

“They Are Mine, Ephraim and Menashe:”

The Meaning of Yaakov's Two Flashbacks

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(2-4): "... And Yisrael gathered his strength and sat up upon the bed. And Yaakov said to Yosef: E-I Sha-dai appeared to me in Luz, in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me. And He said to me: Behold, I shall make you fruitful, and I shall multiply you, and make you into a community of nations, and I shall give this land to your seed after you as an eternal inheritance."

1. TWO FLASHBACKS IN YAAKOV'S WORDS TO YOSEF

(48:1) "And it happened after these things that it was told to Yosef: 'Behold, your father is ill.' And he took his two sons with him - Menashe and Ephraim."

Yaakov is on his deathbed. His eyes can no longer see. His actions, on the other hand, are characterized by lucidity: he looks at things that physical eyes cannot see, a hidden future and a forgotten past.

The scene where Yaakov exchanges his hands - placing the right hand upon the head of Ephraim, Yosef's younger son, and the left upon the head of Menashe, the elder - illustrates this contrast between his weakened physical state and his lucid prophetic consciousness. Unable to see Yosef's sons with his eyes ("And Yisrael saw Yosef's sons, and he said: Who are these?"), he nevertheless knows with certainty where he wants to place his right hand. The dialogue between him and his son is a slightly ironic illustration of the fact that the sight of the elderly, blind father is better than that of his younger, clear-sighted son.

As stated, the "narrative present" of this story is fragmented: memories of the past and images of the future penetrate the present, shaping Yaakov's consciousness and his actions in our story. And so the boundaries between past, present and future are blurred. An example from the end of the story: the conquest of the land by Yaakov's descendants, due to take place after many generations, is attributed by Yaakov to himself - the patriarch of the nation identifies himself with the nation as a whole - as an event that has already taken place (22): "...which I TOOK from the hands of the Emori with my sword and my bow." Since the land has already been "conquered," the forefather of the conquering nation awards Yosef an additional portion of the land, over and above what his brothers will receive. This is the future interpretation of what has already been determined at the start of the story, that (5) "Ephraim and Menashe will be to me like Reuven and Shimon." But this future is already mentioned in the narrative present as something that occurred in the past!

In this shiur we shall focus on the "double flashback" in Yaakov's opening words of our story. He introduces his words to Yosef with a memory from the past:

After this flashback, Yaakov returns to the present:

(5-6): "And now, your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt, before I came to you in Egypt - they are mine, Ephraim and Menashe - like Reuven and Shimon shall they be to me. And your descendants who will be born after them - shall be yours; they shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance."

He concludes with another flashback:

(7): "And as for me - as I came from Padan, Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, just a short distance from the way of Efrata, and I buried her there on the way of Efrat, which is Beit Lechem."

What logical connection runs between these three successive utterances of Yaakov? Why is he now reminded of these two events from the distant past - decades ago - and what does he mean to express by mentioning them now, in his words to Yosef?

B. THE REASON FOR THE FLASHBACKS ACCORDING TO THE PASHTANIM

Let us begin with a clarification of Yaakov's purpose in mentioning God's revelation to him in Luz. In this revelation - as in its predecessor, at the beginning of parashat Vayetze - two promises are made to Yaakov: a. the blessing of seed ("Behold, I shall make you fruitful and multiply you..."), and b. the promise of the land ("And I shall give this land to your seed after you as an eternal inheritance"). Which aspect of these promises makes it important for Yaakov to mention them now? How is this related to what Yaakov is about to say about Ephraim and Menashe?

Some of the "pashtanim," commentators on the literal meaning of the text, relate what Yaakov will say about Ephraim and Menashe specifically to the promise of the land made to Yaakov. Let us cite Ibn Ezra as an example (Rashbam and Radak say basically the same thing):

"It seems to me that a correct understanding of what he says is: God said to me that the land of Canaan will be an eternal inheritance for my descendants. I shall give you the firstborn [double] portion of the land, such that Ephraim and Menashe will receive portions of the land just as Reuven and Shimon will - the eldest of my children..."

Menashe and Ephraim, and they are the focus.

- In the first story it is Yaakov who calls Yosef to come to him, while in the second, Yosef comes with his sons of his own initiative.

This explanation certainly seems plausible, even though Yaakov makes no mention of the matter of inheriting the land when he talks about Ephraim and Menashe. But why does Yaakov then mention, later on, the death of Rachel and her burial? Ibn Ezra continues (as do Rashbam and Radak):

- The time factor is also different, although both stories take place during Yaakov's final year. Although we are told, in the first story, "And Yisrael's days drew near to die," and although he is lying upon his bed, Yaakov is not ill; he lies only because of the weakness of old age. (See Ramban, 47:29.)

"And the reason for his mention of 'and as for me - as I came from Padan' - is that [he is trying to say to Yosef,] 'She died suddenly, and I could not bring her for burial to the Me'arat ha-Machpela, as I buried Leah.' He says this to Yosef so that Yosef will not be angered that 'I ask of you something [i.e. to bring me to burial in Chevron] that I did not do in honor of your mother.'"

How much time elapses between the two stories? Perhaps a few months. This being the case, we cannot go along with the commentators quoted above and assume that Yaakov's words about Rachel's death are related to his request of Yosef that he be buried in Canaan.

C. A CRITIQUE OF THE PASHTANIM'S EXPLANATION

This explanation lumps together Yaakov's words to Yosef (47:29-30), "Do not bury me in Egypt," with his words to Yosef and Yosef's sons later on, in chapter 48, which include the story of Rachel's death. Although these situations are similar - in both cases Yaakov is speaking close to the time of his death (47:29, 48:21), and in both cases he is bed-ridden (47:31, 48:2) - nevertheless, there is a chronological disparity and a thematic difference between these two encounters between Yaakov and Yosef.

D. THE EXPLANATION OF RAV SAADIA GAON

The explanation offered above by Ibn Ezra et al. may be criticized for another reason as well. The two events from the past to which Yaakov refers took place in close succession, and they are juxtaposed in parashat Vayishlach (chapter 35). It is immediately after the revelation at Beit El that we are told (35:16), "And THEY JOURNEYED FROM BEIT EL, and it was - just a short distance way from coming to Efrat - that Rachel gave birth, and the birth was difficult." It is not reasonable, therefore, that Yaakov mentions these two successive events (the promise of the land and the death of Rachel) for completely different purposes, as proposed by these commentators!

i. From a literary perspective, they belong to two different stories, each with its own subject. Yaakov's will that he be buried in Canaan belongs to the story of his family settling in Egypt (47:27), and is apparently meant as a response to that "settling." His words to Yosef in chapter 48 belong to a different story, whose subject is the blessing of Ephraim and Menashe. It begins with a clear, formal formulation (48:1): "And it was, after these things...", which comes as a break between this story and the previous one. How, then, can we relate Yaakov's intention in the second story to his request of Yosef in the first, and mix up the subjects of these two completely different narratives?

We must seek an explanation that gives a single meaning to the mention of both events, and this meaning must relate to the subject that Yaakov is discussing in the present: the status being conferred upon Ephraim and Menashe as though they were sons of Yaakov himself, like Reuven and Shimon.

ii. The circumstances of these two stories are also very different:

Rav Saadia Gaon does not relate to Yaakov's intention in mentioning God's promise to him, nor to this statement's connection to his words later on (5-6), "And now, your two sons...." But he interprets the verse with which we are concerned (7), "And as for me - when I came from Padan...", in a cryptically brief manner:

- In the first story, Yosef is alone with Yaakov, while in the second he takes along

"And as for me - when I came' - BUT as for me, when I came.... 'Which is Beit Lechem' (end of the verse) - and no further children were born to me."

His meaning is obscure: he interprets the "vav" ("AND as for me") at the beginning of the verse as signifying contrast ("BUT as for me"); however, at this stage it is not clear to what Yaakov is contrasting his story of Rachel's death. It appears to be connected to what he adds at the end of the verse, which does not appear in the text itself: "And no further children were born to me."

Let us first try to clarify the connection between the mention of Rachel's death and the meaning that Rav Saadia Gaon adds to these words - that no further children were born to him thereafter. The connection seems to be as follows: Yaakov's only hope of having more children at that time was by his relatively young wife, Rachel; his other wives had long since stopped bearing children, while Rachel was still of childbearing age. Hence when she died, Binyamin necessarily became the last of Yaakov's children.

Let us now try to understand how Rav Saadia Gaon arrives at the conclusion that this was Yaakov's intention in mentioning Rachel's death. The answer is to be found in his first utterance (which R. Saadia does not address):

"E-I Sha-dai appeared to me in Luz, in Canaan, and He blessed me. And He said to me, Behold, I shall make you fruitful and multiply you...."

It appears that, according to R. Saadia, Yaakov understood this blessing as a promise that he would have more children, and would thus seem to have pertained to Rachel. "BUT - as for me, when I came from Padan," Rachel died - AND AFTER THAT NO FURTHER CHILDREN WERE BORN TO ME! Rachel's death therefore seems to contradict the Divine promise made to Yaakov!

How does all of this relate to the issue of Efraim and Menashe, which is located in between these two utterances of Yaakov? It would seem that the answer, in R. Saadia's view, is that by making Efraim and Menashe into sons of Yaakov himself, the contradiction is solved:

"And now, your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt - ARE MINE. Efraim and Menashe - like Reuven and Shimon WILL BE UNTO ME."

We may now interpret God's promise to make Yaakov fruitful as referring to these two sons, for the blessing of being fruitful and multiplying is fulfilled by a person by having two sons.

E. TWO DIFFICULTIES CONCERNING R. SAADIA, AND THEIR SOLUTION

Two difficulties present themselves concerning the explanation of R. Saadia.

1) God promised all of the forefathers that they would have many descendants; why, then, does Yaakov interpret

specifically the promise made in Beit El as referring to children that would be born to him, rather than as a promise to multiply the offspring who already existed? To answer this question, we must return to the formulation of the original promise:

(35:11) "And God said to him: I am E-I Sha-dai; you shall be fruitful and multiply! A nation and a community of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come out of your loins."

Radak feels forced to explain this verse in such a way that it will not stand in contradiction to the reality that comes about later:

"You shall be fruitful and multiply' - HE (God) SAID THIS CONCERNING HIS CHILDREN, as it says concerning Avraham (17:6), 'And I shall make you exceedingly fruitful' - this was said concerning Avraham's children... FOR YAAKOV HAD NO FURTHER CHILDREN AFTER THIS since it appears that Binyamin, who was still to be born, had already been conceived by his mother."

But there is a great difference between God's promise to Avraham ("And I shall make you fruitful," used many times in promises to the forefathers), and the language used in speaking to Yaakov: "Be fruitful and multiply," which would seem to imply Yaakov himself. It is no wonder, then, that Yaakov interprets this blessing as referring not to his existing children, but rather to additional children that will be born to him. Indeed, the continuation of the blessing hints at the same idea: "A nation and a community of nations WILL COME FROM YOU, and kings WILL COME OUT OF YOUR LOINS." In other words, those children who will be born are the ones who will be "a nation and a community of nations," and it is from THEM that "kings will come out."

2) The second difficulty is raised by Ibn Ezra, who first clarifies R. Saadia's meaning and then rejects it out of hand:

"And the reason for saying, 'Behold, I shall make you fruitful' (48:7), according to R. Saadia, is because God said to Yaakov, 'Behold, I shall make you fruitful,' but no further sons were born; [on the contrary,] Rachel died. And therefore I know (says Yaakov) that it was concerning the sons born to you (Yosef) that God said, 'Behold, I shall make you fruitful.'

BUT THIS EXPLANATION HAS NO BASIS AT ALL, for what difference is there between the children of Yosef and the children of Reuven?"

If Yaakov's solution of the contradiction between God's promise and the death of Rachel lies in its referring to grandchildren, then this contradiction could have been solved long ago, when children were born to Reuven or any of Yaakov's other children.

Seforno (48:4-5) answers that the solution to the Ibn Ezra's question on R. Saadia is to be found in Yaakov's own words later on. After Yosef presents his two sons to Yaakov and the latter kisses them and embraces them, we read:

(11): "And Yisrael said to Yosef: See, I never dreamed that I would see your face, and behold - God has shown me even your offspring."

Yaakov mourned Yosef for twenty-two years, never dreaming that he would see him again. Now, through entirely unique circumstances, he has received Yosef back - and he has two sons. Their discovery is, for Yaakov, something of a miracle, whereby they are "born anew." It is these special circumstances that allow Yaakov to regard Efraim and Menashe as his own children, for they have been given to him by God in an unexpected and unusual act of mercy.

To summarize Yaakov's intention, according to R. Saadia's interpretation: Yosef presents himself before his father together with his two sons in order that Yaakov may bless them; Yaakov introduces his words to Yosef by mentioning God's promise in Luz, to make him fruitful and to multiply him - a promise which would appear not to have been fulfilled; "And now," says Yaakov - I am interpreting the promise at Luz to refer to your two sons. In meriting the wondrous opportunity to see your two sons, who were born to you in Egypt before I came here, while I thought you were dead and never dreamt of seeing you again, it is as if they were born to me myself, and through them God's promise in Luz, "Be fruitful and multiply," is fulfilled. Therefore I will consider your two sons as included in the number of my sons, SINCE Rachel, your mother, died when I came from Padan - immediately after that promise, and hence the possibility of my having any further children was removed. The circumstances of my life have therefore revealed, in retrospect, the true intention of that Divine promise in Luz.

6. THE MEANING OF THE SILENCE SURROUNDING THE DEATH OF RACHEL

Yaakov reacts to certain events in his life immediately, but coothes he is silent at the time. This does not mean that such events pass without leaving any impression, or that they are forgotten in the course of time. The reaction to such events is postponed for many years, and it is only in his last days, described in our parasha, that Yaakov finally offers a verbal reaction and reveals what was hidden in his heart.

In my shiur on parashat Vayishlach, I grappled with the meaning of Yaakov's silence in face of the tragic death of his beloved wife. I noted that this silence would seem to cover over a great perplexity, an emotional ambivalence arising from an internal contradiction in which Yaakov found himself. I explained that the root of the contradiction lay in the fact that Rachel's death was, at the same time, the birth of Binyamin, and the event thus became ambivalent.

But in the final section of that shiur, I hinted at another possible reason for Yaakov's silence. This reason is the relationship between the two successive events that the Torah describes:

God's revelation to him in Beit El with the promise, "Be fruitful and multiply" (which appeared to Yaakov as a promise that he would have additional children from Rachel), and her sudden death thereafter. The contradiction between these two events is revealed in the identical action Yaakov performs in both instances: in Beit El (35:14) "Yaakov erected a monument in the place where He had spoken to him," and on the way to Efrat (ibid. 20), "Yaakov erected a monument over her grave." Only a few hours' distance and six verses separate between these two monuments, symbolizing states that oppose each other in every possible sense.

The contradiction between the two events, between the two monuments, gave rise to a burning question in Yaakov's mind concerning God's providence: What did God mean when He told him, "Be fruitful and multiply," if immediately thereafter God saw fit to take Rachel from him - his only opportunity to fulfill this promise? Faced with such great questions, the proper response is silence. Yaakov fulfilled the words of the prophet, "You shall not eulogize, nor weep, nor give way to tears. Sigh in silence for the dead, but you shall not do... and you shall put your shoes upon your feet..." ([Yechezkel 24:16-17](#)), and continued his journey towards Chevron.

Yaakov bore his sorrow and silence for many years. The question only grew stronger with time: a few years after Rachel's death, Yosef - her son, so beloved to Yaakov, was torn apart by wild beasts, and he then mourned his son, too. He guarded Rachel's other son - Binyamin - in every way that he could, but difficult circumstances had now severed him from Binyamin, and the disaster that he so feared seemed imminent.

When he parted from Binyamin, what was Yaakov thinking concerning the promise God had made him in Luz? Not only had he not continued to "be fruitful and multiply," but his family was falling apart before his eyes. Rachel had died, Yosef was no more, and Binyamin was being led into the unknown. What had God meant by His words?

The question that accompanied Yaakov since the death of Rachel became stronger over decades. Yaakov was a great man of faith, and he waited patiently for the solution, without expressing doubt.

Indeed, the hour finally arrived for his great test to come to an end: Yosef, his son, was still alive, and the whole family was reunited. Each of Yaakov's sons now had children of his own. The miracle of Yosef's return to the family not only as a live person, but as someone who had merited to bear children - to "be fruitful and multiply" - was suddenly revealed to Yaakov as the solution to the riddle. God's promise in Luz had referred not to the immediate future, as he had thought at first, but rather to the distant future, and would finally be realized only in the miraculous "rebirth" of Yosef and his two sons. Then Yaakov knew that at this late stage of his life his light had begun to shine, and after all his suffering he suddenly merited an expansion of his family, from the direction of this beloved and lost branch: from Yosef, Rachel's son. Only then did Yaakov give final expression to his emotions: both to his profound sorrow over the death of Rachel, who had died on the way at a young age, and to the contradiction this event engendered in

his consciousness - a problem to which he had reacted with silence until now, when its solution was suddenly revealed to him in a wondrous new reality.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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