

Preserving our Traditions in the Diaspora



Jacob Blessing Manasseh and Ephraim, Sons of Joseph

Benjamin West, American Painter, 1766-1768

This was derusha, a sermon or homily, delivered by Dr. Fred Leder at Congregation Beth El, Fairfield, Connecticut on Shabbat, December 26, 2015. Dr. Leder is a fellow Columbia University alumnus and former President of the synagogue.



Dr. Fred Leder

At the beginning of this Sedra [Aramaic for “order” synonymous with Parasha or torah portion in English] Vayehi [the final reading from the Book of Genesis . Genesis 47:28 – 50:26] we find Jacob, an old man, on his death bed in Egypt. He asks Joseph, his rich influential son, to bury him with his ancestors in the cave at Machpelah. Jacob is thinking about his life and what will become of his descendants. When Joseph comes to visit his father, Jacob recalls what God promised him:

“I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of people; and I will assign this land (Canaan) to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.”

Now Jacob is wondering how this might all come about.

Jacob tells Joseph that he will adopt Joseph’s sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of their uncles, each to have his own tribe and his own portion in the land, someday. He does this out of love and devotion to Rachel, his

wife who died young and was buried on the road to Ephrata.

Then Jacob looks at the sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, whom he has just adopted and elevated to patriarchs, and he asks Joseph, "Who are these?"

Jacob is neither blind nor senile and surely, he knows who the two boys are. He is perhaps, inquiring about their character. Are these two boys going to carry the traditions of their ancestors back to Canaan? It seems Jacob is wondering, and maybe not so sure.

Tradition has it that the boys answer the question by reciting the Shema for their grandfather.

[The Shema or sh'ma is one of only two fixed prayers in the torah that Jews are obligated to recite daily morning and night:

Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might . And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them. when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.]

Then Jacob blessed them, saying:

The God in whose ways my Fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,

The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day.

The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm.

Bless these lads.

In them may my name be recalled,

And the names of my Fathers Abraham and Isaac,

And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.

By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh

It is our tradition to bless our sons on Friday nights with this very blessing... "God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."

This begs the question why Manasseh and Ephraim?

Ephraim and Manasseh were children of the Diaspora. They were born in Egypt. They dressed like affluent Egyptians. They spoke Egyptian and they had no firsthand knowledge of Canaan. That is why Jacob asked who they are.

Jacob was pleased to find that the sons of Joseph understood the tradition of their father and grandfather and he could see that his dream of being blessed with a multitude of descendants who would one day return to Canaan, was going to happen.

Jacob asks Joseph to see that he is buried at Machpelah in Hebron with his ancestors, and upon his death, he is embalmed in the Egyptian tradition, and carried with a military escort provided by the Pharaoh, to Hebron, to be buried in the cave at Machpelah.

One day Moses and the entire people of Israel would take the bones of Joseph in an ark, to be buried in Canaan. After

Sinai, the people of Israel would carry with them two arks. One containing the ten commandments and one containing the bones of Joseph.

So Joseph and Manasseh and Ephraim laid the groundwork for the continuity of the Jewish people. That is why we invoke the blessing asking that our sons be like Manasseh and Ephraim.

However, life is not so easy, and every grandparent worries about the continuity of his traditions. Especially in the Diaspora where our children function primarily in the gentile world.

In October 2013, The Jewish Telegraphic Agency published a study of American Jewry done by Pew Research, augmented by population data from the Steinhardt Social Research Institute and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. These studies put the number of American Jews at about 6.5 million people. About 35 % of respondents identified as Reform Jews, 30 % claim no denomination, 18 % Conservative and 10% Orthodox.

Overall, 22% of U.S. Jews claim no religion at all. Thirty-two percent of all Jews born after 1980 claim to have no religion, and as you might expect, these people have much less connection to Jewish organizations and are less likely to raise their children Jewish.

The most startling finding is that the intermarriage rate among young Jewish people is 58%, and the number rises to 71% when only the non-Orthodox are considered. This is compared to 17% in 1971, only 44 years ago. Among in-married Jews, however, 96% are raising their children as Jews by religion, compared to 45% among intermarried Jews.

In other words, when a gentile marries a Jew and converts to Judaism there is a very good chance the children will be raised in a Jewish home. Among the general Jewish population, this is a fifty-fifty proposition. What prejudice and anti-

Semitism could not achieve, acceptance in America is achieving, and it is not clear that non-Orthodox Judaism has any future at all in this country.

What are Jewish parents to do, to preserve and protect our Jewish heritage? At the end of the day, I suppose one needs to be fortunate, but clearly, it starts with teaching.

The foundations of a Jewish home are kashruth, Shabbat and the festivals. Learning the history of our people, as well as a strong affinity to Israel also play very important roles.

Children learn by watching.

Does Mother light candles on Friday night and does Father bless his sons and daughters, in the tradition of Jacob?

Do Mother and Father attend Shabbat services on a regular basis? If not, how could anyone expect his children to be synagogue people?

I am old enough to remember the founding of the State of Israel. For me the return of the Jews from the ruins of Europe and the Middle East to reclaim their ancestral land, speaking Hebrew and fighting to maintain their heritage was a very moving experience. It was a miracle in modern times.

I remember the days when it was common knowledge among the gentiles that Jews were cowards, dealmakers who would never fight in an organized military. In 1958, a very well meaning gentile professor at Columbia told me that the one thing Israel did was to prove to the world that Jews could fight.

I am also old enough to remember the Six Day War in detail. When the war broke out on June 5, 1967, Israel maintained radio silence regarding the battle taking place in Sinai. Egypt, on the other hand, trumpeted initial victories claiming to have repulsed the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and to have shot down their planes. Nobody knew these were false claims. That

night and the following night, I attended a small minyan in New Jersey and we prayed for a miracle, fearing that the Jewish state was lost.

On the third day, Israel lifted the embargo on war news and reported that in the first hours of the war they had destroyed the Egyptian Air Force that Israeli armor had reached the Suez Canal, that the IAF was moving to destroy the Jordanian Air Force, and that commando units were moving north to defend Jerusalem. Spirits soared as the first Jewish army in over 1900 years was moving to liberate a divided Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount. When Motti Gur broadcast, "Har ha bayit b'Yadeni" (the Temple Mount is in our hands) the entire world Jewish community was thrilled, even those who did not practice anything.

I mention this now to give some sense of the familial bond we had to our brothers and sisters in Israel at that time and how truly a miracle was performed for all of us in our own lifetime. I do not believe that sense of awe is transmitted to our younger people. Certainly not on our college campuses where BDS movements thrive, even among Jewish kids, and all the prejudices of the world are visited on the Jewish State.

To paraphrase Giulio Meotti, an Italian journalist who writes for *Il Foglio*, in Rome:

No other nation on earth, which since its founding, less than seventy years ago, had to sacrifice 23,000 soldiers.

No other nation on earth lives without recognized borders.

No other nation on earth has a population living under a perpetual emotional strain.

No other nation on earth is constantly threatened to be wiped off the map.

No other nation on earth is threatened by boycotts all over the world.

No other nation on earth wins its wars and then loses the peace.

In no other nation on earth do guests on official visits utter disrespectful and offensive comments.

No other nation on earth provides its own enemy with water, electricity, food, weapons, and medical treatment.

As Charles Krauthammer put it in 2011:

Israel is prepared to give up land, but never again without peace. A final peace. Which is exactly what every Palestinian leader from Haj Amin al-Husseini to Yasser Arafat to Mahmoud Abbas has refused to accept. Which is why, regardless of who is governing Israel, there has never been peace. Territorial disputes are solvable; existential conflicts are not. Land for peace, yes. Land without peace is nothing but an invitation to national suicide.

Beth El has always had a tradition of close support of Israel, not only financially but also with organized visits, especially tours for young people. Travel to Israel is the only real way of understanding the miracles that have been performed for us in modern times. This understanding is part of the foundation of our tradition and our attachments to Judaism.

In today's world, more than ever before, we need to lead our children in our traditions by example, and we need to support our brothers and sisters in Israel with all the physical and emotional sustenance we can provide. We cannot accept the new anti-Semitism that has become rampant in Europe and parts of

the United States. We have to raise our voices against boycotts, false accusations, and false comparisons.

When our national leaders are wrong in some respect regarding Israel we have to speak out, collectively and individually. We will not always have leaders who are sympathetic to our cause. Sometimes we have leaders, who are downright hostile, but this is a free country and we are free to support those who support us. We are the strongest Jewish community on earth and it is vital that we use our resources in support of Jewish causes in America and throughout the world. It is also critical to our survival as Jews in America.

Shabbat shalom.