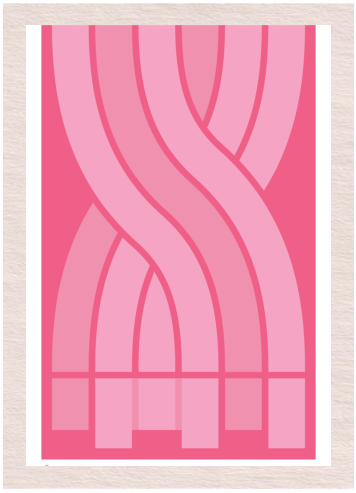
Vayechi: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



ART BY HILLEL SMITH © 2025

Jacob lives in Egypt for 17 more years. Before he dies, he asks Joseph to promise that he'll bury him in the Holy Land. **He also blesses Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh**, elevating them both to be progenitors of the tribes of Israel.

Jacob then blesses all of his sons, assigning each a specific role: Judah will produce leaders, Levi priests, Issachar scholars, etc. When Jacob passes away, his remains are accompanied by a large procession, and he is taken back to the cave of Machpelah, in Hebron, and buried there together with his father and grandfather.

Joseph, too, dies, and he, too, asks for his bones to be taken back to Canaan. **Before he passes away, he promises the Israelites that God will remember them and take them out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land.**

"On that day, he blessed them...saying to them, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh'""

Take a deeper dive

This week's Torah portion solves one of Judaism's greatest mysteries. **Every Friday evening, we place our hands on the heads of our sons, and bless them thusly: "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."**

Huh? Why? A much clearer blessing, after all, might've been, "may God make you like the humble Jacob," or "may God make you like the wise Isaac," or "may God make you like the faithful Abraham." **We have righteous and mighty forefathers to look up to; why do we bless our children in the hope that they turn out like Joseph's two boys?**

The rabbis have asked themselves this question for millennia, and have proposed a few illuminating answers.

First of all, taught the 19th century Lithuanian Rabbi, Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, better known as the Netziv, it's because we know that Ephraim was a great Torah scholar and a pious man, and Manasseh was a worldly man and a great and wise leader. **The blessing, then, is for our children to spend their days doing something fruitful and life-giving**, either studying Torah, being a diligent civil servant, or both.

Other rabbis say the blessing had something even simpler in mind: Ephraim and Manasseh, they noted, were the first brothers in the Torah who were not engaged in a deadly fight (see under: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and everyone else), and so **we merely wish for our children to experience the same peacefulness and brotherly love.**

But there's one more explanation, one that ought to resonate with us moderns. Ephraim and Manasseh, a few rabbis pointed out, grew up in the Pharaoh's Egypt, an empire devoted to wickedness, idolatry, and excess. They were the sons of a wealthy and powerful man, and they could've easily decided to dedicate their lives to pursuing the same material comforts, the same wealth and power and influence. Instead, however, they never abandoned their family's covenant with God, and so **we evoke their names with the hope that no matter what the circumstances of our children's lives, they, too, remain joyfully faithful to our timeless tradition.**

Join the club

You'll receive our weekly newsletter with the Torah reading, updates on our community and local events, and everything else you need to dive into the greatest story ever told. Visit **simchattorahchallenge.org** to sign up today!