

My friends, tonight Jews all over the world will perform the beautiful weekly ritual of blessing our children. The main part of the blessing comes from the Torah, from Numbers, the famous Priestly Benediction. But before we offer those words, there is an introductory prayer. For girls, it is *May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah*. For boys, it is *May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh*.

Especially when we contrast it with the girls' version, an obvious question emerges. Why do we pray that God should make our sons like Ephraim and Menasheh, as opposed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Why do we invoke the names of the matriarchs for our daughters, but do not invoke the names of the patriarchs for our sons?

The easiest answer leads to another question. The answer is that we use Ephraim and Menasheh because of what it

says in this week's Torah reading. Listen to excerpts from the passage:

*Some time afterward, Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Menasheh and Ephraim. When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to see you," Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.*

*Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, "Who are these?" And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." "Bring them up to me," he said, "that I may bless them." Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well."*

*Joseph then removed them from his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground. Joseph took the two of*

*them, Ephraim with his right hand — to Israel's left — and Menasheh with his left hand — to Israel's right — and brought them close to him. But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Menasheh's head — thus crossing his hands — although Menasheh was the first-born.*

*When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it wrong; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Menasheh's. "Not so, Father," Joseph said to his father, "for the other is the first-born; place your right hand on his head." But his father objected, saying, "I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you shall Israel*

*invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.” Thus he put Ephraim before Menasheh.*

This passage answers a question we did not ask—why was Ephraim put before Menasheh?—but not why Jacob did not invoke the names of his father and grandfather, Isaac and Abraham.

For one answer, let’s look at the history of fraternal relationships in the Torah so far:

The first brothers were Cain and Abel. Cain murdered Abel. As a native of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, I can tell you that brotherly love is not off to a great start.

Abraham has a brother, Nahor, and a brother Haran. Haran died at a young age, while his father was still alive. The Torah tells us virtually nothing about Nahor.

Our next set of brothers are Ishmael and his half-brother, Isaac. Their relationship is such that Ishmael is expelled from Abraham's household. Ishmael becomes the patriarch of the Arab nations, most of which still seek the destruction of Israel, both the people and the State.

Lest you think that this enmity would have been lessened had Isaac and Ishmael been full brothers, the Torah next give us a set of twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. Their relationship is full of deceit, greed, and trickery. They are estranged for most of their adult lives, coming together only at the end of Isaac's life to bury him.

Then we get Joseph and his brothers who sell him into slavery.

In Genesis, the term "my brother" hardly warms the heart as a term of endearment. It rings more like a call to arms.

But Ephraim and Menasheh are exceptions. According to rabbinic tradition, they were so close that even the elevation of Ephraim over the first-born Menasheh did not come between them. They are seen as the precursors of the verse from Psalm 133 *How good it is when brothers dwell together*—הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד.

And now, my friends, I have a question to ask. Would you prefer that your children achieve greatness but be estranged from one another, or would you rather that they lead normal lives but have close and loving relationships with each other? To me, it is a rhetorical question. The former holds no attraction for me as a parent, but the latter could not be more important to me. And so, for those who feel as I do, let me conclude tonight with the prayer that God make our children, daughters as well as sons, like Ephraim and Menasheh.