

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

While all of Yaakov's children receive their father's blessings in this week's parsha, Yosef's sons Efrayim and Menashe are singled out:

In you Israel will bless itself, saying, "May G-d make you just like Efrayim and Menashe." And he placed Efrayim before Menashe. (48:20)

What is so special about Efrayim and Menashe that Yaakov hoped all his descendents would turn out "just like them?" And why does the Torah stress the fact that Efrayim is placed before Menashe - which is evident both in the wording of Yaakov's blessing, and from the strange story that preceded it?

Broadly, the Torah's mitzvos can be broken down into two categories, known in Hebrew as *bein adam la-Makom* and *bein adam la-chaveiro* - those that apply to man's relationship with Hashem and those that apply to his relationship with other men. One cannot pick and choose the mitzvos that best suit him: No more can one who disrespects or mistreats others consider himself a frum Jew than one who disrespects the Shabbos or fails to adhere to the laws of kashrus.

At first glance, one might be tempted to think that the only common denominator is that both interpersonal mitzvos and those that prescribe our conduct toward Hashem stem from a common source: both were commanded by G-d. Otherwise, one could theoretically excel in his spirituality while treating his peers with disdain, and vice-versa.

Chazal, our Sages, tell us it is not so:

Jealousy, desire and the quest of honor remove man from the world. (Avos 4:21)

That is to say, they ruin lives. Pursuit of these three most basic human emotions have been the downfall of kings and wise men, of the rich and the poor.

But it's more than that. One who is consumed with desire, with jealousy or with aspirations of grandeur at some stage becomes so infatuated with his quest that he loses touch with the defining aspect of our humanity: free will. He can no longer choose whether or not to pursue the object of his yearning; his hunger and lust dominate his every molecule.

He likely thinks that by allowing his desires free reign he is giving expression to his humanity and

freedom of choice. In fact, he has merely descended into the realm of the animal, which acts on instinct alone: I see, I desire, I conquer.

His frenzy leads him to foolishness in which he devises absurd justifications as to why his actions - entirely divorced from anything holy - are in fact justified. This already compromises not only his relationship with his fellow man, but his conduct toward Hashem: How can one who is completely incapable of taking an honest inventory of himself possibly hope to stand before G-d with any degree of integrity? But more so. In allowing himself to be guided by his basest desires, he allows the animal spirit to dominate the human soul - the only element of his humanness that stood a chance of relating to G-d.

In placing Efrayim before Menashe, the Agra De-Kallah explains, Yaakov put both of Yosef's sons in a compromising position: Would Efrayim become arrogant in recognizing his apparent superiority over his older brother? Would Menashe become jealous of the honor awarded his younger sibling?

They did not. And as a result became the symbol of what every Jew hopes to attain - material blessing and spiritual growth.

Allow me to repeat those seemingly simple yet elusive goals: material blessing and spiritual growth. There is an important distinction here, that is captured in the well-known phrase, "Ba-shamayim mi-ma'al ve-al ha-aretz mi-tachas": When it comes to material achievement, we are looking to set a baseline. Having what we need - health and material blessing - can be tremendously helpful in allowing us to pursue loftier goals without needing to worry about our next meal. At some point, though, one hits a ceiling. The height of the ceiling may vary widely according to one's personality, social status and other factors, but everyone will at some stage reach the point of "enough." Or, put another way, "You can only eat so many breakfasts."

But regarding spiritual growth, as the saying goes, "the sky's the limit." The mistake we often make, particularly as we age, is that we take pride in having avoided the spiritual pitfalls of youth, and feel good about what we've achieved - but we stop aspiring for more. We lose the gleam of unbridled youthful ambition, and 'make do' with what we've achieved: a wonderful family, a daf yomi shiur every day, kiddush on Shabbos...

Menashe, Mayan Ha-Shavua explains, alludes to the hurdles we've overcome. Menashe, from the root "to forget," was named thus by Yosef in appreciation for G-d having helped him vanquish the trials of his youth and forget the hatred of his brothers, the slavery, and the imprisonment.

Efrayim, from the root "to be fruitful," symbolizes that there's so much more still to do - so many trees to plant, so many gardens to cultivate.

Yosef named his first child Menashe and his second Efrayim, as if to say, "I'm thankful for what I've achieved, and mindful of how much there is left to accomplish." In blessing future generations, Yaakov switched the order: May G-d make you just like Efrayim and Menashe, and he placed

Efrayim before Menashe - reminding us to never become complacent in our aspirations of achieving excellence in Torah, even as we thank Hashem for all the good He gives us. Have a good Shabbos.

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