

Jacob on his Deathbed

As the Book of Genesis draws to its conclusion, in chapter 48 we find a poignant deathbed scene.

The elderly Jacob shares final words with his favourite son Joseph and he blesses his two grandsons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

The scene is filled with emotion: hugs and kisses, whispered words of endearment, and a blessing summoned from the last of a grandfather's remaining strength.

But wait! Something isn't quite right. Jacob is overturning the usual custom of blessing, placing his right hand on the younger grandson instead of the elder.

When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it was wrong... (Gen. 48:14).

Joseph reacts swiftly when he realizes that his elderly father's blessing is about to favour the younger over the elder. Is his concern simply for protocol or is there another reason?

And is Jacob's action intentional, or is his eyesight the problem? Of what earlier scenes in Genesis does this remind you? Read chapter 48 for yourself, and join in this Torah discussion.

Perhaps Joseph—and you too—are recalling the multiple crises in Jacob's life which were triggered by the favouring of the younger over the elder. Let's revisit them here:

- The deception that led Isaac to bless Jacob instead of Esau created familial havoc, forcing Jacob into exile. [Gen.27]
- Jacob's choice of Rachel over Leah led to deception by Laban and bitter feelings between sisters. [Gen.29]
- Jacob's favoring of his son Joseph over his older sons led to the envy of the brothers and a family tragedy [Gen.37]

And now, in blessing his grandsons, Jacob wants to show favor to the younger?! Has history taught him nothing? Is this the start of another family feud? And yet in 48:19 Jacob seems fully aware of what he is doing. How do you interpret this

scene? What deeper meaning lies in this Torah passage?

According to one contemporary Jewish commentator, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,¹ the key lies in the meaning of the grandsons' names. Let's recall Gen. 41:50-52:

Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning 'God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.' And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, 'God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.'

Each name expresses something of Joseph's mindset. At the birth of his first son Joseph is emerging from a painful ordeal inflicted upon him by his brothers. He is ready to forget his Hebrew origins. But by the time his second son is born, Joseph is beginning to hanker for his Hebrew roots. He recognizes that Egypt is the place of his success, but it is not his homeland. It is a place of exile, 'the land of my affliction'.

Looking ahead to the book of Exodus we know that this is the start of the long, dark exile of which the Lord had forewarned Jacob (46:4). Manasseh and Ephraim are the first grandchildren to be born in this exile. In favouring Ephraim, then, Jacob's blessing signals an important message to future generations. Those tempted to assimilate or lose hope are urged never forget their homeland - or their God.

This reflection holds profound meaning for the Jewish people whose lives have always been entwined with the sacredness of the land. It also speaks to Christians, we who call this land 'holy.'

At other levels, too, the Torah invites reflection on the deep 'forgettings' and 'rememberings' in life, and how they lead towards, or away from, one's God-given destiny. At this point in your life, are you 'at home' or in 'exile'?

1. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009). Scripture: NJPS.

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