

## Dvar Torah Vayeshev

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Shabbat Shalom.

Each Shabbat, David and I bless our children. For those who do this every Friday evening, you know the routine. The candles have been lit. The room is (mostly) still.

We stand close, place our hands on the children's heads, either together or separately.

And then we say these words.

For the boys: *Yisimcha Elohim k'Ephraim v'ch'Menashe* – “May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe”

And for the girls: *Yisimech Elohim k'Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah* – “May God make you like Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah.”

And then we give them all what I consider one of the most beautiful blessings in our tradition... the same blessing that the Kohanim offer to the congregation ... and which originated in the Holy Temple:

*Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishm'recha  
Ya-eir Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka.  
Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yaseim l'cha shalom.*

May God bless you and care for you.

May the light of God's countenance shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God's countenance be lifted upon you and give you peace.

I love the idea of asking God to grant peace to my children each week. It's like saying “Good night” or “I love you” – a habit, something we almost don't even think about. But without it, we feel incomplete.

Before we go any further, let's step back for a moment...

First of all, why do we bless our children?

We are commanded to honor our parents. But we choose to bless our children. We do not bless our parents. We hold them in high regard, which is a discussion for another day. But our children ... Blessing them is not a mitzvah – it's not commanded of us – it's a custom.

Given, it's a custom that goes back hundreds and thousands of years, but it is a custom nonetheless.

Our family has engaged in this ritual for nearly 17 years. And then a few months ago, one of our children offered up a challenge.

Can you guess who that was?

Miriam asked, "Why do you say I should be like Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, and Sammy and Josh should be like Ephraim and Menashe?"

"Is there a reason I shouldn't be like Ephraim and Menashe? Or that my brothers shouldn't be like the matriarchs?"

Huh. Good point. In 2014, egalitarian, Conservative Jewish America, why are we blessing our children along strict gender lines?

Because we've always done it that way?  
Because it has a deeper meaning I haven't yet explored?  
Because change would be too jarring?

As you might expect, I did not take this question lightly. In fact, I've been thinking about it and talking about it for weeks.

I started with the original sources. We'll read about the source of this ritual in a few weeks in parashat Vayechi. Just before Jacob, is about to die, Joseph brings Ephraim and Menashe to him. Jacob blesses his grandsons before he speaks to all of his sons about what they can expect for the future. Here are some excerpts:

"Noticing Joseph's son's, Israel (meaning Jacob) asked, "Who are these?" And Joseph said to his father: "They are my sons, whom God has given me here (by here, Joseph means, 'in Egypt.')

"And he said: "Bring them up to me, that I may bless them."  
"... And Israel said to Joseph: "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well."  
"... So he blessed them that day, saying: "By you shall Israel [this time meaning the Jewish people] invoke blessings, saying: God make you as Ephraim and as Menasseh."

The blessing for girls was added later, but from what I can tell, it's been many centuries, perhaps even thousands of years, that we've been offering blessings to our daughters in the same way.

The commentaries I've read suggest that Ephraim and Menashe are the role models and the source of blessing for two reasons: 1) they were the first siblings not to fight; and 2) they were the first children to grow up successfully in the diaspora – Egypt.

Who decided on the matriarchs? From what we've seen in the parshiyot of the last few weeks, they are not always paragons of kindness and admirable behavior. For all their strengths, they have some significant weaknesses too.

So if someone picked Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, what was it about them that we want our daughters to emulate? Does the fact that they are women make them the only appropriate role models? Couldn't Ephraim and Menashe be the best examples for all of our children?

### **Why Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah?**

I suspect they were added because it was an easy addition ... and because someone long ago assumed that a blessing for daughters had to invoke female role models.

More about that later.

The conventional wisdom is that these were strong women. They believed in God, which helped them through tough times in their marriages, with their children, with those around them. And because they put God and family first, the Jewish people survived, and even thrived.

Got it.

Setting aside the sexist assumptions inherent in this explanation, let's think about the general qualities these women embodied. These are things we'd want for all of our children, right? Boys and girls alike. Taking that a step further, don't others in the Torah demonstrate other characteristics we wish for our children?

What about Tamar, whom we meet in this week's parasha?

Tamar is left without a husband or children ... not once, but twice. Judah promises her his third son, Shelah, but it soon becomes apparent that he has no intention of fulfilling that vow. We can talk about his motivation another time.

What I'm most interested in today, is how Tamar handles this impossible situation. Forget the sordid details for a minute.

Bottom line, Tamar takes her life into her own hands instead of waiting for male relatives to rescue her. She takes action, and ensures that her family will continue.

Yes, her action involves deception, but who else engaged in deception? That's right, those paragons of virtue, Rachel and Leah.

What if we substituted Tamar for one of the matriarchs when we bless our children? Or added her? Why not? Don't we want our sons and daughters to be active problem solvers, masters of their own destiny?

Perhaps this would be tricky. What do you say to the six-year-old who asks, Mom, who was Tamar?

So maybe we don't include Tamar because she's too hard to explain to young children.

OK, then what if we added Hannah? Or Miriam? Or Deborah?

We could go on and on, considering all the virtues and characteristics we each dream of for our children.

Or we could stop. And take a word of advice from Marcia Falk, a contemporary poet and liturgist.

Instead of wishing that the child be like someone else, Falk's blessing asks that the child be exactly as he or she already is.

So for a daughter, I would say, *Hayi asher tihi – vahayi b'rukhah ba'asher tihi.*

And for a son, *Heyeh asher tiyeh – veyeyeyh barukh ba'asher tiyeh.*

In English, "Be who you are – and may you be blessed in all that you are."

I like what she suggests; and who knows, we might even add it to our Friday night ritual.

But before we start messing with tradition (which, to be honest, I'm ok with), let's step back again, and look at the original blessing. I am beginning to believe that we've missed the point of this blessing by focusing exclusively on the characteristics of those whom we name.

Maybe we got it wrong.

I can thank my husband for sparking my curiosity about the words themselves. Translation is half interpretation. It can be instructive to return to the source.

So let's go back to the opening words again.

*Yisimech Elohim k'Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah*

*Yisimcha Elohim k'Ephraim v'ch'Menashe*

The traditional translation or interpretation is "May God **make** you like ...." or May God **ble**ss you like ..." I found both on various websites and in the bencher we use at home.

But if we look closely at the word *yisimech* or *yisimcha*, it seems possible that Jacob was not suggesting that we ask God to **make** our children like Ephraim or Menashe ... or even to **bless** them as he blessed Ephraim and Menashe. Those English terms are interpretations.

The Hebrew verb, *yisimech* or *yisimcha* comes from the root *Sim – Sin, Mem* – to put or place.

May God **place you** ... or **put you**... like Ephraim and Menashe.

Put you? What does that mean?

Put you in the same place as... ?

Place you as God placed these people?

As I was trying to figure this out, I called another worthy source, my friend Rabbi Amy Bolton, who was kind enough to turn her attention away from the Rangers hockey game (which she was watching with her ten-year-old son) to mull this over with me for a few minutes.

I asked her about the word I was struggling with. What did she think it might mean?

Amy suggested that maybe we're telling our children that we hope they are placed in relationship to God as Ephraim and Menashe were.

Not may God **make** you like Jacob's grandsons (or the matriarchs, for that matter), but may you and God have the same type of relationship that these ancestors were fortunate to have.

I like this idea that perhaps we are not actually asking our children to emulate anyone ... but instead, we want them to have the type of relationships with one another and with God that Ephraim and Menashe had. The types of complex, challenging, ultimately comforting relationships that Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah had with God and with the people around them. Not the same connections. The same **types** of connections.

Now that's something I can get behind. I do want each of my children to remain in relationship with God ... whatever that means.

This interpretation suggests that God needs us. That God needs us to raise a generation of children who remain in relationship with one another and with the Divine.

With all of that in mind, I leave you with three question:

1. Why do you bless your children?
2. What does your blessing mean to you?

3. And what does it mean to your sons and daughters? I suggest asking them too.

Whether you modify the blessing or say exactly the same words that parents have spoken for generations, I ask you to pause before you recite it, and consider the *kavanah* – the intention – you bring to this action.

Yisimchem Elohim K'Ephraim v'ch'menashe...

May God place all of you ... all of us ... as Ephraim and Menashe.

May we all establish and sustain meaningful relationships with one another and with God ... as children and as adults.

Shabbat Shalom.