

## Yaakov's Blessing to Yosef

By Rav Yehuda Rock

In this *shiur* we shall examine various aspects of Yaakov's words to Yosef in their second encounter in the *parasha*. We shall also broaden our discussion of one particular expression – with which the commentators have grappled, and for which we shall propose a new interpretation – to shed light on a more general picture.

Yaakov and Yosef meet three times in this week's *parasha*. In their first encounter (47:29-31), Yaakov calls to Yosef and asks him to bury him in Canaan, rather than in Egypt. At their third encounter (chapter 49), Yosef is present together with all of Yaakov's other sons, each receiving a blessing from their father. We shall focus on the second meeting, as recorded in chapter 48.

Yosef initiates the third meeting with Yaakov, upon hearing of his father's illness. First, Yaakov addresses Yosef, in verses 3-7; thereafter, when Yaakov sees Ephraim and Menasheh, who have accompanied Yosef, he blesses them, and then concludes with parting words to Yosef. We shall pay special attention to Yaakov's first speech to Yosef at this meeting, in verses 3-7:

(3) Yaakov said to Yosef: The Almighty God appeared to me in Luz, in the land of Canaan, and blessed me.  
(4) And He said to me: Behold, I shall make you fruitful and multiply you, and I shall make of you a community of peoples, and I shall give this land to your descendants after you, as an everlasting possession.  
(5) 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 Menasheh shall be for me like Reuven and like Shimon.  
(6) And those born of you whom you shall bear after them, shall be yours; they shall be named after their brethren in their inheritance.  
(7) As for me – when I came from Padan Aram, my Rachel died in the land of Canaan, on the way, with a little distance before you come to Efrat. And I buried her there, on the way of Efrat, which is Beit Lechem.

Yaakov's monologue here comprises three parts :

- a. Mention of the blessing of "the Almighty God" (*El Sha-dai*) to Yaakov (3-4)
- b. Status bestowed on Ephraim and Menasheh like that of Yaakov's sons for the purposes of inheritance (5-6)
- c. Mention of the death and burial of Rachel (7)

Let us examine the significance of each part, and the connections between all of them.

## God's Blessings and the Firstborn Portion of the Inheritance

The significance of giving Ephraim and Menasheh equal status to Yaakov's sons is clear: Yaakov is giving Yosef the portion of the firstborn, i.e., a double portion of his inheritance. This is stated explicitly, in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (I 5:1-2): "Reuven... for he was the firstborn, but when he violated his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef, son of Yisrael... and the birthright to Yosef."

The Torah connects parts a. and b. in Yaakov's speech with the word "*ve-ata* – and now." In other words, the doubling of Yosef's portion (b.) is somehow based upon God's blessing to Yaakov (a.).

Rashi's explains homiletically that the connection lies in the fact that in God's blessing to Yaakov he is told, "I shall make of you a community of peoples"; from the seeming redundancy ("*kehal amim*") Yaakov deduced that after this blessing was given to him, another two tribes were destined to be added: one was Binyamin, and Yaakov now sees to the addition of the twelfth tribe by turning Yosef into two tribes. A

similar explanation is offered by Ibn Ezra in the name of R. Saadya Gaon, but they draw their conclusion not from the expression "*kehal amim*," but rather the multiplicity that is inherent in the expression, "Behold, I shall make you fruitful," where the minimal fulfillment here is two descendants.

Rashbam explains the connection between God's blessing to Yaakov and the double-portion awarded to Yosef with the following simple, clear words: "In other words, since the Holy One, blessed be He, gave me the land of Canaan, I am entitled to make you the firstborn for the purposes of taking a portion equal to that of two tribes; thus, your two sons will receive the same as Reuven and Shimon." In other words, God's blessing to Yaakov is the basis of his authority to divide the land as he sees fit.

As noted, Yaakov makes mention here of the blessing given to him by God at Beit El, when he returned from Padan Aram. A comparison between the language of the blessing here and the blessing as it was given (35:9-12) shows that Yaakov is paraphrasing God's words, rather than quoting them exactly. Nevertheless, there is a clear parallel between the elements in both places, and the changes are linguistic rather than substantive – except for one expression, which Yaakov adds here, which is found nowhere in God's original promise. This expression is "*achuzat olam* – an eternal possession."

The word "*achuza*" means a fixed acquisition in one's possession; it is used especially in contexts referring to an acquisition that is bequeathed (see [Vayikra 25](#)). The expression "*achuzat olam*" here is taken from God's promise to Avraham, at the time of his circumcision (17:1-8). This promise, too, was given in the name of "the Almighty God," and contains similar elements and language to those appearing in God's promise to Yaakov, although it is more elaborate. When Yitzchak conveys this blessing to Yaakov, as he dispatches him to Padan Aram, he makes no mention of the "*achuzat olam*." And, as noted, in God's blessing to Yaakov this expression is similarly omitted. But Yaakov, it seems, knew of the language of the blessing that Avraham had received; it was apparently passed down from generation to generation. He perceived great significance in the words "*achuzat olam*," understanding it as representing a fundamental characteristic of the blessing and relevant to the blessing that he himself had received, even though these words were not mentioned in his own blessing. The reason that Yaakov regarded this expression as so important was that it meant that the land was given to him as an inherited acquisition held in his possession, such that he could bequeath it further as he saw fit. (Apparently, this view was also the basis for Yaakov's desire, many years previously, to receive the blessing of Yitzchak – which Yaakov expected to be the blessing of "the Almighty God." Since Yitzchak had received the land as an "eternal possession," Yitzchak was authorized to bequeath it in his blessing to whomever he chose.) For this

reason, Yaakov adds this expression now, in order to emphasize that by virtue of God's blessing to him, he is authorized to bequeath to Yosef a double portion of the land.

Ibn Ezra, too (ad loc) offers a similar explanation to that of Rashbam, and seems to note Yaakov's emphasis on the "eternal possession": "What seems correct in my eyes is that he said, God told me that the land of Canaan would belong to my descendants as an eternal possession; I now give you a double portion in the inheritance of the land, and Ephraim and Menasheh will receive their portion in the land just as Reuven and Shimon will...."

In this context it should be noted that the halakha as set down in the Torah and binding for future generations is that a person bequeathing his estate cannot transfer the birthright (the double portion due to the firstborn) from one son to another. This is stated explicitly in *Parashat KiTetzei* ([Devarim 21:15-16](#)): "If a man has two wives – one more beloved and the other less so – and the beloved wife and the less beloved wife bear him sons, and the firstborn belongs to the less beloved – then on the day when he bequeaths to his sons, he cannot assign the son of the beloved wife the firstborn in place of the son of the less beloved wife, who is [actually] the firstborn." This law is apparently not fundamental to the definition of the concept of the birthright, but rather a specific law that the Torah sets down for future generations. This law was not adhered to in Yaakov's time; rather, it became halakha when the Torah was given.

[It is possible that the Torah introduces this law as a lesson learned from Yaakov, whose tendency to show preference towards Yosef had started already in Yosef's youth, and eventually led to the entire family moving to Egypt. As the Gemara teaches in [Shabbat 10b](#): "Rabba bar Machasia quoted Rav Chamma bar Guria, who taught in the name of Rav: A person should never treat one child of his children differently from the others, for it was on account of the weight of two *se'ot* of fine wool, which Yaakov gave Yosef over and above his other children, that his brothers were jealous of him, and this eventually led to our forefathers going down to Egypt."]

## The Death and Burial of Rachel

Let us now turn our attention to the third element in Yaakov's words to Yosef: the mention of the death and burial of Rachel. Why does Yaakov mention this here?

Rav Saadya Gaon (quoted by Ibn Ezra) who, as noted, explains that Yaakov understood that the accounting of Ephraim and Menasheh as independent tribes was necessarily entailed by God's blessing to him, now accordingly explains that the mention of Rachel's death likewise fits in with Yaakov's claim: since after he received the blessing only Binyamin had been born, and Rachel had died and could no longer bear children, the additional son had to come from an accounting of grandsons as sons. But aside from the problem that this entire idea seems far removed from the literal intention of the text, this interpretation also fails to explain why Yaakov also mentions Rachel's **burial** here. It would also seem logical that, according to this interpretation, Yaakov should mention Rachel's death along with God's blessing to him, before jumping to the conclusion that Ephraim and Menasheh should be considered as independent tribes in their own right.

Other commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban) maintain that Yaakov is apologizing here to Yosef and explaining why he did not bury Rachel, Yosef's mother, in the burial place of his fathers, in the Cave of Makhpela – the place where he asks Yosef to bury him. (The commentators are divided as to the actual reason why Yaakov did not bury Rachel in the Cave of Makhpela; see Ramban ad loc.) The difficulty with this interpretation is that it would seem to require Yaakov to mention Rachel's death and burial not here, but rather previously – in the first encounter between Yaakov and Yosef in the *parasha*, when Yaakov asks Yosef to bury him in the burial place of his forefathers. Rashbam attempts to resolve this difficulty by explaining that although Yaakov's motivation in his words is to apologize for not having buried Rachel in the Cave, he offers these words here because of the associative connection with God's blessing to him. Rachel had died on that same journey as they traveled from Beit El, where Yaakov had received the blessing that he now recalls. Nevertheless, in view of this interpretation of his words, their proper place and context would still seem to be in juxtaposition to Yaakov's request for his own burial.

It appears, then, that the significance of Yaakov's mention of Rachel's death and burial here must be explained in an altogether different way. As background to our hypothesis, let us recall our *shiur* on *Parashat Vayetzei* (see also my article in *Daf Keshet*, *Shemot* 5758, vol. 635, "Li-demuta Shel Rachel").

There we noted Rachel undergoing a process of transgression and punishment: her sin in stealing the *terafim*, tools for divination, as well as other actions, and repentance that began with abandonment of her sin as part of the preparations for the ascent to Beit El, and concluded with her death, when she called her son Ben-Oni.

In *Parashat Vayishlach*, after Rachel's death and her burial, we are told (35:20): "Yaakov placed a monument over her grave – it is the monument of Rachel's grave to this day." Why did he place a monument there? And why does the Torah take the trouble to emphasize the fact that the monument continues to stand there?

Rachel's death took place on the way, following their departure from Beit El. In Beit El, immediately after God's blessing to Yaakov, we are told (35:14): "Yaakov placed a monument at the place where He had spoken to him, a monument of stone." There seems to be a connection between the two monuments.

Apparently, Rachel's sins gave rise to the thought – among Yosef's brothers, and perhaps in Yaakov's own mind – that perhaps Rachel and her sons had no place in Israel. Just as in previous generations there had been brothers who were rejected and excluded from the covenant with God and inheritance of the land, so it was possible that Rachel and her children should similarly be rejected. It seems that Yosef's brothers regarded Rachel's sins as a justification – if not the actual motivation – for their sale of Yosef. (We infer this from the fact that when Yosef seeks to recreate for the brothers the same situation in relation to Binyamin that they had previously faced in relation to Yosef, he chooses to create a suspicion that Binyamin stole his royal goblet used for divining.) It seems that Yaakov viewed the situation as follows: Rachel had not been punished so long as they were living outside of the land of Canaan, but rather died only as they entered the land, and only after she had lived to see the altar of atonement at Beit El, where God blessed Yaakov and promised him the land. Yaakov declares, as it were: The same Divine Providence that blessed me and gave the land of Canaan to me, also postponed Rachel's death until after she entered the land, stood at Beit El, and had the opportunity to repent. This told him that her place, and the place of her children, was in the land. Indeed, the Torah confirms this message by emphasizing the continued existence of the monument there.

Yaakov repeats this message in our *parasha*, in his words to Yosef. As a continuation of his earlier words, in which Yaakov emphasizes his rights with regard to the land and the extra right of Yosef in the land, he mentions Rachel's death and her burial, as if to say that Divine Providence itself had shown that Rachel's place – and the place of Yosef, Rachel's son – was in the land.

It seems that the emphasis on "As for me" at the beginning of the verse should be viewed in the same light: I, Yaakov, owner of the "eternal possession" in the land, bearer of the authority to bequeath the land and the birthright in the land,

chose to bury Rachel at the place where she died, as a statement that the place of her death was significant and not coincidental: what it meant was that you, Yosef, are entitled to inherit in the land.

Ultimately, Rachel – who, by virtue of her repentance for her sins, merited an inheritance in the land – became a symbol for her children, who were destined to repent and thereby to be returned to their land: "So says God: there is reward for your endeavor, says God... and there is hope for your future, says God, and the children shall return to their borders. I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself... bring me back and I shall return, for You are the Lord my God. For after I returned, I was turned away, I repented; after I was instructed, I struck upon my thigh... Return, O virgin Israel, return to these, your cities."

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