

## **Vayechi** (Jonathan Stern)

Chazak Chazak v'Nitchazek .... and Happy New Year (Sylvester)

This last parsha of Breishit opens as Jacob prepares for his death, making his son Joseph swear to bury him in the Cave of Machpelah. Jacob blesses Joseph's two sons and his own 12 sons and then dies. The portion ends with Joseph's death.

It's the end of the Breishit and the end of the patriarch (& Matriarchs): it marks a transformation from a family drama to a community (spoiler alert: by the end of Shmot, maybe a nation). And what a drama it has been, including (threatened) fratricide, child sacrifice, and an ongoing disdain for primogeniture and first sons. I am going to focus on Jacob's deathbed pronouncements - As Yaakov (or Israel) recognises his end is coming, he summons his family to his side and gives them instructions and "blessings." This ends up being a mixed bag - there is backsliding into the drama of Breishit

Reading Uri Alter's excellent translation, he cautions against taking these insults and backhanded compliments personally - calling this one of the 'oldest extended texts' in the torah - "a cento of poetic fragments about the fates of the various tribes" ... Some examples:

Some sons garner praise and destiny

- **דָן יְהוָה עַמּוֹ כָּאַחַד שָׁבֵטִי יִשְׂרָאֵל:**
- DAN ya-DEEN a-MO ke-a-KHAD shiv-TEI yis-ra-AYL
- Dan, his folk will judge as one of Israel's tribes.

Others scorn: One poetic fragment reading: "Simeon and Levi, the brothers - weapons of outrage their trade. In their council let me never set foot ... for in their fury they slaughtered men. I will divide them in Jacob, disperse them in Israel" Yaakov also disses his oldest son Rueven in a way that is not suitable to discuss in a sanctuary with children present. Not exactly like any deathbed I have seen or heard of.

Some rabbis, including Rabbi Gary Porkas, state Yaakov delivers [necessary truth telling](#) for his sons (or tribes) needed for their continued growth. To me this seems like Jacob settling scores (Like our modern rap battle or dis tracks) with the mic drop effective - his death allowing no answer... Some commenters acknowledge the duality notion - noting the text uses the names Israel and Yaakov interchangeably - perhaps because they represent both aspects - the trickster and patriarch of the nation.

But when it comes to Joseph's sons Ephraim & Menesha there is glimmer of hope. Jacob blesses his Grandsons unreservedly : בָּרוּ יְהֹוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאָמֵר יְשָׁמַר אֶלְהִים כָּפָרִים וְכָמְנָשָׁה

According to Rabbi Bachya ben Asher “By you shall Israel bless:” Yaakov told Joseph that [in the future] when Israel would bless its children, they would hold up [Ephraim & Menashe] as the models they hoped their own children would emulate. Even this is not without drama: Yaakov switches the blessing - he thwarts primogeniture again - switching his arms and giving the primary blessing to the younger Ephraim. Midrash explores why he acts this way, perhaps that he does this criss-cross because Ephraim is the torah scholar and Menashe the worldly one - eventually a tribe known for its warriors and as a defender of Israel

Even so, this causes no conflict with Menashe & Ephraim with Rabbi Harold Kushner suggesting that “perhaps because they were the first brothers in the Bible to get along peaceably.” Ephrayim & Manashe and their relationship is our collective first step away from squabbling siblings into community and ultimately nationhood.

Community is when we see the benefits of working together, that stepping away from every little quibble leads to collective action for the greater good. Usually, we see this portrayed through leadership of great men - here we see the building blocks - all of us. The humblest duo in Breishit are promoted to tribal leaders by cooperating. Both the scholar and the do-er are honored. We need them both.

What do I make of this? It is a successful passing of the torch of generations. It takes 2 generations to do this - skipping his sons. Perhaps an indictment of Jacob as a parent and rolemodel. However, I don't think it is an accident that we return to Jacob at the end of Breshit. The cult of Israel and his status as our greatest instigator is strong. He tricked his brother and his sons are endlessly vying for his favor. Yet here, he manages to set Ephraim & Menashe on more peaceful path.

This moment in Vayechi recording the origin of our collective Jewish Community brings me to reflect on Netivot Shalom and our Community . It is very important to me (and imagine most of us here). We have been a community since 1986. - this marks our 40th year. We have made it through many transitions from a home-based lay-led community, rallying to fund ourselves as a Rabbi-led community (Thanks Stu!), to buying and building our own home (this building).

Many of you know I am more of a Menashe-type. - I have been treasurer here , and I think a lot about the stability and longevity of our community. That brings us to today - we are ready to finish the chapter of home building

We still have a mortgage on our sanctuary - and being a Menashe-type please indulge some practical details. At the beginning of last year we owed more than \$1.5 million, almost 20 years after we moved into this building. The building is old enough that we are starting to have expenses to replace carpets, heating and other major (expensive) systems. It is time to pay off this debt and enable our community to launch into the next, even better version of itself.

In 2025, we launched a capital campaign with the goal of paying off this mortgage - we are calling it Hineni - Answering the Call for Netivot Shalom's Future. I can give more facts and figures if that is helpful (talk to me) but early results been good - pledges and payments are inching up toward \$1 million. If we continue at this pace we have the chance to pay off the mortgage by May of 2029 - just about 40 months from now...

The goal is not only to pay off the mortgage but to do it in community. A core Netivot Shalom value is belonging. We want everyone to feel they are a part of this exciting new chapter in Netivot Shalom's history. Whether it is a one-time donation or a pledge spread out over a few years, every level of

contribution matters. So please consider the level that you and your family are comfortable with and participate. Say “Hineni.” Be a part of this community project to secure Netivot Shalom’s future for us, our children, and future generations.

This sanctuary is the anchor for so many of our programs - we host here in this building: kabbalat shabbat, our pre-school, Minyan Dafna, even the way we come together for kiddush - having a community home is so important. So let's continue to demonstrate we are a community of contributors like both Ephraim & Meneshe and continue to build toward this future.

- Shabbat Shalom

#### **Sources:**

- [: Why We Bless Our Sons Like ‘Ephraim and Menashe’ - Ohr Torah Stone](#)  
[Ephraim and Menashe, Torah and Derekh Eretz - Torah Musings](#)
- [Prof. Moshe Benovitz on Jacob’s Blessing and Your Children - The Schechter Institutes](#)
- [VaYechi - 5779 - Welcome to Temple Beth Ami](#)
- [Remnants of Archaic Hebrew Poetry Embedded in the Torah - TheTorah.com](#)
- [May God Make You Like Ephraim and Manasseh \(\) - Keshet](#)
- [Be Like Brothers In Every Place | T’ruah](#)
- [Vayechi - Dor v’ dor | Sefaria](#)
- [Vayechi – Sorry, Not Sorry: When “It Worked Out” Isn’t an Apology \[Article\] : r/Judaism](#)