



“Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”

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It is easy to forget that the end of Bereishit is a surprise ending.

So used to the fact that all twelve sons and their descendants are included in the Jewish nation, we forget that that wasn’t always necessarily part of the plan, that the inclusion of all children is something new and unexpected.

In one of the final scenes of Bereishit, Ya’akov summons Yosef and his sons to his deathbed, ready to bless them before he dies. Yosef brings in his sons and Ya’akov puts his hands out to bless them, and then does something strange. Ya’akov crosses his hands, putting his right hand, the dominant hand, on the head of Efrayim, the younger son, and his left hand on Menashe’s head:

בראשית מח:יג-יז

¹³וַיִּקַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת אֶפְרַיִם בְּיָמִינוֹ מִשְׁמָאל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת מְנַשֶּׁה בְּשִׁמְאֻלוֹ מִיְּמִין יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּגֵּשׁ אֵלָיו:
¹⁴וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת יָמִינוֹ וַיָּשֶׁת עַל רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וְהוּא הַצָּעִיר וְאֶת שְׁמָאֻלוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה שְׂכָל אֶת יָדָיו כִּי
מְנַשֶּׁה הַבְּכוֹר: ¹⁵וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱלֹקִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלְכוּ אֲבֹתַי לִפְנֵי אֲבֹתָם וַיִּצְחָק הָאֱלֹקִים הָרַעָה
אֹתִי מֵעוֹדִי עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: ¹⁶הַמְּלָאךְ הַגָּאֹל אֹתִי מִכָּל רָע וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בָּהֶם שְׁמֵי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי



אֲבֵרָהֶם וַיִּצְחָק וַיִּדְגּוּ לְרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ: ¹⁷וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף כִּי יָשִׁית אָבִיו יָד יְמִינוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וַיֵּרַע בְּעֵינָיו
וַיִּתְמַךְ יָד אָבִיו לְהִסִּיר אֹתָהּ מֵעַל רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם עַל רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה:

Bereishit 48:13-17

¹³[Yosef] took the two of them, Efrayim with his right hand—to Yisrael's left—and Menashe with his left hand—to Yisrael's right—and brought them close to him. ¹⁴But Yisrael stretched out his right hand and laid it on Efrayim's head, even though he was the younger son, and his left hand on Menashe's head, crossing his hands, even though Menashe was the firstborn. ¹⁵And he blessed Yosef, saying, "The God in whose ways my fathers Avraham and Yitzhak walked, the God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day. ¹⁶The angel who has redeemed me from all harm—bless the boys. Let them be called in my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzhak, and may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth." ¹⁷When Yosef saw that his father was placing his right hand on Efrayim's head, it was bad in his eyes; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Efrayim's head to Menashe's.

The text tells us that Yosef is deeply upset by this. Yosef tries to correct the mistake, first by physically adjusting his father's hands, and then, when Ya'akov resists the adjustment, by voicing his concern, telling Ya'akov he has it wrong. Ya'akov ignores Yosef's pleas. "No," he answers. "This is the way things must be. The older one will also become a great nation, but it's this one, the younger one, who will be greater."¹ And so Ya'akov blesses him the way he wants, and then, for the first time, reveals a secret to Yosef and his sons: "You will not be in Egypt forever. One day, God will redeem you, and take you out of Egypt, and back to the land we came from."²

¹ See Bereishit 48:18-20.

² See Bereishit 48:21-22.



This is often understood as Ya'akov deciding that Yosef, his favorite, will have not just one share among the tribes of Israel, but two.³ Each of his sons will be a tribe in his own right. Yosef, with two tribes among his descendants, remains the favorite among the brothers, but Ya'akov understands that all twelve of his sons are chosen in some way, that all of them are inheritors of the covenant God made with Avraham.

But when we pay close attention, the text opens up other possibilities. We've seen this scene before: a nearly blind patriarch choosing to pass on blessing before he dies; a younger son who gets blessed instead of the older son; a prediction about two sons, that the younger will be greater than the older. This is exactly the way it happened when Ya'akov took the *berakhah* away from his older brother Esav so many years before.

What is happening in this scene is an adoption: Ya'akov adopts Efrayim and Menashe as his heirs. Reuven and Shimon, Ya'akov's two oldest children, would have inherited the birthright and covenantal blessing if not for their mistakes. By stating that Efrayim and Menashe are like "Reuven and Shimon" to him, Ya'akov is stating that Yosef's two children—and, by extension, Yosef himself—are his primary heirs.

There are other clues that this is an adoption scene. When Ya'akov places his hands on Efrayim and Menashe's heads, he invokes his father and grandfather, Avraham and Yitzhak, a key feature in the transmission of the covenantal blessing.⁴ Ya'akov never mentions Avraham and Yitzhak when blessing any of his sons, only here for his grandsons. Furthermore, in blessing Efrayim and Menashe, Ya'akov says that that they should be called in his name—that is, that they should be the carriers of his name, and, implicitly, his heritage. Ya'akov emphasizes this when he says that all of Israel should bless their children in Efrayim and

³ See, for example. Rashi on Bereishit 48:5.

⁴ See Yitzhak's blessing to Ya'akov in Bereishit 28:4.



Menashe's names. Efrayim and Menashe are being set up—instead of the twelve sons—as the carrier's of Ya'akov's name, as Benei Yisrael. In this moment, Ya'akov is attempting to mark Efrayim and Menashe as the designated patriarchs of the chosen people, "like Reuven and Shimon." Ya'akov tells Efrayim and Menashe, "You will be like Reuven and Shimon to me—not just like my children, but like my two firstborn."

What's happening in this scene is not simply a blessing, but something much darker. Ya'akov is not adopting two more children along with his other twelve, but adopting them instead of the others. Yosef, the son Ya'akov who always wanted to be his heir, has two sons, and only one of them will get the blessing and become the next patriarch—the younger son, not the older.⁵ In this way, Ya'akov is reenacting his family cycle all over again, choosing one child to the exclusion of others.

According to this reading, Ya'akov never learned his lesson. After so many years of pain, of fighting between brothers, of seeing Yosef sold into slavery because his brothers were so jealous of his father's love, Ya'akov still can't change the way things have always been done. And so Ya'akov grants Yosef and his sons the coveted birthright to the exclusion of his brothers.

In the beginning of the adoption ceremony, Yosef seems to accept what is about to happen. Yosef is fine with one of his sons being the one to carry on the blessing. He accepts that his sons deserve to be like Ya'akov's two oldest and that one of them should receive the birthright. It is what would have happened years ago if his brothers hadn't sold him into slavery.

⁵ Like Esav, Menashe, the older son, gets a consolation blessing.



And then, in the moment that Ya'akov crosses his hands, everything changes. In that moment Yosef realizes the price that his children will have to pay to inherit the blessing. For one of his children to inherit the blessing, both will also have to inherit the curse that's plagued three generations of his family: younger sons usurping the rights of the older, fathers forced to choose between children, and brothers forced to hate their siblings in order to earn their parents' love. In that moment, Yosef sees that his children are about to be forced into the same cycle. "*Va-yera be-einav*—and this was evil in his eyes."

If the story ended here, nothing would change. We would follow the endless cycle, chosen and unchosen, a family forced to fracture in every generation.

But that's not what happens.

That's not what happens because Yosef is a dreamer who can see hidden possibilities. Yosef knows how to imagine things differently, how to take from one place where there's an abundance of blessing and to share so that no one needs to go hungry. Yosef is a person who knows how to change the ending of a story.

And so, in the last few lines of sefer Bereishit, Yosef's brothers come to him, ready to be his slaves.⁶ They understand that he is the chosen one, that he's inherited the blessing. The best they can hope for, in their minds, is his mercy.

But Yosef, the dreamer, does what no one in his family has ever done before: he chooses to share the blessing with his brothers, to choose his brothers along with himself. He refuses his brothers' offer, and instead promises to care for them.⁷ At this moment, when all of his

⁶ Bereishit 50:15-18.

⁷ Bereishit 50:19-21.



dreams come true, when his brothers are bowing down to him the way he predicted so many years before, Yosef chooses to change the rules of the story. And so, right before his death, Yosef reveals the secret Ya'akov told him on his deathbed, that God will take them out of Egypt.⁸ Yosef, however, expands the blessing. It is not just his descendants who will be taken out of Egypt, but his brothers' as well. For the first time in history, the *berakhah* that God gave to Avraham is being passed on to an entire family. The cycle of chosen and unchosen, of brotherly hatred, is broken. A new possibility emerges, a possibility that transforms a family into a nation.

Bereishit, which began with ruptures between human beings and God and between brothers, ends with a covenant that is given from God to man, and then shared, through deliberate choice, between brothers. The question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is answered with a deliberate yes—and that is how a nation is built.

This, perhaps, is the message of Bereishit: to be a Jew is not only to choose and to be chosen by God, but to decide, even when it seems impossible, to choose your brothers as well.

To be a Jew is to believe, in this world of too much scarcity, that there is enough—enough blessing, enough love—to be shared.

⁸ Bereishit 50:24.

