

PARASHAS VAYECHI

A Father's Blessing

It is an intensely Jewish and awe-inspiring spectacle. The father lifts his hands, and the child bows his head. The father places his hands on the child's head, closes his eyes and begins to whisper his blessing. It matters not if the father is a great sage or a simple man, the blessing draws its power from the sincerity of the father.

Come, let us move a little closer and listen to the words he is saying. "May the Lord establish you like Ephraim and Menashe! May Hashem bless you and protect you . . ." These are the words our Sages, based on Jacob's instructions, have instituted as the formula for the paternal blessing. But why Ephraim and Menashe? What was so special about Joseph's sons that they have become the paragons to which all Jewish children aspire?

In this week's *parshah*, we witness the emotional scene of Jacob blessing his grandsons Ephraim and Menashe from his deathbed. As Jacob reaches out to place his hands on their heads, he sees that Joseph has positioned the older Menashe to receive his grandfather's right hand, which is considered predominant, and the younger Ephraim to receive the left. But Jacob sees greater things in Ephraim's future, and he "maneuvers his hands," crossing over with the right hand to place it on Ephraim's head and the left on Menashe's.

We would not have been surprised had the elder Menashe resented the preeminence accorded to his younger brother, but there is not the slightest hint of such a reaction in the Torah. Nor do we find any hint of Ephraim feeling suddenly superior. On the contrary, Menashe and Ephraim were both perfectly content with the roles they had been assigned to play in the destiny of the Jewish people. There was absolutely no discord between these two brothers, only a desire to fulfill their own individual destinies to the best of their abilities and a selfless dedication to their common goal of doing what was best for the Jewish people as a whole.

This, the commentators explain, is the perfect blessing a father can give his son. The most blessed state a person can achieve is to reach his own full potential while maintaining a sense of equilibrium - or in our contemporary parlance, to be a "contented overachiever." This is quite an accomplishment, but we can attain it if we rise above the pettiness of coveting what Heaven has chosen to grant someone else. If we look inward at what we ourselves can be, we can focus on our growth and, at

the same time, relate to other people in a positive, giving and compassionate way. If, however, we look outward at what others have been given, we will never find contentment and the growth that it fosters. Ephraim and Menashe found that rare harmony of achievement and contentment, and we bless our children that they should find it as well.

A weary traveler was returning home after a long journey. As he trudged along the road, he tried not to think of the blisters on his feet. Instead, he thought only about his younger brother's wedding, which was to take place the following day. One day's march more, and he would be home.

Suddenly, he heard the clatter of hooves, and he turned and saw a beautiful coach. "My good man," he called out to the coachman. "Can I catch a ride with you for a ways? I'll sit beside you on the bench, and I'll tell you where I have to get off."

"Today's your lucky day," said the coachman. "No one's using the coach. You can ride inside."

The traveler couldn't believe his good fortune as he sank into the plush upholstery. Within moments, he was fast asleep.

He slept for hours while the coach followed a bewildering course of highways and roads. Finally, the coach pulled to a halt, and the traveler awoke. The sun was sinking in the sky as he rubbed his eyes and looked about him.

"Where are we?" he asked.

The coachman mentioned the name of a town.

"What!" the traveler cried out in anguish. "I'll never get to my destination in time. We've been riding in the opposite direction!"

"Well, look at the bright side," said the coachman. "At least your ride was comfortable."

A comfortable ride is not much consolation when one is going in the wrong direction. And if we devote too much of our energy to comfort and status, we may very well lose sight of the true destination in our journey through life,. Especially in our own times, when there is such peer pressure to focus on the accumulation of comforts, we would do better to focus on the activities which help us reach our destination. And when we sit down to define the goals of our lives, we will surely find that we care more about who and what we are than about what we have accumulated. Of one thing we can be sure - we have all been given the tools we need to fulfill our personal destinies.