

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayechi)

There are few things as painful as the desire to give birth when faced with the inability to do so. Countless treatments, endless tears, hopes dashed and dreams unrealized; even with all that modern medicine has to offer, sometimes, for reasons we will never understand, a woman, no matter how hard she tries never succeeds in becoming pregnant... But I once met a woman who took all that to an entirely different level...

We were halfway through the afternoon Mincha service when one of our students came over to me and clearly wanted to ask me something. Normally I don't speak until the service is over, having learned there are very few things in life that cannot wait five minutes. But something suggested this was an exception to the rule. As it turned out, there was a woman in the back of our Beit Midrash who had walked in and started wailing; literally. She was actually standing at the entrance to the Beit Midrash (study hall where we study and pray) blocking the passage-way, and she was wailing; her eyes were closed and tears were streaming down her face.

Now, in The Old City every once in a while a troubled soul, perhaps on a spiritual journey, will walk in off the street, and sometimes these individuals need therapy more than Jewish study, but something told me this woman was different so I told the students to let her be and not disturb her.

After a time, she took three steps back and opened her eyes, and I realized she had probably been praying. So, I asked her if I could help and she responded by asking me if I would keep her in my prayers. Still not quite sure whether this woman needed prayers or therapy, I noticed she was quite pregnant and asked her Hebrew name so I could keep her in my prayers for a safe, easy and healthy birth. At which point her eyes brimmed over with tears and she began to cry, and then to sob. As it turned out, she was indeed pregnant; for the fifth time. Each time, she had carried her baby almost to term and lost the baby in the last few months of pregnancy. This despite the bedrest she had taken and following all of the medical advice she had received. She had spent four months in bed, literally during her fourth pregnancy, to no avail. So this time, ignoring her doctor's advice she had gone a different route and was in Jerusalem's Old City praying...

Simply incredible; here was a woman who had lost a baby four times, yet she absolutely refused to give up; it was as inspiring as it was painful, and I could not imagine that I would have had the strength to have carried on. She told me she was spending most of her day in bed, but she had decided (I suspect on the advice of a spiritual advisor or a kabbalist) to come to the Old City every day for 40 days...

Needless to say, I took her name and promised I would keep her in my prayers and share her name with others who would do the same. Indeed, many of us kept her in our prayers until, a few months later (about a month after her due date) someone came by the yeshiva with a message that she had given birth to a healthy baby girl. I had no way of contacting her, but that message obviously made my day; not all stories have such endings ...

This week as we read the portion of *Vayechi* which concludes the book of *Bereishit* (Genesis) we will read of the death of Yaakov and the process whereby he puts his affairs in order and bids farewell to his children. There is fascinating question regarding the blessing he gives to Yosef or, more accurately, his two sons Menashe and Ephraim:

“May He (Hashem) bless the lads, and let them be called by my name, and may they increase in the land many-fold (like fish).” (Bereishit 48:5)

This is the great blessing given for the sons of Yosef; Deemed so special they merit being raised to the level of Tribes: they should... increase?

All of Yaakov’s sons it seems, are blessed according to their specific character traits and talents. Yehuda is blessed with royalty and Levi and Shimon are challenged due to their anger, whilst Zevulun will ply the seas with his merchant ships, each according to his strengths and personality. So why are the blessing of Menashe and Ephraim so... ordinary?

And why is having many offspring such a blessing? Since when is Judaism focused on how *many* we are, instead of *who* we are?

Interestingly, this is not the first time we find the Torah suggesting the value of a larger quantity of descendants: In fact, when Yosef is named by his mother Rachel she says:

“May Hashem add (Yosef) to me another son” (ibid. 30:24)

Yosef’s very name is about having more children! And when Yaakov gives Yosef his own blessing passing along the covenantal blessing he received from his own father Yitzchak, he says:

“Behold! I will make you fruitful and numerous, you will become a congregation of nations, and I will give your offspring this land as an eternal possession.” (ibid. 48:4)

Why do we have to be many, to be blessed and to inherit the land? Why is multiplying so important? And how, for that matter, is it connected to inheriting the land?

Interestingly, when Yaakov promises that Ephraim and Menashe will be tribal equals, Rashi says it means they will also inherit a portion of the land (of Israel):

“Now, the two sons who were born to you in Egypt before I came here shall be considered as mine. Ephraim and Menashe shall be just like Reuven and Shimon to me.” (ibid. 48:5)

Rashi explains (ibid.) that Yosef’s sons will have the status of tribes just like Yosef’s brothers: *“...they will each take a portion of the land”* (i.e. Israel).

What does being *many* and reproducing in multitudes have to do with inheriting the land, and why is it so important?

In fact, in the declaration a Jew makes (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 26: 5, as quoted in the Passover *Haggadah*) when bringing the first fruits up to the Temple we say:

*“...and they (the Jewish people) became there (in Egyptian servitude) great...and **numerous.**”*

Why was it so important for us to become *numerous*? And what did this have to do with the promise to inherit the land (or a portion thereof) of Israel, especially as Yaakov is giving this blessing just as the Jews are about to begin a long torturous journey into their first real exile?!

The closing of the book of *Bereishit* (Genesis) will see Yaakov, Yosef and all of their generation die off, as the Jewish people enter their darkest period: they will descend into the hell of Egyptian servitude. And specifically here Yaakov promises portions in the land of Israel! And to whom does he promise this? To Menashe and Ephraim: who have never even seen the land of Israel? (Though possibly they will briefly visit Israel to see Yaakov buried...).

Perhaps there is a clue to a possible understanding: When Yaakov first tells Yosef that his sons will receive a special blessing he says:

“And now, both your sons who were born to you in Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, will be mine...” (ibid. 48:5)

Why does Yaakov mention that they were born in Egypt before he got there? What does having any children really mean? Who doesn't want to have children? Someone who has given up hope.

A few years ago, Mrs. Marlit Wendell, who had survived the Holocaust, came to Orayta to share her story with us on Yom Ha'Shoah (Holocaust Memorial Day).

Eventually she and most of her family were sent to Auschwitz. She ended up with her mother and older sister, while her two brothers were obviously sent to the men's camp. Her older brother swore he would stick with their younger brother who was only seven years old

But one day in 1942, the older brother Eddie got really sick and could not get up, so they moved him to the infirmary. Which was good as he did not have to go out to work, but dangerous as there were barely rations, and eventually whoever was there for a week was selected and sent to the gas. After a few days he managed to get some strength back; cut his finger to make his cheeks red with the blood and get back to his bunk; but when he got back his brother was gone; he had been taken in a selection and was murdered.

Eddie survived the Holocaust, but he never got over it; never forgave himself for 'abandoning' his younger brother. After the war he eventually married but refused to have children; he would not bring children into such a cruel world....

Having children is about hope; it's about belief in a better future. If there was ever a person who should have lost hope it was Yosef. Abandoned by his family, all alone, thrown in a pit, it is absolutely amazing that he was able eventually to reclaim his life, marry and have children. But even if he did not lose faith in life, one might certainly have expected him to lose faith in G-d, and in Judaism. Yet Yosef continues to believe that Hashem (G-d) runs the world and is the hand that directs the events and dreams he is witnessing. Most incredible is that he names his son Ephraim:

“...because G-d has made me fruitful (hiphrani) in the land of my suffering.” (ibid. 41:52)

So Yaakov points out that Yosef succeeded in raising these two boys even in Egypt and even before Yaakov came to them; he never gave up believing in a better future. Which makes sense: because Yosef's mother Rachel is the one buried by the roadside specifically so that one day (Rashi ibid. 48:7 quoting the *Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah*) she could pray for the Jewish people because Rachel represents the personality who **never gave up hope**.

That, in the end is how Yaakov can promise Menashe and Ephraim portions in the land of Israel, even now, in Egypt, as they are about to enter one of the darkest periods in Jewish history. Because the secret to the survival of the Jewish people is that we never gave up hope; we never stopped believing that one day we would come home. We never stopped daring to bring children into the world no matter how dark it seemed, because we always knew that one day, somehow, Hashem would bring us home.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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