

## Honor, Prophecy, and “Mother Earth”

One of the unsolved mysteries of Tanakh relates directly to Parashat Va-yehi. At the opening of this narrative, Jacob is on his death bed when Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Menasheh, enter.

Jacob extracts an oath from Joseph regarding his burial; and blesses his grandsons, Ephraim and Menasheh, assuring them a rightful portion among the other Tribes of Israel. As Jacob opens his soliloquy, he recounts the death of his beloved Rachel. Clearly, it is the presence of Rachel’s son, Joseph, along with their grandchildren that reminds him of this painful moment in his life. Echoing words found earlier in the Torah (Gen. 35:19), Jacob remarks, “When I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died . . . when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath’—now Bethlehem” (Gen. 48:7). Although these two texts agree, other verses in Tanakh suggest an alternative location for Rachel’s tomb (see especially I Sam. 10:2). What is our most accurate guess based on these conflicting accounts?

Joseph B’khor Shor argues that Rachel was not buried in Bethlehem since this territory was assigned to Judah. He writes,

Jacob buried Rachel on the way to Ephrath, for he knew that this place would be apportioned to her sons and this would be an honor to her to be buried in her sons’ territory. And so it was in the area of the tribe of Benjamin. For if she would be buried in Machpelah, this would be in the territory of Judah, and this would not be an honor to her . . . and it is written concerning Saul that Samuel said to him, “When you leave me today, you will meet two men near the tomb of Rachel in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah.” (I Sam. 10:2)

This is a proof text that she was buried on the border of Benjamin. Citing Samuel’s instructions to Saul in I Samuel 10:2, “you will meet two men near the tomb of Rachel . . .,” Bkhor Shor convincingly advocates for an alternative site—not the tomb that we know of today, which is indeed on the outskirts of Bethlehem. For B’khor Shor, it is an issue of honor that she be buried in the land apportioned to one of her sons.

Modern bible scholarship supports this thesis. The identification of Ephrath with Bethlehem is a gloss that was appended later. Rather, “there is a tradition that identifies Ephrath with Kiriath-jearim, which lay on the border between Judah and Benjamin . . . close to present-day Abu Ghosh” (Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, 408). During an earlier period of Israelite history, the area of Ephrath referred to an “area occupied by the clan of Ephrath” (ibid), which was on the border with Benjamin. Later, when the Ephratites extended their rule to Bethlehem, it also became known as Ephrath, which accounts for the gloss appearing in both verses (Gen. 35:19; 48:7) “now Bethlehem.” Whether it be an issue of honor or prophecy, it appears that Rachel is fittingly buried in the land of her progeny.

One final note: one cannot help but be moved by Jeremiah’s prophetic words that have been realized in our own day, “a cry is heard from a height . . . Rachel weeping bitterly for her [exiled] children . . . Thus says the Lord: ‘Restrain your voice from weeping!’ . . . ‘Your children will return to their country’” (Jer. 31:14). Jeremiah envisions Rachel welcoming her children back to their land—so may this vision continue to be realized in our days.

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*



## PARASHAH COMMENTARY

**This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, who serves as rabbi of Manhattan’s Congregation Anshe Chesed, and adjunct professor at the Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School, The Rabbinical School, and The Davidson School of JTS**

### The Older Shall Serve the Younger

The Viennese psychologist Alfred Adler theorized that birth order within a family was a decisive factor in shaping one’s personality. Firstborn children tend to be natural leaders, he theorized, because parents tend to shower them with attention, and younger children tend to look up to their big siblings for guidance. However, firstborn kids tend to struggle with a sense of “dethronement” when a younger one comes along, feeling that this new little interloper has knocked them off their pedestals of parental love.

I don’t know what kind of religious education Adler received (his family was Jewish, though he converted to Protestant Christianity, as was common in the late 19th century). But on the face of it, he could have learned some of his insights from the Torah.

Being the firstborn in biblical times appears to have been quite a mixed blessing. On the one hand, firstborn sons received a double share of their father’s estate (Deut. 21:16–17), and presumably all the political and economic power that came with it. That explains why wily Jacob manipulates the brutish Esau in Genesis 25, leveraging his big brother’s hunger to obtain the rights to the family estate.

On the other hand, the most recognizable narrative pattern in Genesis—and to some extent, the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) as a whole—is that younger brothers win out, “surprising” us every time by ascending to leadership, playing the key roles in the destiny of the Jewish people. The big brothers never seem to be worthy of the role they would inherit, and, with God’s help, the little guys almost invariably “dethrone” them, as Adler might have said.

Genesis has seen this pattern in the lives of Isaac (who supplants Ishmael), Jacob (who supplants Esau), Rachel (more beloved than the elder Leah), Peretz (David’s progenitor, who trails Zerach out of the womb), and especially Jacob’s children, including the beloved son Joseph (who supplants 10 older brothers and one sister) whose story concludes Genesis this week, and about which I will have a little more to say below. After Genesis, the Torah relates that the Levite clan is to serve as Temple officiants, thereby displacing the actual firstborn of each family, who had that role initially (Num. 3; Mishnah Zevachim 14:4).

This week, we close the book of Genesis with the full expression of this pattern in the lives of Jacob's children and grandchildren. For one thing, the physical first-born, Reuben, is rather bluntly reminded of his displacement.

Perhaps more dramatically (Gen. 48), Reuben's younger brother Joseph is enshrined as the true spiritual firstborn, and Joseph's own children, Ephraim and Menasheh, see the same pattern play out in their family status. As Jacob's death approaches, Joseph comes to visit, bringing his two sons with him, and Jacob manages to rouse himself to sit up, gazing upon his son and grandsons, seeing in them the fulfillment of God's promise that his family would become "a congregation of nations." In what appears to be a gesture of formal adoption, Jacob asserts that—for purposes of inheritance and family status—Ephraim and Menasheh become Jacob's own children, equal to Reuben and Simeon. The effect of this gesture, it would seem, is to guarantee that Joseph receive the double portion due the firstborn.

Jacob had always loved Joseph more than the others, and bestowed special status upon him with the famous "striped coat" or "coat of many colors" (Gen. 37). That favoritism was a disaster for family dynamics, of course, ultimately leading us to slavery in Egypt. To that end, both the Torah itself (Deut. 21:16) and the Sages (BT, Tractate Shabbat 10b) warn parents about playing favorites among their children. But this week's gift to Ephraim and Menasheh is worth more than a fancy coat. Effectively, there are not 12 tribes of Israel, as we typically say, but 13, as Joseph counts for two.

Also, between the grandsons themselves, the same pattern holds: Joseph tries to prompt Jacob to bless Menasheh first, by thrusting the older boy toward his father's right hand. But Jacob has his own, providential plan, crossing his hands, and blessing the younger Ephraim first, for "after all, the little brother will be greater." Those inclined to read the Torah psychologically might find a heartbreaking moment in this, as Joseph—himself the favored younger victim of his spurned older brothers' rage—tried to avoid this pattern for his own sons. Alas, Ephraim would turn out to be the more powerful tribe, and Menasheh one of the obscure and lost.

Why does the Torah consistently repeat this pattern of *rav ya'avod tza'ir* (the older shall serve the younger; Gen. 25:23)? A clue might be found in Jacob's ungentle deathbed rebuke to Reuben (Gen. 49:3–4).

"Reuben," begins the patriarch, "you are my firstborn, my strength and my vigor, most powerful and most mighty." This indicates the folk-medical reason why the firstborn was seen as preeminent: ancient people thought the firstborn received the best dose of his father's genetic material. But, Jacob goes on, Reuben blew it. "You are unstable as water, and you will not endure, for you came upon your father's bed and defiled my couch." Reuben, you may recall, slept with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine (Gen. 35:22).

Again, a psychologically attentive reading is kind of heartbreaking here. Adler might have said that poor Reuben never got over being displaced by his younger siblings, and spent his whole futile life trying to reassert his role, failing every time. A midrash (Tanhuma Buber Va-yehi 11) adds another layer of pathos to this episode, suggesting that the reason Reuben had sex with Bilhah was to drive Jacob back to the bed of Leah, Reuben's lonely mother, Jacob's unloved first wife.

But don't be too sympathetic to unloved Reuben, or you will miss the moral and spiritual thrust of the narrative: Reuben had *natural* strength on his side, but was *morally* unworthy of those gifts.

The Bible, and Judaism generally, are wary of thinking that natural order or natural strength is decisive. Beyond them is the moral and spiritual greatness that our small nation can attain by loving and serving God and God's creatures. If outward power were decisive, we and our children and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Israel is driven to see past the outwardly powerful to the inwardly profound. Even in our own families, Genesis reminds us, those whose birth order would seem to make them natural candidates for leadership must earn their positions through moral greatness, not good looks and big muscles.

Perhaps the most stirring example of this narrative dynamic is found in the election of the Tanakh's true leading man, King David, who is anointed only after Samuel has examined all seven of his older brothers (I Samuel 16). While Samuel is repeatedly impressed by the appearance of Avinadav and Shammah and all the other sons of Jesse, God reminds the prophet to search for goodness in unexpected places: "God does not see as people see. For people see the outward appearance, but God looks through to the heart."

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.*