

THE BLESSING OF EPHRAIM AND MENASHE: A SPIRITUAL GPS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The Blessing of Ephraim and Menashe: A Spiritual GPS

He blessed them that day saying, "Israel will bless through you saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.'" (Bereishis 48:20)

Irony of ironies. This special blessing which is repeated week after week by so many families as they bless their sons on Friday night and Erev Yom Kippur, is amazing. It is amazing because, of all the many children and grandchildren that Ya'akov Avinu had to choose from as role models for Jewish children until the end of history as we know it, he chose the only two that had been born outside of the Land of Israel.

On one hand, it could have been because they were the sons of his favorite son, Yosef, whom had almost been lost forever. But on the other hand, even were that so, Ya'akov Avinu could still only choose a role model based upon attributes, for his own good, and the good of the future of all of his descendants.

If so, then what was it specifically about Ephraim and Menashe that caught Ya'akov's attention that they became the symbol of blessing for the Jewish people? And, if the answer is not apparent from this week's parshah, perhaps it is more apparent from what we learn about Ephraim and Menashe later on in history.

Two specific episodes come to mind, one in the Torah itself, and one in the Midrash. We are told that the descendants of Ephraim were the first to leave Egypt. In fact they left 30 years too early, and as a result, were attacked and killed along the way. They never made it to Eretz Yisroel at that time, but then again, neither did the generation that left Egypt with Moshe Rabbeinu on time.

Indeed, Bnei Ephraim were the ones that the prophet Yechezkel brought back to life in the Valley of Dry Bones. And once brought back to life, they made aliyah and raised families there, unlike the Jews who died in the desert following Moshe Rabbeinu to the Promised Land. It may have been their tremendous yearning to live in Eretz Yisroel that resulted in their early deaths, but it was probably also the reason for their reincarnation and second chance to live in the Holy Land.

Likewise, it was the daughters of Tzelofchad, descendants of Menashe, whose intense love of Eretz Yisroel resulted in their being mentioned in the Torah by name (more than once), a great honor to be

sure. And, it also resulted in the introduction of an important law in their names regarding the laws of inheritance, an even greater merit.

As Rashi points out there, we shouldn't be so surprised. After all, they were descendants of Yosef, whose love of Eretz Yisroel is legendary, perhaps because he spent most of his life away from it. In fact, out of 110 years of life, Yosef only lived on the land between the ages of 8 and 17, nine years altogether, not a lot of time. How does one develop such a love of a land if they spend so little time living there?

In everyday language, we call it a personality type. You see that some people seem to have a 'natural' appreciation of Eretz Yisroel, which results in a natural love of the land. However, behind every personality type is a soul-type, and that has a lot, actually almost everything to do with the way we relate to things in life.

Yosef was the attribute of Yesod. Literally, Yesod means 'foundation,' and there is a reason for that. But, for the sake of this essay, the main thing to understand about the attribute of Yesod is its role in the system of things. Indeed, understanding the role of Yesod is crucial for increasing blessing in one's life.

The Zohar compares Yesod to a flowing river, and says that it is responsible for shalom in the world. Indeed, the Zohar says, Yesod is the attribute of peace, which is why the Talmud (Brochos 56b) says that anyone who has a dream of a river will likely see peace in life (Zohar, 1:193b). Hence, the dream that Yosef interpreted for Pharaoh included a river, and Yosef spoke about the 'peace of Pharaoh.'

Therefore, in spite of the fact that Yosef's brothers hated him, Ya'akov Avinu, who was aware of this, sent Yosef to check on the shalom of his brothers who were tending their sheep in Shechem at the time. Without shalom, the brothers could not carry on the rectification that began with the Forefathers, and the only one capable of bringing shalom was Yosef, the representative of the trait of Yesod and shalom.

As the rabbis explain, the Hebrew word for 'blessing' is brochah, from the word breichah, which is a spring of water. This indicates that blessing is the result of a flow of Divine light from the world above to the world in which we live, something that seemed to happen everywhere Yosef went. Hence, even his master couldn't help but recognize how God blessed everything Yosef did.

Does Yesod create the flow of light? No. Kabbalah explains that the flow of Divine light is always there, just waiting to come down into our world and bless us with good. However, without a faucet, how can the water go from the sealed pipe in the wall to the shiny new basin that awaits it? Likewise, without Yesod to connect the upper eight sefiros with the final one, the Malchus, which corresponds to the world in which we live, how can the Divine light flow to us in abundance?

The Arizal explains in Sha'ar HaGilgulim that the best teachers of Torah usually function in the role of Yesod. This means that they have opened themselves up as a vehicle to receive Divine light, and to

pass it on to those whom they are teaching. For, the knowledge they give over is Divine light that also requires a spiritual 'faucet' through which to pour into the world of man.

That is why, like it or not, it was Yosef's responsibility to feed everyone, including his own father and brothers. They all had different talents and responsibilities, but Yosef was the trait of Yesod, and therefore, the Divinely-ordained conduit through which the blessing of sustenance was destined to flow. And, this is why he was a great educator as well.

Hence, Yosef was a great source of chayn, and people swarmed to be in his presence. Like thirsty people around a single 'faucet,' they came to drink from the well-spring of Divine light that could only result in additional blessing in life. And, nothing reveals chayn more than when the light of God passes through a person in an obvious way.

Eretz Yisroel functions in the same way. Kabbalah explains that there is only one opening to Heaven, and it is over Eretz Yisroel, mirroring its borders, something that Ya'akov Avinu's dream revealed to him, and us. The Divine light that blesses the world descends over Eretz Yisroel only, and especially over the Western Wall, before going out to the rest of the world (Tuv HaAretz; Sha'arei Leshem).

But we are not simply talking about increasing one's blessing in life, but about increasing one's connection to the Divine Presence, because they are one and the same thing. This is why Yosef longed to live in Eretz Yisroel, and insisted on being buried there, especially in Shechem. In Eretz Yisroel, he could increase his capacity to act in the role of Yesod, and therefore enhance his ability to draw light down into the world, and increase his connection to the Shechinah—the Divine Presence.

And, since Yesod acts in the same way that Eretz Yisroel does, it is an especially important quality to have while living in the Diaspora. For, it allows a person to do a remarkable thing: to spiritually stretch the borders of Eretz Yisroel to wherever they may be. Hence, though the person may have the physical status of being in the Diaspora, spiritually e may have the status of actually still being in Eretz Yisroel.

This is what happened to Ya'akov Avinu when he fled Eisav and lived with Lavan for 22 years. His love for Eretz Yisroel, evident in last week's parshah, meant that God allowed some of the kedushah to envelope him while he lived away from the land, since doing so, at that time, had clearly been the will of God. This is what allowed the Shechinah to remain with him even while living in such a profane place with such a person as Lavan.

It is also what protected Ya'akov Avinu all those years from the machinations of Lavan until remaining there ceased to serve any purpose of God's. Once Ya'akov Avinu had fulfilled in exile all that he had been sent there to achieve, he headed home once again, taking with him the spiritual reality of Eretz Yisroel until he was finally able to cross the actual physical border and allow his physical reality to match his spiritual one.

Being a true disciple of his father, and being rooted in Yesod as well, this was a trait that Yosef had

mastered. Hence, even though he had physically lived in Egypt, he had managed, in such an impure place, to live, spiritually-speaking, in Eretz Yisroel. For that reason, he longed to live there physically as well, something that was not only not lost on his two sons, but was given over to them, even though they had never lived in Eretz Yisroel.

Hence, Ephraim and Menashe represent the Jewish people's ability to not lose our way as we travel through the darkness of exile. Therefore, when we bless our sons to be like Ephraim and Menashe, something that we learn from Bnos Tzelofchad and the women of Moshe Rabbeinu's time is not confined to the male element of the nation, we are giving over to them a spiritual GPS. We are blessing them with an ability to never get lost as Jews, something that happen even should they continue to keep Torah and perform mitzvos.

"But," you may ask, "is that not redundant?" Not really. Keeping Torah and doing the mitzvos is one thing. But, remaining focused on the long term goals of the Jewish nation, and trying to fulfill them is something else. This is why, even for those who learn Torah and perform the mitzvos, it is possible to stay too long in exile, and suffer the consequences of doing so. We have so many times already.

As the Maharal points out in his explanation of the Haggadah, one of the main messages of the matzah, which is called 'Poor Man's Bread,' is to live like a poor man, at least inasmuch as we don't become overly attached to our physical possessions, particularly the land we own in the Diaspora. Every time we have been, we failed to leave exile on time in spite of the warning signs to do so.

Not Ya'akov Avinu, though. When the time came to go, no matter how rooted he had become in the Diaspora, he left immediately. And, so would have Yosef, given the chance, not to mention Ephraim and Menashe. And, hopefully us, b"H, if and when the time comes to move on because the exile has clearly come to an end.

Text

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