

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



VAYCHI

## The Left-Handed Compliment

For die hard fans, American baseball is a year round enterprise. We are now engaged in the 'off season', when teams work hard to make up their roster of players for the upcoming season. My hometown team, the Boston Red Sox, have announced that they were interested in getting 'left-handed pitching' (often called 'southpaws' because of the historical orientation of baseball parks during the era before night games) and 'right-handed batting'. I love those kinds of announcements, because I'm left-handed and am accustomed to feeling oppressed by our right-handed world. But, at least, in baseball lefties have a niche.

But historically, lefties have had it rough. The Latin word for 'left' is 'sinister'. In French, we're just awkward or 'gauche'. See what we have had to put up with through the ages. And that doesn't even mention scissors which are designed for righties. Oh, the indignities of my childhood!

Well, this week's Torah reading just adds fuel to the fire of lefty persecution.

When Ya'akov Avinu calls in Yosef with his sons, Efrayim and Menashe, for their blessings, Yosef puts the older Menashe on his father's right-hand side. But Ya'akov purposefully places his left hand on his head. Yosef is outraged (literally 'it was evil in his eyes'- B'reishit 48:17). He was so scandalized that he tried to move his father's hands!

Ya'akov would have none of that! He not only confirms the superiority of the right side, but announces that, indeed, the younger Efrayim would have a more distinguished destiny than the elder sib: But his younger sibling will become greater than he! (verse 19).

Before we discuss the superiority of the blessing for Efrayim, and its implications about the dominance of the right hand, I am happy to mention a number of Rabbinic authorities who show some respect for the left side of things.

The Kli Yakar points out that the heart is on the left side (well, at least we feel the beating more strongly on the left, the heart is really in the middle), and that represents the attribute of intelligence. So, Yosef, at least initially, saw some merit in placing the left hand on the older son. The Mei Shilo'ach suggests that the left side is GEVURA (strength) and, therefore, Yosef didn't realize that the more powerful blessing was really

being given to the younger son until Ya'akov started reciting the actual blessings. Then Yosef objected.

At this point, Ya'akov finally announces: But the younger brother shall be greater than he! Ya'akov is not to be deterred, because he has seen prophetically that Efrayim shall be the more powerful tribe. Yehoshua shall come from Efrayim, and Efrayim will sire the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Yisrael, and will rule from about 940-729<sup>BCE</sup>.

Then Ya'akov looks proudly at his two grandsons, and declares: (In time to come), Yisrael will use you as a blessing. They will state (to their children): May God make you like Efrayim and Menashe!

That had to be a NACHAS moment for Yosef. But what does it mean?

Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch famously explained: Jewish parents have prayed that their children withstand the temptations of exile, and keep a strong Jewish identity... Despite great odds, they grew up in Egypt and maintained adherence to Torah ideals and practice. Which is why we bless our children to be like them, expressing our hope for proud Jewish children - and grandchildren.

As beautiful as that thought is, it is not the most common approach. Most commentaries prefer to emphasize the true love bond between

them. They are the first Jewish children who do not fight. It's very sad to recall the strife between Yitzchak and Yishmael, Ya'akov and Eisav, Yosef and everybody else. Also, the sons of Leah fought with the children of the maidservants.

Sadly, the history of sibling rivalry didn't start with the children of the Patriarchs. The first pair of brothers were also the first victim and perpetrator in humankind's initial homicide. The book of B'reishit is a catalog of fraternal hatred. Freud based modern psychology on the strife between generations (Oedipus and Electra Complexes). The book of B'reishit sees the essential human tension as within each generation; namely, sibling rivalry.

Since my sister and I never had any friction whatsoever (Ha!) I had to go to a website ([thetherapistparent.com](http://thetherapistparent.com)) to find out about sibling rivalry. Point #1: It is inevitable! And the leading cause? Jealousy. Or as they say it: One of the main causes of sibling rivalry is due to children wanting their parent's attention and being jealous when the other child seems to be getting more attention.

What is the antidote for jealousy? I believe strongly that it is: And you shall love your fellow like yourself (Vayikra 19:18). When you truly love the other, in this case one's sibling, you are happy for their good fortune

and advancement. How can I be jealous when I am so proud of my beloved sib?

What a wonderful idea! But who can possibly live up to that spiritual level? Well, Menashe!

It seems that Ya'akov recognized this. This explains why, when Ya'akov blessed Efrayim and Menashe, he switched his hands, blessing Efrayim before Menashe. Ya'akov wished to emphasize there was no rivalry between these brothers. It is with this thought that parents bless their children today. For there is no greater blessing than peace among siblings.

So, the hero of our episode is Menashe! He defeated the green-eyed monster. His great act of righteousness is a capstone to all the stories of B'reishit. He proudly accepted the blessing of the left hand.

I'm going to end with the words of Rachel Goldberg-Polen (mother of Hersch HY"D) to a UN meeting in Geneva on this parsha last year: Why Ephraim and Menashe? Because, they are the first brothers since the Creation of the world who love each other. Unlike Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers who are all filled with hate, violence, and jealousy - Ephraim and Menashe choose a different path. Even as we read in Vaychi, when

Jacob places his right hand (the birthright blessing) on Ephraim, the younger, and his left hand (the inferior blessing) on Menashe, the older, they choose not to give in to the inter-generational hate around blessings and birthrights that had destroyed their family for generations. They break the cycle of hate.

May God break the cycle of hate throughout the world! 🙏