

September 10 - Gen. 48:1-22 - Rosh Hashanah - Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh

Rosh Hashanah!

Torah Reading: Genesis 48:1-22 - Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh

Psalm 39

Haftorah - (1) 2 Kings 13:14-23

Genesis 48:3-4 - “And Jacob said unto Joseph, God Almighty appeared unto me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, And said unto me, Behold, I will make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, and I will make of thee a multitude of people; and will give this land to thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession.”

Rashi - Although he said to me, “A nation and a congregation of nations [shall come into existence from you]” (**Gen 35:11**) [meaning three nations], by “a nation,” He promised me [the birth of] Benjamin. “A congregation of nations” means two in addition to Benjamin, but no other son was born to me. Thus I learned that one of my tribes was destined to be divided [in two]. So now, I am giving you that gift. — [from Pesikta Rabbathi ch. 3]

Genesis 48:5 - “... Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuben and Simeon.”

Rashi - They are counted with the rest of my sons, to take a share in the land, each one exactly as each [of my other sons]. — [from Baba Bathra 122b-123a]

Genesis 48:6 - “And thy issue, which thou begetteth after them, shall be thine, and shall be called after the name of their brethren in their inheritance.”

Rashi - But your children: If you have any more [children], they will not be counted among my sons, but will be included among the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, and they will not have a [separate] name like [each of] the [other] tribes as regards the inheritance. ... only these (Ephraim and Manasseh) were called tribes.

A Link to Rosh Hashanah

Genesis 48:7 - “And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan in the way, when yet there was but a little way to come unto Ephrath: and I buried her there in the way of Ephrath; the same is Bethlehem.”

This thought of Jacob comes out of nowhere, seemingly.

Rashi explains - Although I burden you to take me to be buried in the land of Canaan, and I did not do so to your mother, for she died close to Bethlehem. — [from Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel]

Also, the fact of her death brings guilt to Jacob’s heart as he recalls how he cursed the unknown thief of the Teraphim (**Genesis 31:32**), which may have led to her death.

After Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob regrets not taking Rachel's body back to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron with the other patriarchs and matriarchs. He did not even take her to nearby Bethlehem, which would have been in the inhabited area of the Promised Land.

Rashi - I know that you hold it against me; but you should know that I buried her there by divine command, so that she would be of assistance to her children. When Nebuzaradan exiles them (the Israelites), and they pass by there, Rachel will emerge from her grave and weep and beg mercy for them, as it is said: "A voice is heard on high, [lamentation, bitter weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children]" (**Jer. 31:14**). And the Holy One, blessed be He, answers her, "'There is reward for your work,' says the Lord, ... 'and the children shall return to their own border'" (ibid. verses 15, 16) (Pesikta Rabbathi ch. 3).

Rachel actually is comforted in the rest of the passage with the promise of a regathering of both Israel and Judah. It's clear that this is something not fully accomplished by the return of the exiles (in Jesus' day the exile and diaspora was still considered to be ongoing) but is for the Days of Messiah, because the New Covenant is part of the promise:

Jeremiah 31:33 - "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people."

The New Testament writers saw this fulfillment in the events around the birth of Jesus and the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. Christ would be the comfort for both tragedies.

After the angel told Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt with their son, Matthew says this was fulfillment of the scripture. By fulfillment he means "completion, perfection":

Hosea 11:1 (NET) - "When Israel was a young man, I loved him like a son, and I summoned my son out of Egypt. But the more I summoned them, the farther they departed from me. They sacrificed to the Baal idols and burned incense to images."

The first Israel/son turned to idolatry after leaving Egypt. Jesus would retrace their steps and perfect this, complete his course with sinless obedience to the Father.

Matthew 2:16-18 - "Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."

The Tears of Rachel

Rachel was uniquely positioned to intercede for Israel. Her burial away from Machpelah made her sort of an “exile” too. And if their sin was idolatry (a word that in Hebrew can also mean “rival wife”), then she points to her years of faithfulness to Jacob, enduring a “rival wife” in Leah and the handmaids. “I am flesh and blood, while you are the compassionate King - how much more merciful should you be to them? And God answers, “There is a reward for your labor.” - Eikhah Rabbah

The remembrance of Rachel’s death, added to his guilt about her burial, momentarily paralyzes Jacob. (See ‘The Beginning of Desire,’ pg. 370-371)

“Rachel died, to my sorrow (or “upon me). Some sources explain that their love was so great, Jacob “died” when she died, in the same way he figuratively “died” when Joseph’s bloody coat was brought to him. He is at a loss for words, let alone a blessing.

This leads to his momentary confusion and “drawing a blank”:

Genesis 48:8 - “And Israel beheld Joseph's sons, and said, Who are these?”

The Crossed-Handed Blessing

This incident recalls the comparison with Jacob and Esau, the elder would serve the younger, the confusion of Isaac’s blessing of Jacob. Again, we see Paul’s insight on the resurrection: “The spiritual was not first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven.” (1 Corinthians 15:46-47).

Rashi explains: Then Israel saw Joseph’s sons: He attempted to bless them, but the Shechinah withdrew from him because of Jeroboam and Ahab, who were destined to be born from Ephraim, and Jehu and his sons, [who were destined to be born] from Manasseh. — [from Tanchuma Vayechi 6] [Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, and Ahab the son of Omri were notorious idolaters.]

Genesis 48:9 - “And Joseph said unto his father, They are my sons, whom God hath given me in this place. And he said, Bring them, I pray thee, unto me, and I will bless them.”

Rashi - Joseph showed him (Jacob) the document of betrothal and the kethubah , and Joseph prayed for mercy concerning the matter, and the Holy Spirit [returned and] rested upon him (Jacob). - [from Kallah Rabbathi 3:19]

Genesis 48:10 - “Now the eyes of Israel were dim for age, so that he could not see. And he brought them near unto him; and he kissed them, and embraced them.”

Genesis 48:14 - “And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands wittingly; for Manasseh was the firstborn.”

Rashi - Deliberately and with wisdom, he guided his hands for that purpose, and with knowledge, for he knew [full well] that Manasseh was the firstborn, but he nevertheless did not place his right hand upon him.

Genesis 48:19 - “And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it: he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations.”

Rashi - Of Manasseh: he too will become a people, etc.: for Gideon is destined to be descended from him. [Gideon] through whom the Holy One, blessed be He, will perform a miracle. — [from Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi 6]

Of Ephraim: But his younger brother will be greater than he: for Joshua is destined to be descended from him, [and Joshua is] the one who will distribute the inheritances of the land and teach Torah to Israel. — [from Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi 7]

and his children[’s fame] will fill the nations: The whole world will be filled when his fame and his name are spread when he stops the sun in Gibeon and the moon in the Valley of Ajalon. — [from Abodah Zarah 25a]

But also possibly because Jesus is his namesake (Joshua = Jesus) and the blessing was in the form of a cross.

In Thee Shall Israel Bless

Genesis 48:20 - “And he blessed them that day, saying, In thee shall Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh: and he set Ephraim before Manasseh.”

Sages say that Ephraim was focused solely on spiritual matters. Manasseh was focused on spiritual matters too, while not totally shunning worldly matters. Jacob gave Manasseh the place of honor to be on his right side, while still given Ephraim the status of firstborn blessing. But Israel was to be like both.

Ephraim and Manasseh were the first set of Jewish brothers who did not fight and didn’t exhibit any jealousy or spite, and they were born in an “exile” of sorts in Egypt, so they are representatives of a faith that does not assimilate to the dominant culture.

The Jewish blessing of their sons - “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh” - is done every Sabbath and after Rosh Hashanah - just before the Yom Kippur service.