

NEVER SAY NEVER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

So he blessed them that day, saying "By you shall Yisrael give blessing, saying, â??May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menasheh."

The translation sounds better than the original. The first "you" of the pasuk should either be "them" or "you" in the plural form. After all, it is Ephraim and Menasheh - plural - whom the parent wants his child to emulate. The word for "you" in the actual text, however, is becha, which is singular.

While Ephraim and Menasheh are worthy models for parents, suggesting them is likely to produce some pushback. Look at their background! Their father had the ability and the resources to give them everything that proper chinuch calls for. He could offer them wisdom and insight. He could match spiritual gifts with material ones, providing for all their needs, and overseeing their well-being even into adulthood. (According to Chazal, Menasheh was appointed as the majordomo of Yosef's household; Ephraim became his father's Torah study partner.) What sort of example is the upbringing of Yosef's two sons to the not-infrequent figure of an under-educated father coping with poverty? Isn't their example irrelevant to the majority of Jews?

The object of the preposition in our pasuk is not the two sons, but Yosef the father. He is the exemplar. While he seemed to have it all, this was not always true. For years he lived with no resources, at the mercy of his jailers. Egyptian culture was hardly friendly to the life of holiness he knew in his father's house. Any objective observer at the time would have bet that Yosef would not survive with his previous values intact. Both in material or spiritual gifts, Yosef for a time seemed sorely lacking. Who ever would have expected Yosef to rise from penury and desperate solitude to become the ruler of all Egypt?

That is the point of the berachah in our pasuk. Hashem has His ways of getting things done that humans cannot predict. The father who frets that he does not have what it takes to turn his children into Ephraims and Menashehs can look to Yosef, and gain strength. That father can bless his own children through the example of Yosef, and hope that he, too, will benefit from some unanticipated Divine largesse that enables him to provide them with spiritual and material gifts.

A Fair Price²

In my grave, which I have dug for myself in the land of Canaan - there you will bury me.

Rashi offers three explanations of the word karisi, whose simple meaning is "dug." The third of these sees a connection with the word kri, or pile. Citing a midrash, Rashi relates that Yaakov took all that he had earned in the house of Lavan in his final years there, and piled it up in front of Esav. He offered it to his brother Esav in return for the latter yielding to Yaakov his share in the M'aras HaMachpelah.

This gesture is puzzling. Surely, even a prime piece of real estate could not be worth anything approaching the wealth that miracles from Heaven allowed Yaakov to accumulate. Why would Yaakov deliberately overpay for Esav's interest in the burial plot?

Yaakov's riches came at a price. Chazal³ tell us that at the root of Yaakov's fear about encountering his brother after so many years of separation was Yaakov's perceived vulnerability. Yaakov felt that the years he spent in Lavan's house meant forfeiting two mitzvos: honoring his parents, and dwelling in Eretz Yisroel. While Yaakov had no choice in the matter, the reality was that he lacked the merit of those two mitzvos, while Esav might very well lay claim to them!

This realization was a source of consternation to Yaakov, and he determined to rectify this shortcoming. He therefore decided to take everything that he had earned while non-compliant with the demands of those mitzvos, and use that wealth to purchase Esav's share in the family tomb in Chevron. He reasoned that this swap would be a perfect tikkun of his perceived imperfection. On the one hand, by bringing M'aras HaMachpelah under his control, he would be honoring his father and ancestors. In spending a royal sum to purchase the rights, he would also make a powerful statement about the importance of Eretz Yisroel, offsetting his slight to it in absenting himself for many years.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 48:20
 2. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 50:5
 3. Bereishis Rabbah 76:2
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