

Shabbat Parashat Va'y'hi

The Blessing that Jacob, Ephra'im and Menashe Passed Down to Us

At a traditional Shabbat dinner, one of the rituals is that parents bestow blessings upon their children. When my parents come over for Shabbat dinner, one of the unique aspects of the experience is that around our table, after singing Shalom Aleikhem and before reciting the Kiddush, we have multiple generations of parents who can bless their children. Not only am I able to bless my son and two daughters, but my father still rises and comes to bless me! He has been doing it since I was a little boy and it is a brief reminder not only of my childhood, but also of my roots that go much, much deeper...

One of the sacred aspects of many of our traditional customs is that they are characterized by having long histories. In fact, six hundred and thirteen of our *mitzvot*/commandments come directly from the Torah itself, though not all of them apply in the modern world since we no longer have a Temple in Jerusalem. Other practices, while not direct commandments, also originate in the Torah, the practice of sharing blessings with loved ones among them. This week's *parasha* recounts that in his very old age, Jacob takes a moment to surround himself with his children and grandchildren. He wishes not only to pass down the mantle of familial leadership to the next generations, but also to share warmth, love, and blessing with those who are nearest and dearest to him. Jacob grants a blessing to each of his sons and then takes Joseph's sons Ephra'im and Menashe, lays his hands upon their heads, and blesses them as well. The blessing of these two grandsons is significant for us because it sets the stage for a meaningful and powerful custom of our own ritual blessings today.

Each Friday night, it is customary for Jewish families to gather together (much in the same way that Jacob's family did in our *parasha* this week) for a festive Shabbat meal. There are rituals that accompany any meal in Judaism, but Shabbat is special because it gives us the gift of a sacred time of rest during which we have an opportunity to go beyond only what is "required" to do. One of these "bonus" customs is the parents' blessing of their children. After a long, difficult, stressful, and busy week, parents can lay their hands upon their child(ren)'s head(s) and express in a traditional blessing formula their love, gratitude, and high hopes for them. Sons are blessed in the names Jacob's grandsons Ephraim and Menashe, while daughters are blessed in the names of the matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Parents call upon God to protect their child(ren), light and guide their way(s), and grant them peace. This blessing custom is a beautiful way for parents to take pause, even for a moment, and to show their children how much they mean to them in a physical and traditionally Jewish way. Each of these aspects is very important for the modern Jewish family. You may even choose to add more personal words of blessing to the traditional text – or use them exclusively from time to time – for this ritual to achieve added significance and power. This custom blesses us with some useful flexibility.

"Doing it all" in terms of ritual on a Friday night can be overwhelming. Selecting one custom either to get started or to add on to what you may already do can make it all much more manageable and meaningful. Perhaps, a slightly belated New Year's resolution that your family could make would be to adopt a new Shabbat ritual this year. If you don't already participate in the blessing of children on Friday night, then I highly recommend taking the minute or two necessary for parents to share blessings with their child(ren). Children may also choose to craft some blessings of their own for their parents and siblings. They will make your Shabbat/Friday evening dinners an all the more intimate and sacred part of your week. Good luck and enjoy your blessings!

The texts of the children's blessings, based on this week's *parasha*, in Hebrew, transliteration, and English translation are inserted below for your convenience.

Shabbat Shalom!

For Sons:

לבנים:

יְשִׁיבְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה:
Y'simkha Elobim k'Ephrayim v'kb'Menasheh
 May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh

For Daughters:

לבנות:

יְשִׁיבְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּשָׂרָה, רִבְקָה, רָחֵל, וְלֵאָה:
Y'simeikh Elobim k'Sara, Rivka, Raheil, v'Leah.
 May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

For All Sons and Daughters:

לכל הבנים והבנות:

וְיִבְרַכְךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ.
Y'varekh'kha Adonai v'yishm'rekha.
 May God bless you and protect you.

וְיֵאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחַנֶּה.
Ya'eir Adonai panav eilekha vi'kbuneka.
 May God shine God's presence upon you and be gracious unto you.

וְיִשָּׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיַשֵּׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.
Yisa Adonai panav eilekha v'yaseim l'kha shalom.
 May God lift God's presence be toward you and grant you peace.