

# Parsha Ponders

Vayechi | December 31, 2020 | 15 Teves 5781

## *A recipe to avoid decline*<sup>1</sup>

ויברכם ביום ההוא לאמור בך יברך ישראל לאמר ישמך אלקים כאפרים וכמנשה וגו'  
[Yaakov] blessed them on that day saying: "In you<sup>2</sup> the Jewish people will bless, to say that Hashem should make you like Efraim and Menashe"...<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of Yaakov's life, he blessed his children with various prophetic pronouncements. Before blessing his twelve children, he gave Yosef's two sons their own special blessings. He informed them that the Jewish people will bless their own children to be like Efraim and Menashe. Indeed, the standard practice in a Jewish home is that Friday night the parents bless their sons to be like Efraim and Menashe<sup>4</sup>. What's the intent behind blessing our kids that they should be like Efraim and Menashe? What aspect did they have that we hope our children will share?

Rav Yaakov Weinberg *zatzal* suggested that the intent relates to *yeridas hadoros*. This Jewish concept<sup>5</sup> is an observation that with every succeeding generation, there's a certain decrease in spirituality and wisdom. Adam, the first Man, was directly created by G-d. Therefore, he was the most divine human. His children, although G-d was involved in their creation, had human parents<sup>6</sup>. They're one level removed from direct creation by Hashem. This continues as the generations progress. Similarly, the generation that was at Mount Sinai witnessed the greatest revelation of Hashem. They literally received the Torah from Him. Their children were one step removed from that. As such, every succeeding generation is one step further from Sinai, creating a decrease in their grasp of Torah<sup>7</sup>.

One could argue that Efraim and Menashe are the only two brothers in history who were able to avoid *yeridas hadoros*. Yaakov didn't look at them like they were his grandchildren. To him, they were on the same level as his own children. This is why he said that Efraim and Menashe would be like Reuven and Shimon<sup>8</sup>. He observed that there was no decrease in spiritual stature from his children's generation to

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a *shiur* heard from [Rabbi Yissocher Frand](#) in 5779

<sup>2</sup> בך is hard to translate. It could mean here "in you", "with you", "through you", but they're all not the most grammatical

<sup>3</sup> [Genesis 48:20](#)

<sup>4</sup> This practice is first recorded by [Sefer HaChaim Parnasa VeChalkala](#) Chapter 6 § לקראת בואו ונצא לקראת שבת כלה, written by the [Maharal's](#) brother. The next source is [Ma'avar Yabok Sifsei Rananos](#) Chapter 43. The [Kitzur Shulchan Aruch](#) 131:16 and [Chayei Adam](#) 144:19 only mention this custom with regards to Yom Kippur evening. Credit to my brother in-law [Rabbi Nachum Aharon haKohen Kutnowski](#) for these sources

<sup>5</sup> The concept of *yeridas hadoros* appears in [Shabbos](#) 112b. See also [Yevamos](#) 39b. It is subsequently discussed in many sources. However, the earliest usage that I found of the specific phrase *yeridas hadoros* is in [Rav Yaakov Emden's Mor UKtziah](#) § 88, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>6</sup> [Kiddushin](#) 30b; [Niddah](#) 31a

<sup>7</sup> This Jewish concept is the exact opposite of Western Society's *weltanschauung* or world view. The common conception is Man came from the animals, so every generation is one level less animal, and thus more advanced and wiser. This creates a certain apathy or disrespect for one's elders, whereas Judaism due to its world view emphasizes respecting and honoring those who preceded us

<sup>8</sup> [Genesis 48:5](#). See [Ba'al HaTurim ad. loc.](#), who points out that the numerical value of אפרים ומנשה is equal to ראובר ושמעון. However, upon inspection, one phrase's numerical value is 732 and the other's is 731. This is pointed out by [HaRosh Al HaTorah ad. loc.](#) This is fine though according to the rule in *gematria* known as *im-hakolel*, where numbers off by one are considered equivalent. The [Benei Yissaschar](#) brings in a few places (for example: [Kislev UTeves 2:2](#), [Chodesh Sivan 2:13](#)) that this verse is actually the source for *im-hakolel*, since the verse says אפרים

their own. This is the blessing that we give our children, that they should be like Efraim and Menashe<sup>9</sup>. They should see no spiritual decline from the generation that preceded them. How is it though that Efraim and Menashe avoided the reality of *yeridas hadoros*?

We can say that they learned it from their father, Yosef. At the beginning of the *parsha*, Yaakov instructed Yosef to ensure that he be buried in the land of Israel. Yosef agreed to the mission, by saying אעשה כדברך, I will do like your words<sup>10</sup>. One interpretation<sup>11</sup> of this phrase is that besides burying his father in the land of Israel, Yosef would ensure that he himself would also be buried there. This is because Yosef wanted to be exactly like his father Yaakov. Our Sages in fact tell us<sup>12</sup> that everything that happened to Yaakov happened to Yosef. The two shared similar destinies, and Yaakov had taught Yosef all that he knew<sup>13</sup>. Yosef himself evaded *yeridas hadoros*, and was able to inculcate that ability into his children.

We see here a tremendous lesson in *chinuch*, raising our children and teaching our students. You can't just talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. It's one thing for us to want our children and students to be just like the generation that preceded them. But to actually make it a reality, desire alone may not be enough. The best way to teach a lesson or value to anyone is to live it yourself. If we ourselves strive to emulate the generation that preceded us, attaining heights beyond the norm for our generation, then that's something we can properly pass on to the next generation. We see from Yosef that he was able to impart in his children amazing abilities, solely because he himself had attained them.

Good Shabbos

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לי יהיו לי, ומנשה כראובן ושמעון יהיו לי, meaning they will be equivalent. In the latter source he cites this from the Chida in Devash Lefi 3:14.

<sup>9</sup> I suppose one could ask then why we only wish this for our sons and not our daughters, who are blessed to be like Sarah, Rivka, Rochel, and Leah

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 47:30

<sup>11</sup> Da'as Zekeinim, Rabboseinu Ba'alei HaTosafos, Hadar Zekeinim and Rabbeinu Bachaye ad. loc., quoting a Midrash; Tur HaAroch ad. loc. without citation. See Torah Sheleimah ad. loc. § 128

<sup>12</sup> Bereishis Rabbah 84:6, Midrash Tanchuma Vayeishev § 1, *ibid* Miketz § 3, Tanchuma Yashan Vayeishev § 5, brought by Rashi to Genesis 37:2. See also Bamidbar Rabbah 14:5 and Torah Sheleimah to Genesis Chapter 37 § 25

<sup>13</sup> See Rashi, Ramban, and Targum Onkelos to Genesis 37:3 and Bereishis Rabbah 84:8