

Parshat Vayechi - Peace: The Ultimate Blessing

By Rabbi Mayer Freedman

This week's Torah portion tells us of the last days of Jacob, the third of our forefathers. When it was clear that Jacob did not have much longer to live, Jacob's son Joseph brought his own adult sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to visit their grandfather for the last time. Jacob took this visit as an opportunity to bless his grandchildren. Though the custom when giving a blessing to two people at once was to place the right hand on the head of the older person and the left hand on the head of the younger person, Jacob did the opposite. He placed his right hand on the head of Ephraim, the younger of the two brothers, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, the older brother. Joseph, thinking his father had made a mistake, tried correcting him, but Jacob told him that it was no mistake. He had seen prophetically that though great people would descend from both of these grandsons, the descendants of Ephraim would be greater. He therefore accorded Ephraim the honor generally given to the older sibling.

The Torah then records the blessing that Jacob proceeded to give Ephraim and Manasseh: "By you shall Israel bless, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" The blessing that Jacob was giving to his grandsons was that all future generation would bless their children that they grow up to be like Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob's blessing has been and continues to be fulfilled. To this day, when Jewish parents give their sons a blessing, either weekly on Friday night or annually before Yom Kippur, the text of the traditional blessing is, "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."

Why is this so? We bless our daughters that they should follow in the footsteps of our glorious Matriarchs ("May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah"), so why did Jacob not want us to bless our sons that they follow in the path of our Patriarchs? What is unique about Ephraim and Manasseh that Jacob was essentially hoping and praying that all of his male descendants should follow in the path of these two grandchildren of his?

Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapiro¹ (1783 – 1841; Dinov, Poland) gives a beautiful and meaningful answer to this question. He explains that until now, there had been conflict between every set of brothers recorded in the Torah. From the very first generation, in which Cain actually killed Abel, to the most recent generation of Joseph and his brothers, in which the brothers had sold Joseph as a slave to passersby, brotherly strife had been the norm. With this set, however, even though Manasseh had just undergone the possibly humiliating experience of having his younger brother accorded the greater honor, no disharmony existed. There was no jealousy or fighting that took place. These two brothers lived in perfect peace. This is the message that Jacob was trying to impart to all of his future descendants – the greatest blessing you can give to your children is a blessing of peace and harmony amongst themselves.

This lesson is true not only in regards to our biological families, but to our communal family and national family as well. How sad it is when we see communities torn apart over disagreements that might have been avoided with a certain commitment to peace. When a community is involved in petty power plays, any possible growth is severely stunted. Jacob did not want his children to be blessed with wealth, with distinguished communal positions, with always being right in an argument. He wanted them to be blessed with brotherly love and peace. So it might mean forfeiting a large sum of money, becoming reconciled to someone else getting the position, or a certain amount of humiliation, but the dividends of a united family or community are worth it. How beautiful it is when we see a community rise above potential disputes in favor of working together, expanding, and growing.

As a Jewish people, we have been subject to much harassment and persecution from the rest of the world. Let us make sure that we do not subject ourselves to that maltreatment. When we work together as one unit with shared goals, we can be certain of our success. Let's unleash the unstoppable power of unity.



¹ This is quoted in the commentary on the Torah, Mayanah Shel Torah. This explanation is also given by Rabbi Avraham Zalmens (late 1800's to mid 1900's, Warsaw, Poland). I have seen it quoted in the name of Rabbi Mordechai Illan (1915 – 1982, Tel Aviv) as well.