

<p>Gn 48:1-20</p> <p>Some time afterward, Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.</p> <p>2When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to see you," Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.</p> <p>3And Jacob said to Joseph, "El Shaddai, who appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, blessed me—</p> <p>4and said to me, 'I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.'</p> <p>5Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon.</p>	<p>Gn 27:1-29</p> <p>When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am."</p> <p>2And he said, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die.</p> <p>3Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game.</p> <p>4Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die."</p> <p>5Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home,</p>
<p>6But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead* of their brothers in their inheritance.</p> <p>7[Do this because] when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath"—now Bethlehem.</p> <p>8Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, "Who are these?"</p> <p>9And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." "Bring them up to me," he said, "that I may bless them."</p> <p>10Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So [Joseph] brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them.</p>	<p>6Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying,</p> <p>7'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with הויה's approval, before I die.'</p> <p>8Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you.</p> <p>9Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes.</p> <p>10Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies."</p>

<p>Gn 48:1-20</p> <p>11 And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well."</p> <p>12 Joseph then removed them from his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground.</p> <p>13 Joseph took the two of them, Ephraim with his right hand—to Israel's left—and Manasseh with his left hand—to Israel's right—and brought them close to him.</p> <p>14 But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head—thus crossing his hands—although Manasseh was the first-born.</p> <p>15 And he blessed Joseph, saying, "The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day</p>	<p>Gn 27:1-29</p> <p>11 Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned.</p> <p>12 If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing."</p> <p>13 But his mother said to him, "Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me."</p> <p>14 He got them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared a dish such as his father liked.</p> <p>15 Rebekah then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there* in the house, and had her younger son Jacob put them on;</p>
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Gn 48:1-20

16The Messenger who has redeemed me from all harm—
Bless the lads.

In them may my name be recalled,
And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.”

17When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand
on Ephraim's head, he thought it wrong: so he took hold of his
father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's.

18“Not so, Father,” Joseph said to his father, “for the other is
the first-born; place your right hand on his head.”

19But his father objected, saying, “I know, my son, I know. He
too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his
younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall
be plentiful enough for nations.”

20So he blessed them that day, saying, “By you shall Israel
invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and
Manasseh.” Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

Gn 27:1-29

16and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the
skins of the kids.

17Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread
that she had prepared.

18He went to his father and said, “Father.” And he said, “Yes, which of
my sons are you?”

19Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as
you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me
your innermost blessing.”

20Isaac said to his son, “How did you succeed so quickly, my son?”
And he said, “Because your God יְהוָה granted me good fortune.”

21Isaac said to Jacob, “Come closer that I may feel you, my son—
whether you are really my son Esau or not.”

22So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and
wondered. “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the
hands of Esau.”

23He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those
of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him.

24He asked, “Are you really my son Esau?” And when he said, “I am,”
25he said, “Serve me and let me eat of my son's game that I may give
you my innermost blessing.” So he served him and he ate, and he
brought him wine and he drank.

26Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come close and kiss me, my
son”,

27and he went up and kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and he
blessed him, saying, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the
fields that יְהוָה has blessed.

28“May God give you
Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth,
Abundance of new grain and wine.

29Let peoples serve you,
And nations bow to you;
Be master over your brothers,
And let your mother's sons bow to you.

Cursed be they who curse you,
Blessed they who bless you.”

Vayehi

ראובן גורמן סאקס *Conversations: Gresser*

Jonathan Sacks

his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations." He blessed them that day, saying: "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Menasheh. (48:13-14, 17-20)

It is not difficult to understand the care Joseph took to ensure that Jacob would bless the firstborn first. Three times throughout his life, his father had set the younger before the elder, and each time it had resulted in tragedy. Jacob, the younger, had sought to supplant his elder brother Esau. In choosing a wife, he had favoured the younger sister Rachel over Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Joseph and Benjamin, over the elder Reuben, Shimon and Levi. The consequences were catastrophic: estrangement from Esau, tension between the two sisters, and hostility among his sons. Joseph himself bore the scars: thrown into a well by his brothers, who initially planned to kill him and eventually sold him into Egypt as a slave. Had his father not learned? Or did he think that Ephraim – whom Joseph held in his right hand – was the elder? Did Jacob know what he was doing? Did he not realise that he was risking extending the family feuds into the next generation?

Why, in any case, did Jacob favour Ephraim over Menasheh? He had not seen his two grandchildren before. He knew nothing about them. None of the factors that led to the earlier episodes were operative here. We cannot be sure of the explanation. Here, as so often in the Torah, the narrative is undetermined, leaving it to us, the reader, to flesh out the details. In the rabbis' wonderful phrase: "the text itself cries out: Expound me!"¹ In this case, we know that Jacob knew only this about his grandsons: their names, Menasheh and Ephraim. This was enough to persuade him to bless Ephraim before Menasheh. For encoded in Joseph's sons' names is the story of his years of exile away from Jacob.

1. Solomon Buber, comp., *Tanhumas, Vayeshev* 13; see Rashi to Bereishit 1:1, 37:20.

When Joseph finally emerged from prison to become chief minister of Egypt, he married and had two sons:

Before the years of the famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenat, daughter of Potiphara, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Menasheh, saying, "God has made me forget [*masheh*] all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim, saying, "For God has made me fruitful [*farat*] in the land of my affliction." (41:50-52)

With the utmost brevity the Torah intimates an experience of exile that was to be repeated many times across the centuries. At first, Joseph felt relief. The years as a slave, then a prisoner, were over. He had risen to greatness. In Canaan, he had been the youngest of eleven brothers in a nomadic family of shepherds. Now, in Egypt, he was at the centre of the greatest civilization of the ancient world, second only to Pharaoh in rank and power. No one reminded him of his background. With his royal robes and ring and chariot, he was an Egyptian prince (as Moses was later to be). The past was a bitter memory he sought to remove from his mind. Menasheh means "forgetting."

But as time passed, Joseph began to feel quite different emotions. Yes, he had arrived; he had achieved the power and greatness of which he had dreamed in his youth. But this people was not his; nor was its culture. To be sure, his family was, by any worldly terms, distinguished, unsophisticated. Yet they remained his family. They were the matrix of who he was. Though they were no more than shepherds (a class the Egyptians despised), they had been spoken to by God – not the gods of the sun, the river and death, the Egyptian pantheon – but God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who did not make His home in temples and pyramids and panoplies of power, but who spoke in the human heart as a voice, lifting a simple family to moral greatness.

By the time his second son was born, Joseph had undergone a profound change of heart. To be sure, he had all the trappings of earthly success – "God has made me fruitful" – but Egypt had become "the land of my affliction." Why? Because it was exile. There is a sociological

observation about immigrant groups, known as Hansens Law: "The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget."² Joseph went through this transformation very quickly. It was already complete by the time his second son was born. By calling this child Ephraim, he was remembering what, when Menasheh was born, he was trying to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.

On this reading, Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Menasheh had nothing to do with their ages and everything to do with their names. He knew that the stay of his family in Egypt would not be a short one. Before leaving Canaan to see Joseph, God had appeared to him in a vision:

Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes. (46:3-4)

He knew, in other words, that this was the start of the long exile that God had told Abraham would be the fate of his children, a vision the Torah describes as accompanied by "a deep and dreadful darkness" (15:12). Knowing that these were the first two children of his family to be born in exile, knowing too that the exile would be prolonged and at times difficult and dark, Jacob sought to signal to all future generations that there would be a constant tension between the desire to forget (to assimilate, acculturate, anaesthetise the hope of a return) and the promptings of memory (the knowledge that this is "exile," that we are part of another story, that ultimate home is somewhere else).

The child of forgetting (Menasheh) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part.

2. Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant* (Rock Island, IL, Augustana Historical Society, 1938), 9.