, redemption and healing including all the needs in the world are in the Torah, because it is the life force of everything Through it the world was created (Be’er Mayim Chaim, *Bereishit* 48:20). This blessing endures forever because it is given through the attribute of justice,

by means of the divine name אֱלֹקִים/*Elokim*. Throughout the century's, we have been repeating Ya'acov's blessing, "G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe" when blessing our sons. For daughters, we say, "G-d make you like Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah" (Rabbi Chaim Yair Bachrach, late 1600s, Germany). We then bless both boys and girls with the blessing of the Kohanim:

ספר במדבר פרק ו פסוק כד

יְבָרֶכֶךָ הַשֵּׁם וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ: פֶּסוּק כה יֵאָר הַשֵּׁם פְּנֵי אֵלֶיךָ וַיְחַנֶּךָ: פֶּסוּק כו יֵשָׂא הַשֵּׁם פְּנֵי אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:
Yevarech'echa Hashem v'yismerecha. Yair Hashem panav elecha vichuneka. Yisa Hashem panav elecha, v'yasem lecha shalom – "May Hashem bless you and watch over you. May Hashem shine His face toward you and be gracious to you. May Hashem bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace" (*Bamidbar 6:24:26*).

Afterward, it's nice to whisper a personal message to the child, praising some accomplishment in his or her week. It's our special moment with our child – let us use it as a way of connecting in our own personal way. Lori Palatnik shares how she continued to give the Shabbat bracha even after her children moved away from home. "Friday morning, we call our younger daughter and I give her a bracha. Later in the day, we do the same for our elder daughter in Manhattan" (Lori Palatnik, *Friday Night and Beyond*). I am inspired to take up this practice.

The Blessing of Children in Halacha

The custom of blessing the children Friday night is first mentioned by Rav Chaim ben Betzalel, the brother of the Maharal of Prague, who writes, "It is a worldwide custom that the father blesses his son and likewise the rabbi, his student during this holy day, when the channels of blessings are open. Do not take a blessing of a commoner lightly." The *minhag* (custom) to bless our children Friday night is in the secret of the extra soul we receive then, which makes us more conducive to both give and receive blessings. Furthermore, the accusers have no power on Shabbat" (*Ma'avar Yibuk, Siftei Rananot*, chapter 43). Rabbi Aharon Barchia (17th century) writes, "One shall put his hand on the head of the child being blessed, as it states, 'Yisrael stretched forth his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head...' For our hand has 15 joints (the 14 joints of the fingers together with the palm). This corresponding to the 15 words in the blessing of the kohanim." The Vilna Gaon would place only the right hand on the child. He held that the blessing given with both hands should be reserved for the kohanim" (*Siddur HaGra*). Rabbi Ya'akov Emden, however, instructs us to place both hands on the head of the child. Using all ten fingers when giving the blessing is beneficial, for kabbalistic reasons. In addition, blessing with only one hand appears as if one is being 'stingy' with his blessing (*Siddur Ya'avetz 150:7*). A tangible reason for blessing the children is that sometimes during the week, the parents may inadvertently curse their children out of anger. The Friday night blessing reverse that. Even the negative angel is forced to answer, "Amen," when he hears how the father rectifies his relationship with his children at this auspicious moment (*Siddur Ohr Zarua l'tzaddik*). Almost every family concludes the blessing with a kiss or a hug. No matter what conflicts occurred during the week, at the moment of blessing, the child cannot help but feel very special and very loved.

May Mothers Bless their Children Friday Night?

Throughout the generations, the traditional blessing of sons and daughters Friday night has been a privilege reserved mainly for the father. In the Torah, it was Ya'acov and Moshe who imparted blessings. Besides Avigail, who blessed King David, "*the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with Hashem your G-d*" (I *Shemuel 25:29*), I cannot recall any reference to a woman in the Bible bestowing blessings. The halachic sources regarding the blessing of the children, quoted above, only mentions fathers and rabbis. It is, therefore, not surprising that when our first son was born, my husband alone would give him his Friday night blessing, since that was the most

prevalent custom. Many years later, when our second son was born, I too desired to bless him Friday nights. It seemed obvious to me that there could be no restrictions on bestowing a blessing, since anyone is allowed to bless anyone. I inquired, anyway, and learned that, indeed, in some communities, it was the tradition for also the mother to impart the Friday night blessing to her children. According to Rav Yitzchak Yosef, both parents should always bless their children, particularly on Shabbat eve, and, on the night of Yom Kippur (*Yalkut Yosef, Honoring Parents*, pp. 431-432). Among Sephardim, there is a widespread custom for children to kiss their parents' hands on Friday night and then receive their blessing. As we quoted above from *Siddur Ohr Zarua l'tzaddik*, children may perhaps have angered their mother or father during the week. Therefore, they should receive the blessing from both their father and mother on Shabbat eve (based on [Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin, Daily Halacha](#)). In fact, the Arizal teaches sons to kiss their mother's hand upon arriving home Friday night, in order to prepare it for bestowing the blessing (Arizal, *Sha'ar Hakavanot, Aravit Leil Shabbat*, drush 2). My daughter-in-law, of Iraqi descent, reported that in her family, the grandmother blesses the grandchildren Friday nights, so I'm happy to continue her family tradition.

Why Efrayim and Menashe?

In *Parashat Vayechi*, on his deathbed, Ya'acov called all of his sons for a final blessing. The first ones to receive his blessing were Yosef's two sons: "On that day Ya'acov blessed them. He said, 'In time to come, the Jewish people will use you as a blessing. They will say, May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe'" (*Beresishit* 48:20). Rashi explains that when one wishes to bless his sons, will bless them by reciting the formula: a man will say to his son, "G-d make you as Efraim and Menashe." From that day forward, they would become role models for Jewish children everywhere. What were their special qualities that make them worthy to emulate and be mentioned in the blessing of parents throughout the generations? Unlike the patriarchs and the rest of the tribes, Efraim and Menashe grew up in exile – in the decadent Egypt. Yet despite great odds, they still remained faithful to Judaism. We cannot always guarantee that our children will not be exposed to a negative environment. We, therefore, give them the blessing to be like those who were not tempted by their immoral surroundings and maintained their distinct Jewish identities (Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, 19th century Germany). Moreover, in contrast to their ancestors, Efraim and Menashe, were the first brothers among our forefathers to live without rivalry (Rav David Ish-Shalom). Menashe did not harbor jealousy when Ya'acov bestowed his younger brother, Efraim, with the double blessing, and Efraim did not become arrogant (*Sefer Derech Pekudecha* 55). By blessing our children to be like Efraim and Menashe, we strive to bestow upon our children the legacy of peace and harmony between brothers –that ultimately leads to redemption. The ability to maintain Jewish values in a non-Jewish environment and having a loving, noncompetitive relationship with siblings became the benchmark for raising Jewish children for millennia later.

My Father's Last Blessing

Since, I did not grow up in a Torah-observant environment; I never merited receiving this Friday night blessing. However, as an adult, when I would visit my parents in Denmark, they were happy to keep the Shabbat meals together as a family with Kiddush, handwashing and everything. During one of the last Friday night meals together with both of my parents, I had the idea to ask my father to bless my sister and me with the traditional blessing of children. As he was not fluent in Hebrew, I recited each word very slowly for my father to repeat. The blessings took a very long time, but receiving my father's blessing that Friday night was one of the most memorable moments in my life. I felt the intensity of my father's effort in reciting the blessing as if the light of that one blessing included all the Friday night blessings throughout the years and made up for all the blessings I had missed as a child.