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Change Your Perspective, Change Your Reality

This week's Torah portion describes the passing of Jacob and our Sages interestingly tell us that Jacob did not die. This is not referring to Jacob living through his children and descendants, or through his good deeds. Our Sages tell us this is very literal and suggests that Jacob never died and was alive in the truest sense of the word.

How can this be? The Torah portion goes through great detail describing his death, burial, and mourning?

Lesson: The Hebrew word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*, which in shares the same Hebrew root word for boundary, limitations, and constraints. Through the eyes of the Egyptians, ie, through a limited and constrained perspective, Jacob had passed. However, it was not the ultimate truth. Jacob was still alive. If you allow your perspective to shift, if you allow your perception to go beyond your personal limitations, you can have a completely new truth. Just by thinking differently, you can create a new reality.

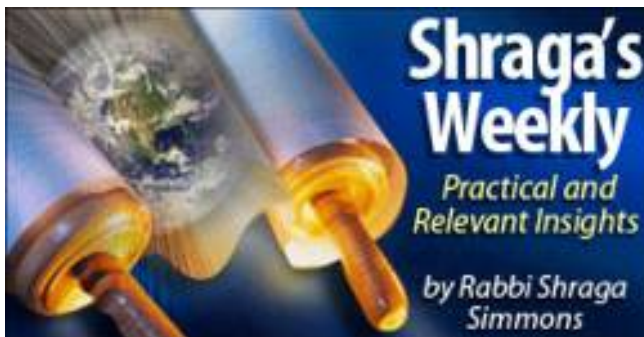
This is not just a lofty idea, but a real concept corroborated by a theory in quantum physics. The 'observer effect' came about after electrons, tiny particles of matter, behaved in such a way completely contrary to how physicists would have expected during an experiment. To better try to understand what was happening, a detector was placed nearby to see what these electrons were doing. When they did this, an extraordinary, astonishing thing happened. The electrons went back to behaving 'normally'. The detector did not interfere at all with the electrons, but being observed, ie, having a new perspective, completely changed the outcome and reality of the situation.

By throwing off your limited perspective, your limitations, resentment, preconceived notions, physical limitations, etc., you can change your truth and reality. How do we do this? Knowing that God is only good, only wants to do good, and is only giving you the very best, even if it is

wrapped up in ugly packaging. By knowing that God only gives the best, you will be able to tear off the ugly wrapping to reveal and bask in the most amazing and beautiful blessings. When we use our minds think about, contemplate, focus on, and concentrate on God's love for us we can change the way we think and feel – and thus changing the way we relate to reality.

Exercise: Go through the day knowing that everything is from God and therefore a blessing. If you stub your toe – thank God! If your dinner turns out delicious, know it's from God. See how it changes your perspective moving forward.

(Idea heard by Ani Lipitz of Geulavision.com)



Blessing of Ephraim & Menashe

Jacob, realizing he is about to die, gathers his 12 sons to receive a blessing.

But first, Jacob calls upon two of his grandchildren – Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menashe – to receive blessings. Why would Jacob place priority on blessing grandchildren over children?

As every grandparent knows) the joy of having grandchildren in some respects exceeds the joy of having children is. Why is this so?

Most creatures in the world have parent-child relationships – whether a mother lion protecting her cubs or a mother bird feeding her young. But only the human being has a concept of grandchildren, of perpetuation beyond a single generation. Being a grandparent connects us to our unique spiritual soul which is rooted in infinity.

Sibling Peace

There is further significance to Jacob's blessings.

One of the most beautiful customs in Jewish life is for parents to bless their children at the start of the Friday night Shabbat meal. Girls receive the blessing: "May God make you like the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah." Boys, meanwhile, are blessed "to be like Ephraim and Menashe."

What happened to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Why are Ephraim and Menashe instead the subjects of this important tradition?

Ephraim and Menashe were the first set of Jewish brothers who did not fight. Abraham's two sons – Isaac and Ishmael – could not get along, and their disagreement forms the basis of the Arab-Israeli conflict until today. The next generation – Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esav – were so contentious that Esav repeatedly sought to kill Jacob and instructed his descendants to do the same. The next generation was contentious as well: Jacob's sons sold Joseph into slavery.

Ephraim and Menashe represent a break from this pattern. This explains why Jacob purposely switched his hands, blessing the younger Ephraim before the older Menashe. Jacob wished to emphasize the point that with these siblings, there is no rivalry. (see Genesis 48:13-14)

(In the world of nature, things can degenerate even further. A mother shark casts multiple fertilized eggs into her womb. Once the fetus-sharks grow teeth they tear one another apart, then eat their siblings – until the strongest shark remains alone in the womb.)

Indeed, there is no greater blessing than peace among siblings. The words of King David ring true: "How good and pleasant is it for brothers to sit peacefully together" – Hiney ma tov u'ma'nayim, shevet achim gam yachad (Psalms 133:1).

It is with this thought that parents bless their children today.

Diaspora Difficulties

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (19th century Germany) offers another explanation of why Jewish boys throughout the ages have received the blessing of Ephraim and Menashe:

The first generations of Jews – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – raised their children primarily in the Land of Israel. The Holy Land is the most hospitable Jewish environment, where the Talmud reports that "even the air makes you wise." In one sense, being Jewish in Israel is easy.

But due to famine, Jacob and his family moved to Egypt. The next generation would grow up

surrounded by pagan immorality. The challenge was if Judaism would survive amidst all the distractions of diaspora life.

Throughout the ages, Jewish parents have prayed that their children withstand the temptations of exile, and keep a strong, proud Jewish identity.

It is not an easy task. Faced with the reality of Xmas season, for example, the easy option is to relegate Jewish identity to the back burner. That's why parents must constantly fight the tide by emphasizing Jewish values. The most effective tools are high-impact experiences like Jewish day schools and trips to Israel.

In the end, how does a parent gauge success?

Far more than children, it is grandchildren who reveal the foundation and future direction of a family line. Hence the popular saying: "The issue is not whether you have Jewish children, it's whether you have Jewish grandchildren."

What was the outcome with Ephraim and Menashe? Despite great odds, they grew up in Egypt and maintained adherence to Torah ideals and practice. Which is why we bless our sons to be like them, expressing our hope for proud Jewish children – and grandchildren.



An Eternal Blessing

In this *parashah*, Jacob, on his deathbed, blesses all his children, assigns them their unique missions, and also chastises them for their failings. He singles out, however, two of his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, and adopts them as his own: "And now, your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt before my coming to you in Egypt shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be like Reuben and Simeon."

Additionally, Jacob gives the two lads a special blessing and proclaims "By you shall Israel bless, saying 'May God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.' "²

At first glance, this elevation of Ephraim and Manasseh is somewhat puzzling, but there is a deep teaching therein. These two boys grew up in Egypt, in a land that was renowned for its immorality, corruption, and decadence. Moreover, they grew up in the opulence and luxury of the palace and, more significantly, they were the only Jewish children in the land of Egypt. And yet, despite it all, their commitment and faith in God remained unwavering and they were as dedicated to Judaism as the sons of Jacob were.

This, in and of itself, is a phenomenal feat, for usually, with the passage of each generation, there is a spiritual downturn, as each generation becomes one step further removed from its source. But Ephraim and Manasseh reversed that process. They linked themselves to the previous generation as though they had been born to be Tribal Patriarchs. Thus they defied the odds and reached beyond the spiritual level into which they had been born.

Now we can more readily understand the blessing which Jacob proclaimed, "By you shall Israel bless, saying, "May God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh," for even as Ephraim and Manasseh withstood the ultimate test and were able to maintain their high standard of faith in a hostile environment, so too, to this very day, all Jewish parents pray that no matter where destiny may take their children, they will remain staunch, loyal Jews, upholding Torah and mitzvot. Therefore, on the eve of the Sabbath and on the eve of Yom Kippur, parents pronounce the ancient words of Jacob and bless their children with these immortal words: "May God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh."

There is yet another reason why Ephraim and Manasseh were chosen to be the ultimate role models for our children. They were free of jealousy and arrogance and rejoiced in each other's attributes and success, as we see that Manasseh did not complain that Ephraim, the younger brother, was mentioned first and received the blessing of the right hand.

Shabbos Chazak

The Shabbos on which we conclude the reading of the portions of the Book of Genesis, the first of the Five Books of the Torah, is referred to as *Shabbos Chazak* – the Sabbath of Strength. This is because, as we conclude the Book of Genesis, the entire congregation rises and proclaims, "*Chazak, Chazak, V'Nis'chazeik* – Be Strong! Be Strong! And may we be strengthened!" We ask the Almighty to give us the strength to continue with and succeed in our Torah studies.

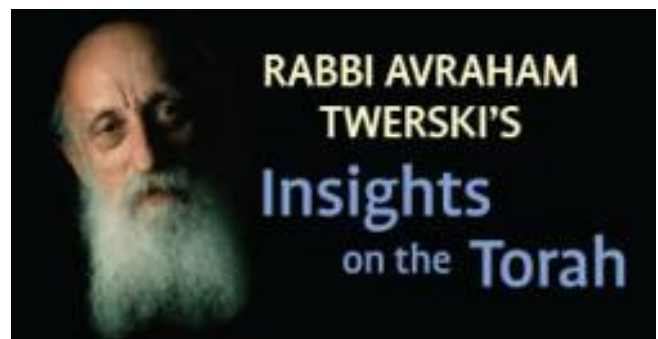
At first glance it may appear strange that we extend wishes for strength at this time; one might think that it should really be at the commencement of our undertaking that we do so. However, beginnings are always marked by enthusiasm and zeal. The trick is to retain that same level of enthusiasm at the end. Therefore, upon concluding the Book of Genesis, we make a commitment to continue our Torah studies with strength and devotion and pray that this conclusion be a steppingstone for further growth and development.

Additionally, we learn that that which is first is always definitive; since this is the first time that we recite "*Chazak*," it behooves us to ask what special lesson or teaching we can derive from it. This is the *parashah* in which the death of the Patriarch Jacob is announced, but, strangely enough, instead of saying that Jacob died, the Torah states, "*Vayechi Yaakov*," which, literally translated, means, "And Jacob lives." But how can that be? Isn't this a contradiction?

Our Sages teach us that as long as the children, the descendants of Jacob, keep his teachings

alive, as long as we live by them, "Jacob did not die – rather, Jacob lives!" *And that is the true meaning of "Chazak – Be strong."* We must find strength in the knowledge that our Patriarchs and Matriarchs – our *zeides* and *bubbies* – live on in us. We need only follow in their footsteps.

1. Ibid. 48:20.



The Blessing of Fulfilling One's Potential

Jacob called for his sons and said, "Assemble yourselves ... Gather yourselves and listen, O sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father" (49:1-2) This is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them, each according to his appropriate blessing (49:28)

The Talmud says that the only vessel that can contain blessings is shalom (peace). Prior to giving them his blessings, Jacob twice indicated the importance of togetherness: assemble and gather. Fragmentation and divisiveness can undo even the greatest blessings.

It is significant that in blessing them, Jacob referred to both his names, Jacob and Israel. He

was named Jacob (Yaakov) because when he was born he held onto the heel (*ekev*) of Esau. The name, Jacob, thus represents the person at birth, the genetic endowments and the potential. The name, Israel, was given to him after he wrestled with an angel and triumphed; Israel meaning, “You have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome” (Genesis 32:29). Israel, therefore, represents Jacob's achievements, his ability to be master over both human and superhuman forces.

It is of interest that we do not find manifest blessings in Jacob's words. He seems, rather, to be describing the character traits of each of his sons. The Torah tells us that indeed, “He blessed them, each according to his appropriate blessing.”

Jacob knew his children. He instructed them to each fulfill his unique potential, maximizing the particular talents, skills and character strengths with which he was created. This is the greatest blessing of all. Jacob did not bless them with wealth or other external acquisitions. The latter may not be a blessing at all. The true blessing is for a person to become everything that he can be.

This is an important teaching for parents. Sometimes parents set their minds on what they would like their child to be, not taking into consideration the child's interests and abilities. All parents want the best for their child. However, they may think they know what is best for the child, whereas what they really desire is that the child fulfill their aspirations for him. The patriarch teaches us that we must get to know our children and help them develop and realize their own unique potential.

In these few words, Jacob conveyed the essence of blessings: brotherhood, working at achievement (Israel) and developing one's innate endowment to its fullest (Jacob).

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