

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Vayechi

The Blessing of Menashe and Ephraim

Background: Synopsis and Some Questions

One of the main episodes in the beginning of our parsha is Yaakov's blessing to Yosef's two sons, Menashe and Ephraim. A synopsis of this episode would go roughly as follows: Yosef presents his sons to his father with Menashe, the elder son, at Yaakov's right side and Ephraim, the younger son, at Yaakov's left. Yaakov, however, switches his hands, giving the right hand to Ephraim and the left hand to Menashe. Yosef objects to this switch and expresses to his father that Menashe should get the right hand. To this, Yaakov responds that he knows what he is doing and that it is Ephraim who will be the greater of the two.

However, a careful analysis of the verses which the Torah devotes to Yaakov's blessing will reveal a deeper dimension into this entire episode.¹ Let us preface with some questions:²

1. **Verses 8-9:** Yaakov sees Yosef's sons and asks, "Who are these?" to which Yosef responds, "They are my sons, whom God gave me in this place." What is behind this question and answer? Are we to assume that until this point Yaakov did not know who his grandchildren were? Additionally, why does Yosef add the detail that they were born to him "in this place"? Having married in Egypt, would we have thought that they would be born to him anywhere else?
2. **Verse 9:** In response to Yosef's answer, Yaakov instructs him, "קַחֵם נָא אֵלַי וְאֶבְרַכֵם – Take them to me, please, and I will bless them." This phrase sounds self-contradictory. When one "takes" something or someone, he takes it towards himself. Here, however, Yaakov is asking Yosef to move his

¹ The present discussion is based on the Commentary Toras Moshe of R' Moshe Alshich.

² The Alshich's Commentary follows the style of earlier commentators, such as the Akeydas Yitzchak and the Abarbanel, of prefacing his comments to a particular section with a number of questions, and then proceeding to offer an approach which answers them one by one. In our instance, the Alshich opens with twenty-five questions, of which we have presented six, leaving the other questions to be addressed as the presentation of his approach unfolds.

sons forward closer to him. As such, the verse should have said “ הַבְּיָאֵם נָא – *bring them to me*”!

3. **Verse 12:** When Yosef presents his sons to Yaakov, he bows down to the ground. What is the meaning of this act? This is neither the beginning nor the end of the meeting, and nothing seems to have happened at this particular moment which would make such a gesture appropriate!
4. **Verse 13:** The Torah describes how Yosef positioned his sons – “Ephraim at his right side, which was Yaakov’s left, and Menashe at his left side which was Yaakov’s right.” Why does the verse inform us of the positioning of the sons in terms of Yosef? While it is true that if one person faces another, then the former’s right is the latter’s left and vice versa, surely that is irrelevant here, as the only positioning of significance is vis a vis Yaakov!
5. **Verse 14:** Yaakov switches his hands, placing his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Menashe. Given that, in Yaakov’s estimation, Yosef has positioned his sons wrongly, why does he choose to switch his *hands*? Why not simply ask his *grandchildren* to switch their positions?
6. **Verses 17-18:** When Yosef sees that his father had switched his hands, he begins to move them toward the way he feels they should be positioned, saying, “Not so, father, for this is the firstborn, place your right hand on his head!” This action, as well Yosef’s words, seem very forward to say the least! There is an appropriate way to address one’s father if one feels he is mistaken. Yosef seems to have acted far in excess of any such protocol.

From Grandsons to Sons – Evaluation before Elevation

The Alshich explains. The singling out of Menashe and Ephraim for special blessing is not merely to bless them with success; it is for purposes of elevating them to the status of tribes of Israel. To this end, when Yaakov is presented with his grandchildren on this momentous occasion, he first assesses them critically to see if they are worthy of attaining such status. This is the meaning of his question, “Who are these?” Yaakov is asking, “What is their essential worth, and are they deserving of being elevated to tribe status?” In fact, as the Sages point out,³ Yaakov senses that they are not entirely worthy of this elevation and, as such, was expressing his reservations about giving them this blessing.

To this, Yosef responds, “They are *my sons*,” expressing his assertion that, like him, they are indeed deserving of tribe status. In this vein, he adds, “that God

³ Midrash Tanchuma, cited in Rashi to this verse.

gave me in this place.” By emphasizing where they were born, Yosef was arguing that any deficiency Yaakov may have perceived within them was not an expression of an essential lack on their part. Rather, it was the unavoidable consequence of external circumstance – “this place” in which they were born, the land of Egypt which was full of corrupt influence and moral deficiency. The sons themselves however, says Yosef, are entirely worthy.

Did Yaakov accept Yosef’s argument?

In response to Yosef’s words, Yaakov says, “Take them to me and I will bless them.” We noted that the ideas of “take them” and “to me” contradict each other, for the former connotes Yosef drawing them close to him, while the latter involves moving them forward toward Yaakov. What is the meaning of this phrase? The answer is that Yaakov has assessed that while Menashe and Ephraim are fundamentally worthy of this blessing, they are not entirely on the level where they can receive it directly. Rather, the blessing will come *through Yosef*. Thus, Yaakov instructs Yosef to take his sons and draw them close to him, since the blessing will be bestowed through him, and thus to present them to Yaakov for blessing.

Encouraging Developments?

Understandably, this instruction was something of a disappointment for Yosef, who would have liked to have seen his sons blessed directly by Yaakov. That said, however, the events described in the following verses were a source of some encouragement for Yosef, as they gave him reason to conclude that Yaakov had reconsidered.

Verse 10: Yosef presents his sons to Yaakov, who kisses and hugs them.

Verse 11: Yaakov says to Yosef, “I never thought that I would see you again, and behold, God has shown me your children as well.”

What are the implications of all this? In reality, with these actions and words, Yaakov was endorsing his grandsons’ *essential* worthiness to receive the blessing, even though his decision to bless them through Yosef remained unchanged. Yosef, on the other hand, saw the direct contact with his sons and Yaakov’s ensuing words as an indication that *he had reconsidered* and was prepared to bless them directly! For this reason, verse 12 states that “Yosef released his sons

from between his knees and bowed down to the ground.” We asked, what was the meaning of this bowing? The answer, says the Alshich, is that one bows down upon hearing good tidings.⁴ In Yosef’s understanding, he had just heard exceptionally good tidings – that his sons would be blessed directly by Yaakov!

In reality, however, Yaakov’s fundamental position had not changed. The grandsons would receive his blessing, but it would take place through Yosef. The most immediate implications of this question relate to how the sons should be positioned in order to receive the blessing – which brings us to the question of right and left...

The Field of Blessing

When it comes the positioning of Yosef’s sons to receive the blessing, two issues need to be considered:

1. Which son should receive the right side?
2. With reference to whom should the “right” and “left” side be determined?

Regarding the latter question, if the blessing will be given direct from Yaakov, then it will be his right and left side that are significant. However, if the blessing will be delivered through Yosef, then his right and left will be the ones to consider.

In terms of the above, we can appreciate that Yosef’s understanding differed from that of Yaakov with regards to both of these questions:

- He felt that Menashe should receive the right side.
- He thought that the blessing would come direct from Yaakov.

Accordingly, he positioned his sons with Menashe at Yaakov’s right side, and Ephraim at Yaakov’s left. What is most fascinating is that through acting on these two premises together, he effectively positioned his sons *exactly where they needed to be* in terms of Yaakov’s plans:

- Placing Ephraim at *Yaakov’s left* side meant that he was placed at *Yosef’s right* side.

⁴ See Rashi to Bereishis 24:52.

- Likewise, placing Menashe at *Yaakov's right* side meant that he was at *Yosef's left* side.

This is why the verse describes the positioning of the sons not only in terms of Yaakov's right and left, but also Yosef's; for in the event, it was the latter's "coordinates" which would be definitive for the way the blessing was delivered. Additionally, we now understand why Yaakov crossed over his hands to give the right to Ephraim, and did not ask his grandsons to change place. For in reality, they were exactly where they needed to be – with Ephraim at Yosef's right and Menashe at his left. All Yaakov now needed to do was to align his right and left hands with the sides of Yosef – which he did by crossing over his hands. With everything in place, verse 15 then introduces Yaakov's blessing to his grandsons by saying, "He blessed Yosef", for as we have seen, his blessing to them was actually transmitted through Yosef.

Understanding Yosef's Reaction

We can now understand why Yosef reacted to these events in the way that he did, saying "Not so father, for this is the firstborn," and even trying to physically move Yaakov's right hand on to Menashe. When Yosef saw that Yaakov had crossed his hands, he realized that he had been mistaken in thinking that the blessing was to go to the sons directly from Yaakov. However, it was still obvious to him that Menashe was meant to receive the right hand. As such, in light of the way the he realized the blessing was being transmitted, he thought that he had positioned his sons contrary to Yaakov's wishes! That is why he tried moving Yaakov's hands – not as a protest to what he perceived as *Yaakov's* mistake, but in response to *his own* mistake. He was effectively saying, "I am sure you crossed your right hand over to *my* right side expecting to find Menashe there, but I mistakenly put him at *your* right side. Here he is!"

However, Yaakov responds by saying, "יָדַעְתִּי בְנִי יָדַעְתִּי – I know, my son, I know." Perhaps the double expression refers to both aspects of the situation: "1) I know that you thought the blessing would go directly from me, and 2) I also know that you think Menashe should get the right hand, and that is why you place Ephraim at my left side. However, the blessing was actually to go through you and Ephraim – whom you placed at your right side – is the one who will be receiving my right hand, for he will achieve greater eminence than his brother."

Stunning *parshanut*!

Concluding Thoughts

The Alshich does not specify what the implications are of Yosef's sons receiving the blessing through him and not directly from Yaakov. However, it is interesting to note as we go through the Chumash that these two are not always considered separate tribes. There are occasions when they "close ranks" and are treated as one tribe called "Yosef". Perhaps this "partial" elevation to tribe-status is due to the fact that it still involved their father, Yosef.

Another question that remains is that although Yaakov originally stated that the blessing would go through Yosef ("take them to me"), he was aware that his subsequent actions (hugging and kissing them, saying, "Behold God has shown me your children") led Yosef to conclude that the blessing would be given direct. Since Yaakov had not in fact changed his mind in this regard, why did he allow Yosef to reach this conclusion? Could it be that since Yosef was effectively to be the conduit through which Yaakov's blessing would flow to his grandsons, Yaakov did not want any resistance or interference to that flow on account of Yosef's desire that the blessing not go through him. The optimum way to ensure that the blessing would flow smoothly through Yosef was by arranging for it to flow unconsciously, leaving the explanation for after it had occurred.

Food for thought!

חזק חזק ונתחזק