
פרשת ויחי

פרק מז פסוק כ

וַיְבָרֶכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּךָ יְבָרֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר יִשְׁמְךָ אֱ-לֹהִים כְּאֲפֵרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה
וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת־אֲפֵרַיִם לְפָנָי מִנְּשָׂה:

רש"י

הָבֵא לְבָרֵךְ אֶת בְּנָיו יְבָרְכֶם בְּבִרְכַתְּכֶם, וַיֹּאמֶר אִישׁ לְבָנוּ "יִשְׁמְךָ אֱ-לֹהִים כְּאֲפֵרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה".

מושג

הָבֵא לְבָרֵךְ אֶת בְּנָיו יְבָרְכֶם בְּבִרְכַתְּכֶם

Translation:

One who comes to bless his children should bless them with their blessing.

Explanation:

Yaakov is answering Yosef's insistence that he change the placement of his hands. Yosef is claiming that since מנשה is the elder, he should be blessed with superior achievement. Yaakov answers that you Yosef should know better. I know, retorts Yaakov that you, the youngest of the brothers, rose above them all when you stood strong - וימאן - against the advances of Potifar's wife. You thereby proved that age or environment do not dictate one's future achievement. In fact, concludes Yaakov, you Yosef will become the model parents use when they bless their children. They will use your actions to prove that every אפרים can be greater than every מנשה, that זה הקטן גדול יהיה, that we can and must rise above every challenge that is placed in our path.

Looking in the Pasuk:

There are a number of textual difficulties with this Pasuk and the one immediately preceding it. The most obvious peculiarities in our Pasuk are the use of the word בך in the singular where it should have said בכם, and the seemingly unnecessary words וישם את אפרים לפני מנשה at the end of the Pasuk. In the preceding Pasuk the word וימאן does not seem to be appropriate and the word ידעתי is repeated. In general, it is difficult to understand what Yaakov is trying to add in these Pesukim.

NOTES

There are multiple problems with even the most basic reading of our Pasuk and the lesson Rashi¹ learns from it.

- Where is there a blessing to ומנשה אפרים in Yaakov's words? The fact that all future generations will bless their children with this ברכה does not seem to be a blessing to them!
- Why does it say בך יברך and not בככם?
- Why does the Torah have to repeat לפני מנשה אפרים?
- Yaakov seems to have already finished blessing his grandsons in פסוק טז, why does he add these words here?

The תרגום יונתן² answers our second question by explaining that the blessing was given to Yosef: וברכנון ביומא ההוא למימר בך יוסף ברי ברכון בית ישראל ית ינוקא ביומא דמהולתא למימר ישוינך ה' כאפרים וכמנשה (ובירך אותם ביום ההוא לומר בך יוסף בני יברכו בית ישראל את התינוק ביום הברית מילה³ לומר ישימו ה' וכו')

The רמב"ן addresses our fourth question by explaining that these words were a response to Yosef's questioning Yaakov's hand placement:

ויברכם ביום ההוא. טעם ביום ההוא, בעבור שיוסף יפצר בו לשום מנשה ראשון, הגיד כי לא רצה להסיר יד מימיו מראש אפרים על ראש מנשה, ולא עוד אלא שחזר ואמר בפירושו במעמד ההוא בפני יוסף בברכו אותם "כאפרים וכמנשה": וישם את אפרים לפני מנשה בכל ברכותיו.

With the above in mind we might suggest a different explanation to this blessing. We begin by asking two questions on the previous Pasuk⁴. In order to focus our attention on the deeper meaning of the text the Torah will use words that are either redundant or out of place. In Pasuk יט we have both. The word ידעתי is repeated twice and the word וימאן is very much out of place⁵. Why?

The Zohar picks up on these textual peculiarities and gives an extraordinary interpretation of the Pasuk:

כיון דסליק יוסף עיניו וחמא דיוקנא דאבוי יתיב בקיומיה ותב לאחורא, תא חזי מה כתיב (לט:ח) וימאן ויאמר אל אשת אדניו, א"ל קודשא בריך הוא את אמרת וימאן ויאמר, חייך וימאן ויאמר אחרא ייתי לברכא לבנך ויתברכון ביה, הדא הוא דכתיב וימאן אביו ויאמר ידעתי בני ידעתי, כיון דאמר ידעתי בני אמאי אמר ידעתי אחרא? אלא אמר ידעתי בני בזמנא דקיימת בגופך דאת ברי כד חמית דיוקנא דילי ותבת בקיומך... (כיון שהרים יוסף עיניו וראה דמות דיוקנו של אביו נתישב בדעתו וחזר לאחוריו. בא וראה מה שכתוב וימאן ויאמר אל אשת אדניו, אמר לו הקב"ה אתה אמרת וימאן ויאמר, חייך וימאן ויאמר אחר יבא לברך לבנך ויתברכו בו, זה מה שכתב

¹ There does not seem to be a source for Rashi's commentary that one who comes to bless his children should bless them with these words.

² The רמב"ן as well understands the בך to be referring to Yosef. It is important to note here that the title תרגום יונתן בן עוזיאל written in our Chumashim is almost certainly an error. We know this because the גמרא (מגילה ג.) teaches us that the Targum on the Torah was written by אונקלוס and the Targum on נביאים was written by עוזיאל. יונתן בן עוזיאל. No mention is made about a Targum on the Torah written by עוזיאל. (In fact one who reads the גמרא will see clearly that he wrote no other Targum.) There is also the fact that Rashi in Chumash never quotes a Targum of עוזיאל while Rashi in Novi quotes him extensively. Rather, the חיד"א and others conclude that it is actually the תרגום ירושלמי (many think that the abbreviation ת"י was written and an unlearned printer decided to write it as תרגום יונתן instead of תרגום ירושלמי). Proof to this is in the fact that when various ראשונים quote a תרגום ירושלמי we actually find the text in what we call תרגום יונתן. We will, therefore, cease using the term תרגום יונתן for this Targum.

³ It is not clear where the Targum saw a hint to a ברית מילה in the Pasuk. The פירוש on the Targum suggests that the words ביום ההוא seem to point to a special day, which would refer to the day of the ברית מילה. He adds that this is why we bless the baby with the blessing יהיה גדול יהיה, referring to the blessing of Yaakov when the קטן was made into the גדול.

⁴ וימאן אביו ויאמר ידעתי בני ידעתי גמ"הוא יתה"לעם וגמ"הוא יגדל ואולם אהיו הקטן יגדל ממנו ונרעו יתה"לעם גמ"הוא:

⁵ The shoshon is best translated as to steadfastly refuse. For example it is used by פרעה refusing to free ישראל בני or by Yosef refusing the advances of פוטיפר. It seems strange to use the word here where it could have simply stated ויאמר אביו ידעתי.

וימאן אביו ויאמר ידעתי בני ידעתי, כיון שאמר ידעתי למה אמר ידעתי אחר? אלא אמר ידעתי בני בזמן שקיימת בגופך שאתה בני כשראית דיוקני ושבת אל הברית⁶ שלך...

According to the explanation of the Zohar, Yaakov is telling Yosef that he not only knows who is the older child, he also knows when Yosef used the words ויאמר, when he steadfastly refused the advances of the wife of Potifar. It is as if the Pasuk said: ויאמר אביו ידעתי ויאמר בני.

While this explains the double use of the word ידעתי and the word ויאמר, it leaves us perplexed as to why Yaakov would mention this now. Why did Yaakov choose this moment to tell Yosef that he knew about his trials and triumphs? Why is this the response to Yosef's insistence that his father place his right hand on Menashe?

There is a puzzling מדרש רבה which also comes to explain the repeated ידעתי:

ויאמר יוסף אל אביו לא כן אבי וגוי, ויאמר אביו ויאמר ידעתי בני ידעתי, ידעתי מעשה ראובן ובלהה ומעשה יהודה ותמר, מה דברים שלא נתגלו לך נתגלו לי דברים שנתגלו לך על אחת כמה וכמה (ב"ר פרשה צז).

Here too we are left to wonder what יהודה ותמר or ראובן ובלהה have to do with Yaakov's answer to Yosef? And, to what is Yaakov referring when he says לך דברים שנתגלו לך?

Yaakov is indeed responding to Yosef's objection. Yaakov is telling Yosef that his criticism is based on a mistaken assumption. For some reason Yosef is assuming that greatness, and therefore the blessings that go with it, are determined by age; that at birth the eldest gains a determination for superior achievement; hence placing the right hand on אפרים will place an unrealistic burden of expectations on him⁷. To this Yaakov retorts that you Yosef should know better than anyone that this is not true. Who should know better than Yosef who is born the 11th of 12 children, who is forced to grow in an alien environment with no advantage of age or education, and yet when severely tested with the most difficult of moral challenges rises above it all and proves himself to be a true son of Yaakov? "I know", ידעתי says Yaakov, "that you superseded every expectation and rose above every obstacle to become יוסף הצדיק." "So why do you think that אפרים cannot do the same?" Rather, Yaakov insists again at the end of the Pasuk, וישם את אפרים לפני מנשה; "I know exactly what I'm doing by placing אפרים first."

This, adds the מדרש רבה, was the challenge of ראובן and יהודה. They were challenged to show incredible moral fortitude and be ready to admit to wrongdoing even though they risked tremendous damage to their reputations. They too rose to the challenge and exhibited extraordinary moral character. And, concludes the מדרש, although you Yosef did not know of their actions, your actions - מה שנתגלה לך - where you withstood the moral challenge of פוטיפר, should have taught you this lesson well.

And by doing so Yaakov is not only challenging אפרים to rise to greatness but he is challenging מנשה as well to not rely on birthright alone. גם הוא יהיה לעם must realize that he too, like אפרים, will only realize his G-d given talents through his efforts and his efforts alone.

This will become the story of the Jew. He will, like Yosef, be placed in the most trying of environments and be challenged to rise above it all and fully realize his G-d given potential. Struggling against a powerful stream of negative influences will be the norm for the Jew. He will always be wrestling with forces greater and more powerful than he and will always be expected to overcome.

Yaakov thus tells Yosef that בכך יברכו, you will become the model for the blessings and achievements that will come to the Jewish people. Looking at you they will realize that every אפרים

⁶ Perhaps these words of the Zohar can help us understand why this is mentioned at a ברית מילה.

⁷ Yosef is thus not bothered by Yaakov's left hand placed on מנשה, but only on the right hand that is placed on אפרים. This is supported by the wording of the Torah: וירא יוסף כי ישית אביו יד ימינו על ראש אפרים וירא בעיניו אפרים וירא בעיניו אפרים.

can overcome his 'natural' shortcomings and achieve greatness. וישם את אפרים לפני מנשה, the placing of my right hand on אפרים is no error, concludes Yaakov, but rather the lesson that Yosef's example has taught the Jewish people for all time.

This therefore, teaches Rashi, is the greatest blessing a father can give his children. No matter how difficult the task, no matter how many barriers seem to stand in your way, remember יוסף הצדיק and remember that Yaakov placed אפרים before מנשה. In effect, we are blessing our children with the very same ברכה we give at the time of a ברית מילה⁸ when we say זה הקטן גדול יהיה. This is the deeper meaning of the ברכה of וכמנשה כאפרים ואלקים כאפרים.

Questions for Further Thought:

- a. Can you give other examples of the younger brother becoming greater than the older brother? Why do you think this happens?
- b. Where else is the word וימאן used in the Yosef story? How do you think it connects to the other two?

⁸ See footnote 3.