

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayechi

Ephraim and Menashe

וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת יְמִינוֹ וַיָּשֶׁת עַל רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וְהוּא הַצָּעִיר וְאֶת שְׂמֹאלוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה

Yisrael extended his right hand and placed it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Menashe's head. (48:14)

In the well-known episode toward the beginning of our Parsha, Yosef brings his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to his father, Yaakov, to receive a bracha from him. Although Yosef assumes that his older son, Menashe, should be at Yaakov's right side and Ephraim, the younger son, should be at Yaakov's left side, Yaakov crosses his hands over, placing his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Menashe. In response to Yosef's querying this, Yaakov explains that although Menashe will become a great people, Ephraim will become greater than he.

RIGHT AND LEFT

We note that the greater stature of Ephraim relative to that of Menashe is reflected in the fact that he received the right hand of Yaakov. Should we ask: What is the significance of who receives the right hand and who receives the left? The answer would presumably be that since the right hand is naturally stronger and more prominent than the left, it is appropriate that should go to the son who will himself be more prominent. However, the Meshech Chochmah¹ explains the significance of Yaakov's right and left hands on an entirely different level.

He begins by referring to an explanation of R' Yehonasan Eybeshutz² regarding a pasuk in Tehillim³ that we say regularly, which reads:

יָפֹל מֵאַרְבָּעָה אֲלֶיךָ וְרִבְבָּה מִיְמִינֶךָ

A thousand shall fall at your side and a myriad at your right

¹ Parshas v'Zos Haberachah, 33:17.

² Yaaros Dvash Vol 1, drush 2.

³ 91:7.

From the fact that the second phrase in the pasuk refers explicitly to “your right,” we thereby infer that when the first phrase mentions “your side,” it is referring to the left side. This asymmetrical method of phraseology is somewhat puzzling. Why is the right side referred to as “your *right*” and the left side as “your *side*”? Are the right and the left not both “sides”?

R' Eybeshutz explains that the difference between the two sides of right and left is not merely that one is stronger, but rather, they refer to two completely different levels of Divine supervision. The left side represents a person who is guided within the bounds of nature. This is why it is referred to as “your side,” for it relates to a realm which is “closer at hand” to human existence and experience. In contrast to this, the “right hand” represents a qualitative shift to a level of Divine supervision which transcends the bounds of nature. This shift is reflected in the above-mentioned pasuk in Tehillim. In terms of “your (left) side,” success is expressed by the felling of a thousand of your foes. In contrast, the number of those who will fall from your “right side” is not merely more than a thousand, it is an entirely new order – a myriad – for the right side itself represents a different order of Divine supervision.

TORAH AND PRAYER

The Meshech Chochmah⁴ notes that the above idea regarding the distinction between right and left can be perceived clearly in the pasuk in sefer Yeshaya,⁵ which states:

אֶף יְדֵי יְקֻדָּה אָרַז וַיִּמְיֵנִי מִפְּתַח הַשָּׁמַיִם

My hand has established the earth, and My right hand had measured out the heavens

Here, too, we see that creation of the earth, i.e. the temporal realm, is associated with Hashem’s left⁶ hand, while that of the transcendent heavenly realm is attributed to His right hand.

Building on the foundations of the this idea, the Meshech Chochmah⁷ explains that the two sides of right and left are reflected in the two areas of Torah and *tefillah* respectively. *Tefillah* is concerned primarily with connecting with Hashem and asking for health, sustenance and success in matters of this world. It is for this reason *tefillah* has set times, for it represents a connection with Hashem within the realm of this world which is governed by time. In contrast, Torah has no set time, it is an ongoing mitzvah whenever possible, for it connects a person with Hashem’s wisdom, and through that to a level which is beyond this world and hence beyond time.

Thus we find that *tefillah* is referred to by Chazal as “*chayei sha’ah*,”⁸ which we translate as “temporal life,” but which the Meshech Chochmah explains literally to mean “the life of time,” for it is involved in attaining Divine blessing and life in this world which is governed by time. In contrast, Torah is referred to as “*chayei olam*,”⁹ the life of the

4 *Devarim 33:2.*

5 48:13.

6 [Here, too, the left hand is described non-specifically in the first half of the pasuk, and subsequently defined via contrast with the “right hand” specified in the second half.]

7 *Parshas Vayechi, 50:10.*

8 *Shabbos 10b.*

9 *Shabbos ibid.*

universe, for it involves connecting to the Divine Life-force that sustains creation from the highest levels of existence, even those that transcend this world.

With this in mind, we can understand a somewhat cryptic comment of Chazal regarding the Torah's description of the splitting of the Red Sea:

וְהַיָּם לָהֶם חוֹמָה מִיְמִינֵם וּמִשְּׂמֹאלָם

*And the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left*¹⁰

Commenting on this pasuk, the Sifrei¹¹ explains:

- “On their right” – this refers to Torah
- “And on their left” – this refers to *tefillah*

Based on our discussion, we understand that Chazal's allocation of Torah and *tefillah* as explaining the walls on the right and the left reflect the two different planes of Divine connection which they enable and develop.

YEHOSHUA AND GIDEON

Coming back to Yaakov's *berachos* to Ephraim and Menashe, we can appreciate anew the significance of the way Yaakov arranged his hands. The success of the two tribes of Ephraim and Menashe is reflected and embodied by two great personalities which emerged from them: Yehoshua from Ephraim and Gideon from Menashe. When we consider the success of these two individuals, we will see that Yehoshua's military victories did not merely exceed those of Gideon, they partook of a completely higher order. Gideon's battle against the Midianites was enhanced by his ingenuity and blessed with success due to Divine supervision.¹² Ultimately, however, it took the form of a battle in temporal military terms. Yehoshua, on the other hand, was able to conduct his battles in a way which transcended temporal means, as expressed by his calling on the sun and the moon to cease their movement in order to allow him to conclude the fighting.¹³

We can now understand that when Yaakov directed his right hand toward Ephraim, he was thereby facilitating the development of Ephraim's ability to access the level of Divine interaction represented by the right hand – the level which transcends the nature of this world. In contrast, sensing that Menashe's success would be found in Divine assistance in terms of nature, Yaakov directed his left hand to him.

10 *Shemos 14:22.*

11 *Parshas Ha'azinu.*

12 *See Shoftim perek 7.*

13 *See Yehoshua 10:12.*

MOSHE'S BERACHAH TO YOSEF

With this in mind, we can appreciate on a deeper level an aspect of the *berachah* that was bestowed to Yosef many years later by Moshe Rabbeinu, which says:¹⁴

וְקַרְנֵי רְאֵם קַרְנָיו בְּהֶם עַמִּים יִנְגַח יַחַדְוּ אַפְסֵי אֶרֶץ וְהֵם רַבְבוֹת אַפְרַיִם וְהֵם אַלְפֵי מְנַשֶּׁה

His horns are like those of the re'em, with them shall he gore nations together, to the ends of the Land, they are the myriads of Ephraim and they are the thousands of Menashe.

As we have seen, the Divinely-bestowed capability to fell a thousand or a myriad depends on which side they are being felled, for “a thousand will fall from your (left) side, and a myriad from your right”. Since Ephraim’s success comes from the level associated with the right side, his felled foes are expressed by Moshe in terms of myriads, while Menashe’s mode of success within the framework of the natural world, represented by the “left,” will fell his enemies in their thousands.

Thus, we see from the Meshech Chochmah, that the two sets of *berachos* given by Yaakov and Moshe to Bnei Yisrael are ultimately connected to each other, with aspects of Moshe’s *berachos* in Chumash Devarim building upon the framework which was laid down by those of Yaakov in Chumash Bereishis.

חֹזֶק חֹזֶק וְנִתְחַזַּק

This week’s Meshech Chochmah is dedicated l’ilui nishmas

Fanny bat Moshe

14 Devarim 33:17.