

Parshat Vayechi
On Raising Children
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Class of 2017

In Parshat VaYechi - we find the following encounter. Yaakov is on his deathbed and his children and grandchildren come near to receive his last blessing.

Yosef - his beloved son - enters the room with his children: Menashe and Ephrayim. As was customary, he placed Menashe - the elder son, the *bechor* - near Yaakov's right hand, signifying a place of honor. However - to Yosef's surprise - Yaakov does something unexpected. He crosses his hands - placing his right hand on **Ephrayim's** head and his left hand on **Menashe's** head.

<p> יד וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-יְמִינוֹ וַיָּשֶׁת עַל-רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם, וְהוּא הַצֶּעִיר, וְאֶת-שְׂמֹאלוֹ, עַל-רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה: שְׂכַל, אֶת-יְדָיו, כִּי מְנַשֶּׁה הַבְּכוֹר. (בראשית מח: יד) </p>	<p> 14 And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Menashe's head, guiding his hands wittingly; for Menashe was the first-born. (Bereishit 48:14) </p>
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Yosef was upset and tried to correct his father. But Yaakov insisted that he knew what he was doing. Not only was Yosef upset - a lot of the commentaries are bothered as well. Hadn't Yaakov learned anything from the trials and travails that Yosef and his other sons went through? Didn't he realize that favoritism does not work?

The Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin, in his commentary on the Torah, gives a beautiful and insightful answer to this conundrum that flips the whole scenario into a positive light.

Imagine yourself in the room and notice where the boys are standing vis-a-vis Yaakov, their grandfather. Yaakov has crossed his arms: Menashe is now standing near Yaakov's left arm and his right leg. Ephrayim is now standing near Yaakov's right arm and left leg.

The Netziv explains: Yaakov's arms (on the top of his body) symbolize the spiritual strengths while his legs (on the bottom of his body) symbolize worldly matters. Yaakov understood that Ephrayim's strengths lay in cerebral and spiritual matters while Menashe's strengths lay in the natural world and "getting things done" on the ground.

This position is strengthened by the Midrash in Breishit Rabba 19 which describes Yosef's right-hand man (הממונה על ביתו) and the one who carried out his word and "got things done" as his son Menashe.

What the Netziv is telling us is that Yaakov knew exactly what he was doing and in fact was very sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of his grandchildren.

We often quote the verse in Mishlei:

<p> ו חֲנֹךְ לְנֶעֱר, עַל-פִּי דַרְכּוֹ-- גַּם כִּי-יִזְקֶינּוּ, לֹא-יִסּוּר מִמֶּנָּה. (כב: ו) </p>	<p> 6 Train a child in his own [particular] path, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it. (22:6) </p>
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We know that Yaakov and Eisav developed in striking contrast to each other; Yaakov was a gentle man who lived by his spirit, while Eisav lived by the sword.

R. Shimshon Rafael Hirsch offers this commentary on Yaakov and his twin brother Eisav. He says that not following this path is the precise reason that the brothers developed so differently: Eisav being uncouth and wild while Yaakov was gentle and studious. R. Hirsch presents their parents - Yitzchak and Rivka - as bringing them up in exactly the same manner, without noticing their vastly different temperaments and needs until their personalities were fully formed.

Chazal perceived this need for individualized recognition as well. The Mishna in Avot 2:10-11 lists the five great disciples of R. Yochanan ben Zakai and then adds the following about each one:

<p>הוא היה מונה שבתן. רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס, בור סוד שאינו מאבד טפה. רבי יהושע בן חנניה, אשרי יולדתו. רבי יוסי הכהן, חסיד. רבי שמעון בן נתנאל, ירא חטא. ורבי אלעזר בן ערך, מעין המתגבר.</p>	<p>He used to recount their praise: R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus - a plastered pit that never loses a drop. R. Yehoshua ben Chanania -- happy is the one who gave birth to him! R. Yosi the Priest is pious. R. Shimon ben Netanel - a man who fears sin. R. Elazar ben Arakh - an ever-flowing fountain.</p>
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R. Yochanan ben Zakai is teaching us how to raise our students (and our children) - by using *focused praise* that speaks to each one's specific strength. And - I would add - where they need encouragement and buttressing.

By the end of Yaakov's life, he has learned to recognize the importance of individuality; he has taken notice of each of his son's positive and negative traits and confers his blessings accordingly:

<p>כח כל-אלה שבטי ישראל, שנים עשר; וזאת אשר-דבר להם אביהם, ויברך אותם--איש אשר בברכתו, ברך אתם. (בראשית מט:כח)</p>	<p>28 All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is it what their father said to them and blessed them; he blessed each of them according to his [particular] blessing. (Bereishit 49:28)</p>
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We would do well to follow Yaakov's path. When raising our children and when teaching children we must ask ourselves about each and every one:

- Where do they shine?
- Where do they need help?
- What inspires them and what pulls them down?

The answers will guide us along the path to reach each heart and touch each precious soul.



Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe served, for many years, as Community Educator and Director of Mercaz Center for Adult Education in Beth Tfiloh synagogue in Baltimore, MD. Her love of tefilla and ritual led her to be an experienced gaba'it and organizer of women's tefilla groups. She has taught many women and girls to leyn and is the voice of the JOFA Megillat Esther App. Rabbanit Bracha interned at United Orthodox Synagogue in Houston, Texas and at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. She participated in chaplaincy programs at New York Presbyterian Hospital and at a maximum security women's prison. Rabbanit Bracha is a 2017 graduate of Yeshivat Maharat, following a long career in hi-tech in Israel. She feels blessed to be following this path which nourishes and fills her soul.