

***Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World**

Parashat Vayechi, Genesis, Chapters 47–50 | December 30, 2023

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

The Nation of Grandparents and Grandchildren

Rembrandt's most Jewish painting is seen by few Jews today. It hangs in Kassel, Germany, and depicts one the last scenes of Jacob's life: a loving grandfather bestowing blessings on the sons of his own son Joseph:



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The painting is not only beautiful, but also an embodiment of Rembrandt's biblical interpretation, providing a prism through which to gain a perspective on our *parashah*. For more than any other weekly reading, this week's is not only about family, but also about the bond between grandparents and grandchildren; indeed, it provides us with the only scenes of grandparents and grandchildren in the entire Hebrew Bible—one at the beginning and one at the end—thereby bracketing all we read within. Rembrandt's unique way of seeing a story will allow us to understand how this familial bond is also spiritual and political, lying at the very heart of Jewish national existence.

As our reading begins, Joseph, the vizier of Egypt, is summoned to his ailing father's bed, bringing with him his own children. At this point they are described in order of age:

And he took his two sons with him, Menasseh and Ephraim. (Genesis 48:1)

Jacob implores his son Joseph to swear that he, the patriarch, will be borne to his familial burial plot in Canaan following his passing. After Joseph so swears, Jacob then turns to the sons of Joseph, explaining that eventually, in the Holy Land, the descendants of each will be considered a tribe unto itself, receiving its own portion of land. Joseph, through his children, will thus suddenly become father to two tribes. Jacob puts it this way:

Ephraim and Menasseh will be to me as Reuben and Simeon. (Genesis 48:5)

We must note that Jacob has suddenly switched the names of his grandchildren, giving precedence to the younger, Ephraim. Jacob then goes on to bemoan the fact that Joseph's mother, Rachel, had died mid-journey, and had been buried on the side of the road, rather than in the familial plot. Now, he explains, tribal portions will be accorded to Joseph's children as if they were Jacob's own; this means, as some commentators understand, that the very land of Israel will proclaim Jacob's love for Rachel. Then the grandfather turns to his grandchildren, and the scene depicted by Rembrandt unfolds:

Bring them to me that I may bless them. (Genesis 48:9)

As Menasseh and Ephraim are brought before their grandfather, the wizened Jacob does not only place his hands on their heads to bless them; he also implies that there are national implications to this blessing. Forever, Jacob insists, the moment will be modeled in the Israelite future, so that Jewish fathers will say to their own sons:

May God make you as Ephraim and as Menasseh. (Genesis 48:20)

And thus so many fathers use these same words as they bestow blessings today. This may initially seem odd. Why does Jacob select these two boys as role models? What do we even know about them? Why not bless boys in the future that they imitate Moses, or Abraham?

The answer begins with another important element in the story. Jacob, in his wording, deliberately places the younger child—Ephraim—first, and likewise places his right hand on the younger grandson's head. Joseph immediately protests, saying, "Not so, my father!" (Genesis 48:18).



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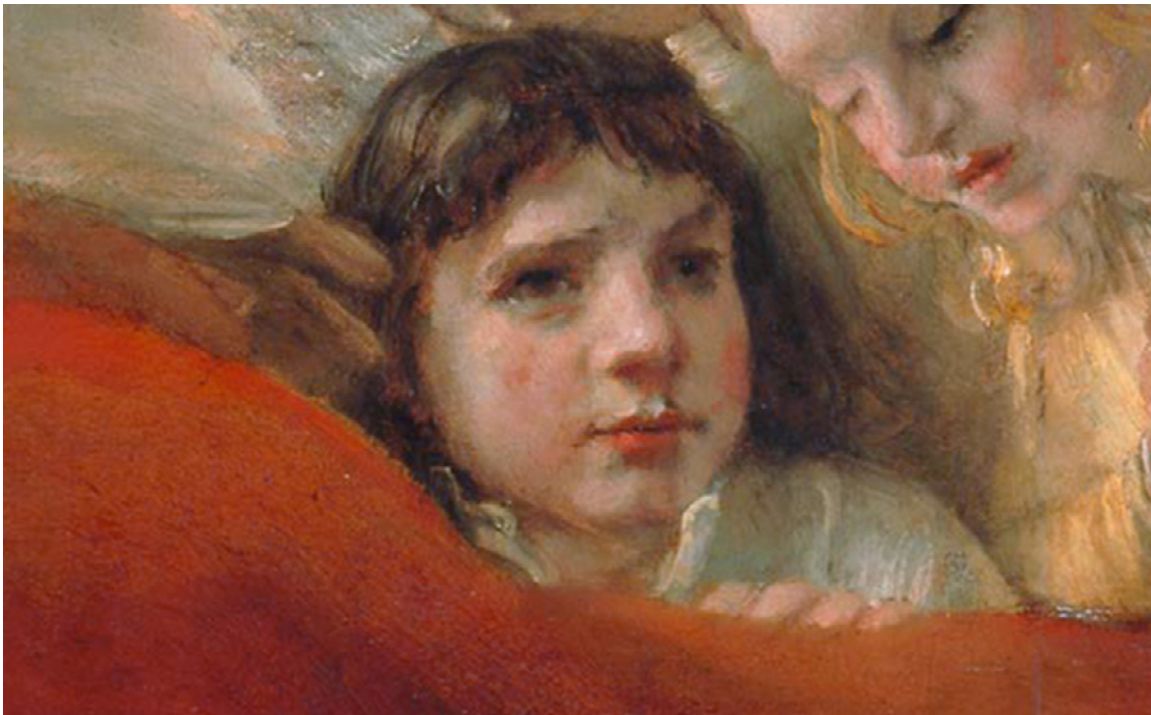
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We instinctively understand Joseph's shock; after all, so much of his own suffering was the result of the elevation of a younger child ahead of senior siblings. But Jacob responds, speaking of Menasseh:

I know, my son, I know; he too will be a people, and will also be great; however his younger brother will be greater than he. (Genesis 48:19)

Ephraim, the ancestor of Joshua, will be second only to Judah in tribal political importance, and his greatness cannot be denied, even as Menasseh's own potential is celebrated and sanctified.

It is this that Rembrandt seeks to emphasize. Ephraim—the blonde child in the painting, probably modeled on the artist's own son—is elevated by receiving Jacob's right hand, a sign of the profound potential within him. But Rembrandt wants to show that Jacob is also highlighting how Menasseh too is cherished, dedicated, sanctified, and loved—and therefore he has Jacob's hand not, as in the text, placed on top of the head, but rather caressing Menasseh's face:



The story reflects both recognition of particular potential and an embrace of each child. Interestingly, there seems to have been a tradition among some Jews to bless even a single child using only one hand, as Jacob placed a single hand on each child before him. Thus we have Moritz Oppenheim's "*Der Segen des Rabbi*," "The Rabbi's Blessing," where the artist depicts his own rabbi in the town of Hanau, Tobias Sondheimer, blessing his grandchild as Jacob blessed his own grandchildren:



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This rabbinic grandfather thus recalled the original grandfather in Egypt, using one hand to highlight how Jacob guided each hand separately to each child, reminding us that the tale of Jacob and his grandchildren is about drawing out and dedicating the potential of every child.

For Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, this is the reason Jacob designates his grandchildren as role models for future blessings. Every child is different, and Menasseh and Ephraim were different from one another. But each grew up to devote his respective talents to the service of God and his people—and that, ultimately, is what we all wish from future generations.

The covenantal unity of the scene is meant to be contrasted with previous scriptural stories. The entire saga of Jacob's trouble-ridden life is linked to the elevating and blessing of one child to the exclusion of the other. It began with Jacob's deception of his father, thereby ensuring that the blessings intended for Esau would



be bestowed upon him instead. As I argued in our discussion of *Toldot*, I believe Jacob's actions, taken at the insistence of Rebecca, to have been necessary. But what ended up happening was tragic nevertheless: it turned brother against brother and ensured that Jacob would never truly be with his parents again. Later, within his own family, Jacob's explicit favoritism for Joseph inspired the enmity of his other children. Here, in Egypt, Jacob informs Joseph that as part of a family that will form and father a people, he and his offspring must find a way to recognize greatness while at the same time sanctifying and dedicating the talents of each person.

Thus Jacob's blessing of his grandchildren together, side by side, is meant to be contrasted with all that has preceded it. After an entire book of Genesis, replete from beginning to end with stories of sibling rivalry—from Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers—after story upon story of havoc wreaked upon family life by envy among brothers, here brothers are suddenly united in blessing without denying the uniqueness of each.

We can therefore see how this story sets the stage for what is to follow, as all of Jacob's children gather around his deathbed; some are praised, some are criticized, but the potential and destiny of each is described, and all are covenantally connected. There is no Ishmael or Esau who is set apart, and it is this, as Jacob concludes his last words, that Scripture seeks to emphasize:

All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in all, and this is what their father spoke to them as he blessed them; each according to his blessing were they blessed. (Genesis 49:28)

At this moment, every son of Jacob finds a future role. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch puts it:

When the sons of Jacob gathered to hear their father's blessing and he visualized in them the future tribes of Israel, he saw not only *kobanim* and teachers of the law. . . . Standing before his eyes was the whole nation, with all its manifold characteristics and diverse ways of development, . . . and he blessed all of them, each according to his own special qualities.

This, as Rabbi Hirsch notes, is fundamentally different from the story of Jacob's own brother, who was denied a future in Israel's covenant. It is all the more striking, then, that Rembrandt, in depicting Ephraim and Menasseh, seeks to contrast the scene with what occurred with Jacob and Esau. Rembrandt, perhaps inspired by Jewish texts, places Joseph's wife Asenath in the tale, as she watches blessings bestowed on her children.



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The artist thus establishes a link to an earlier story where a mother and father were involved in blessings bestowed on children. But Asenath, in contrast to Rebecca, did not need to deceive Jacob as Isaac was himself deceived. Here, both children are blessed. As Simon Schama writes:

Rembrandt, with his instinctive love of the interweavings and cross-stitchings among different but related Scriptures, has included Asenath as a deliberate reminder of an earlier story, related in Genesis 27, when the blind Isaac is deceived by Rebecca into supposing that he was bestowing his blessing on his older son Esau.

And Schama notes something else that is striking:

Rembrandt has given the dying Jacob a shawl of animal skin wrapped around his neck and falling down his back as a further reminder of the earlier story.



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Rembrandt thus reminds us of Jacob placing goatskin on himself to trick Isaac, and thereby highlights here, with Jacob's grandchildren, the unusual unity in the Abrahamic family that has not existed until this point.

For us, as the war in Israel goes on, and as our sense of Jewish unity still stands at this moment as a marked contrast to the fractiousness that existed only mere months ago, we can suddenly understand why Jacob selects Ephraim and Menasseh as models of blessing for the national future. Together at Jacob's bedside, they embody a people in which different talents are welcome, but in which greatness is recognized without unity being disturbed, without the division that marked Abraham's family throughout the rest of this biblical book.

But there is another reason why we, as members of a people, would bless our children by remembering Ephraim and Menasseh, and it lies in the fact that this is one of only two scenes in all of Scripture where we see a bond that transcends more than one generation, where grandfather and grandchildren are joined. The moment thus captures the transmission of Israelite identity beyond one generation, and it therefore takes on national importance.

It is noteworthy that the Jewish people in the Bible are named not after the patriarchs Abraham, or Isaac, but rather only after the third of the patriarchs, whose two names became synonymous with the nation that descended from him: Jacob and Israel. In discussing this aspect of Jewish identity, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik points out that Jacob is also the patriarch commonly referred to by the Midrash as *zaken*, the elder, despite the fact that Abraham and Isaac lived longer. It is Jacob, Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, who is, for Jewish tradition, the archetypal biblical grandfather. Abraham and Isaac are never shown interacting with their grandchildren; it is Jacob, rather than those who came before him, who emerges as the ultimate embodiment of immortality and continuity.

Jacob, Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote,

leapt over the gulf of generations and transmitted the great *m'sorah* [tradition] of Abraham directly to Ephraim and Menasseh. Despite the discrepancy of years, the *zaken*, carrier of the old tradition, succeeded. How appropriate, therefore, that our people is called Israel or Jacob, for it was he who created the Jewish community which ensures Jewish continuity.

The links between generations lie at the heart of our national identity. That this differentiates Israel from Egypt can be discerned in what follows in our reading. Joseph requests that he journey to Canaan to bury his father. At Pharaoh's insistence, Joseph's family is accompanied by a royal retinue, one so large that the local Canaanites mistake the funeral for an Egyptian one:

And the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw, . . . and they said, it is a great mourning unto Egypt.
(Genesis 50:11)

These Egyptians intruded on the Israelite nature of the event; it would seem that Pharaoh sent them in order to ensure that Joseph came back to the court. We can therefore understand another odd aspect of the funeral: whereas a multitude of Egyptians journeyed to Canaan, certain Israelites stayed behind.

Only their children and flocks and cattle were left in the land of Goshen. (Genesis 50:8)



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The young Israelite grandchildren, in other words, were denied the ability to join the funeral procession, to mark a covenantal moment in Hebron at the cave of Machpelah. The funeral was organized by the order of Pharaoh, and it was therefore in many ways an Egyptian affair. But years later, another Israelite stood before Pharaoh, and declared that when next the chosen people departed Egypt, this time for good, it would not be as before. This time, generations would join:

And Moses said: with our old and with our young will we go, with our sons and daughters, with our flocks and cattle will we go, for it is a festival of the Lord for us. (Exodus 10:9)

Israelites cannot mark covenantal moments without joining generations.

We are now better able to understand why Jews bless members of the next generation by praying that they imitate Ephraim and Menasseh. What they mean is that these children should embody an ability to connect with generations before our own: that they have a relationship with Jacob, just as Ephraim and Menasseh connected with a patriarch that preceded them by so many years.

The moral and political health of a society lies in its ability to connect with its past. Abraham Lincoln, as a young man, famously worried whether the lessons of the American Revolution would be remembered after those who witnessed it passed away:

The consequence was, that of those scenes, in the form of a husband, a father, a son or brother, a living history was to be found in every family—a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related—a history, too, that could be read and understood alike by all, the wise and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned. But those histories are gone. They can be read no more forever. They were a fortress of strength; but, what invading foeman could never do, the silent artillery of time has done; the leveling of its walls. They are gone.

For America to endure, Lincoln reflected, it must be able to connect with the founding generation even when only the grandchildren of that generation still live.

It is this ability to bridge generations that lies at the heart of Jewish endurance. In a famous talmudic tale, Rabbi Akiva, witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem, predicted the Jewish return by citing Zechariah:

Thus saith the Lord of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem. . . . And the streets shall be full of boys and girls playing the streets thereof. (Zechariah 8:4–5)

There were so many prophecies that Rabbi Akiva could have cited; but the one he chose was so seemingly simple, and yet sublime: that one day grandparents and grandchildren will sit together in the streets of Jerusalem, as Jacob sat with his grandchildren. The connection of Jewish generations ultimately outlasted Rome, as it has every other empire that followed.



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We can therefore appreciate how the Torah portion that began with one of the only two scenes in the Hebrew Bible of grandparents with grandchildren concludes with the other one, describing the joy that Joseph experienced from his family:

And Joseph saw from Ephraim a third generation; and also Machir the son of Menasseh grew up on Joseph's knees. (Genesis 50:23)

Genesis comes to a close highlighting the bond between generations, as if to suggest that this bond will allow Israel to endure until the Exodus occurs.

It is a strange fact of history that many of Rembrandt's biblical paintings that were inspired by his encounters with Jews now hang in Germany. This means that today few Jews see this scene that is so vividly re-enacted by Jewish parents in their own homes. But I like to think that this painting may have been seen by Kassel's most famous Jew, Franz Rosensweig, who in the first part of the 20th century had planned to convert to Christianity, and then, on a whim, attended a Yom Kippur service. He suddenly seemed to have heard his ancestors calling out to him during the *Kol Nidrei* prayer; connecting with the spirit of generations that had lived before, he returned to Judaism, and went on to write *The Star of Redemption*, one of the most important

modern works of Jewish thought. It is a nation that joins generations together that comes into being as Genesis comes to a close; and it is such a nation that will endure forever.

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Additional Resources

Abraham Lincoln's Lyceum Address, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," January 27, 1838. [Click here to read.](#)

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