YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

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Dedicated in memory of my grandmother, Szore bat Simen Leib (Weinberger) z”l, whose *yahrzeit* is on the 18th of Tevet.

May her soul be among the Righteous in Gan Eden.

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**Parashat Vayechi**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

**“Let God Make You as Efrayim and as Menashe”**

Summarized by Daniel Herman

Translated by David Strauss

So he blessed them that day, saying, “By you shall Yisrael invoke blessings, saying: ‘May God make you like Efrayim and Menashe.’” (Bereishit 48:21)

It is the customary practice that parents bless their sons on Friday night with the blessing that Yaakov gave to Menashe and Efrayim, the sons of Yosef.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, our *parasha* is full of blessings, some of which seem so much richer and more impressive than that blessing. In what way is the blessing of Menashe and Efrayim unique, such that it was chosen to be preserved in Jewish tradition for all generations?

When we consider our *parasha*, we see that there are two systems of blessings, each one unique in its own way – the blessings that Yaakov gave to Yosef's sons and the blessings that he gave to his own sons. Let us begin with the second group.

The *gemara* in *Pesachim* (56a) relates that when Yaakov wished to reveal what would happen in the end of days, the holy spirit departed from him, and he feared that this was due to some flaw in his progeny. He understood that this was not the case when his sons began to recite the *Shema* before him. When Yaakov saw this and understood that they would eventually build the people of Israel, he began to bless them.

These blessings emphasize the special qualities of each of the tribes and express the hope that they will join together to create the special texture that will build the people. Each trait has advantages and disadvantages, each trait must have its proper place, and each trait must be qualified in accordance with the person's situation and personality. This is what Yaakov does with respect to his sons, blessing each son in accordance with his personality, characteristics, and future inheritance. At the same time, he chooses to restrain the forces that are liable to be dangerous, such as the forces of Levi and Shimon:

Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Yaakov and scatter them in Israel. (*Bereishit* 49:7)

The *Or Ha-Chayim* (49:28) writes in this light:

"Every one according to his blessing" (*Bereishit* 49:28). This means: [According to his blessing] that is appropriate for him in light of his soul and his actions. For you must know that every soul has its own virtue. The virtue of one is the priesthood, of another the monarchy, and of yet another the crown of Torah. There is might, and wealth, and success. Yaakov meant in this prophecy to bless each of them with the appropriate blessing, the king with the monarchy, the priest with the priesthood, etc., and not the opposite.

"He blessed them" (ibid.) – it says "them" in the plural, because the blessing of each one of them was to benefit him and all of his brothers. For example, when he blessed the king that his hand will reach the nape of his enemies, the benefit reaches all of the brothers. And similarly when he magnified the virtue of one of them, and his abundance, and his rank, part of this reaches all of his brothers. Therefore, it says: "Everyone according to his blessing he blessed them."

The blessing that Yaakov gave Menashe and Efrayim was of a different nature. A close reading of the verse indicates that the blessing was actually given to Yosef:

And he blessed Yosef and said: The God before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. (*Bereishit* 48:15)

Yosef continues the chain of a father's blessing of his son. Just as Avraham blessed Yitzchak, and just as Yitzchak blessed Yaakov, Yaakov now blesses Yosef. Indeed, Yaakov's blessing contains the two components of the blessing that was passed down from generation to generation – seed and the land:

The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named in them, and the name of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak; **and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth** … And his father refused, and said: I know it, my son, I know it; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; **however his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations…**

**Moreover I have given you one portion** above your brothers, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow. (*Bereishit* 48:15-22)

However, the case before us is different than those involving the earlier patriarchs: Avraham was preferred over Nachor, and he blessed Yitzchak and not Yishmael, and this blessing was passed on to Yaakov but not to Esav. In contrast to all this, Yaakov chooses to bless Yosef as the first and foremost among his brothers, but not in opposition to them.

Yosef is chosen by Yaakov to be his firstborn, seeing that he is the firstborn of Rachel, the wife for whom he had worked for so many years. Yaakov himself testifies to Rachel's superiority over the rest of his wives when he refers to his sons' request to send Binyamin down to Egypt:

You know that **my wife** bore me two sons. (*Bereishit* 44:27)

However, there seems to be something deeper in the selection of Yosef. The *midrashim* relate how Yosef's countenance was identical to that of Yaakov, and the *Zohar* expands on the external physiological similarity between them:

"And he called his son Yosef" )*Bereishit* 47:29) – R. Yitzchak said: Were the rest of the tribes not his sons? Rather R. Abba said: Yosef was more special than any of them. As we have learned: When Potifar's wife pressed Yosef, what is written: "And he went into the house to do his work, and there was none of the men of the house there within" (*Bereishit* 39:11). It should have written: "And there was no one there within." What is "none of the men of the house"? Rather, to include the image of Yaakov that was found there. "There was none of the men of the house there within," but another man was there. When Yosef raised his eyes and saw the image of his father, he sat up and retreated. What is written: "But he refused and said to his master's wife" (*Bereishit* 39:8). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: You said: "But he refused and said" (*Bereishit* 48:19). By your life, another one will come to bless your sons. This is what is written: "And his father refused, and said: I know it, my son, I know it." )*Zohar, Vayechi* 222)

Potifar's wife tried to seduce Yosef already from the time that he first entered her house, but she never succeeded. One day, Yosef returned and his passions overcame him. The *Zohar* describes how just as Yosef was about to sin, he saw a vision of his father, retreated in fright, and avoided sinning. Yosef was not only physically similar to Yaakov; he had a deep inner connection to him, so that his image was in his thoughts and appeared to him in times of trouble, when he was about to fall.

The *Zohar* states that as a reward for Yosef's "refusal," Yaakov also "refused" when he chose to bless Efrayim before Menashe. Yaakov's decision not to bless the firstborn Menashe may have stemmed from his concern that part of the sinful thoughts with respect to Potifar's wife still adhered to him, but perhaps there is a deeper reason as well. Menashe's name expresses Yosef's alienation, his identity as the brother who was cast into a pit by his brothers. This is not true about the name of Efrayim:

And the name of the second he called Efrayim, for God has made me fruitful [*hifrani*]in the land of my affliction. (*Bereishit* 41:52)

Efrayim expresses Yosef's progress, the continuation of his journey, just like Yosef's refusal in the spirit of his father's tradition.

This seems to be the reason that this blessing was selected as the parents’ blessing of their son in Jewish tradition. Every parent wants their son to succeed in whatever field he chooses to enter – spiritual, economic, or the like. But above all he wants him to continue in his path, to preserve the tradition that has preserved our people across the generations.

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Vayechi* 5777 [2016].)

1. Traditionally, daughters are blessed, “May God make you like Sara, Rivka, Rachel and Leah.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)