

Va-Yechi January 2, 2010 / 16 Tevet 5770

Josh calls his mother and asks, "How are you?" "Not too good," Sylvia says. "I'm feeling very weak." "Why, mother?" "Sylvia says, "Because I haven't eaten in 23 days." Her son replies, "That's terrible, mother. Why haven't you eaten in 23 days?" Sylvia answers, "Because I didn't want, Gd forbid, my mouth would be filled with food if you should happen to call!"

Today I want to talk about what parents do to their children - what we teach them and what they learn. Some of what parents teach their kids is good, and important, vital for their success in life. But sometimes, as we have seen in the Book of Genesis, parents actually hamstringing their kids by passing on character traits and patterns of behavior and thought that they really should have kept to themselves. As parents we want to give our children everything, but some things might be better kept to ourselves.

At the end of the Sefer Beraysheet three generations come together. It is, I believe, a first. We did not see Abraham with Jacob, or Isaac with Joseph, but here in VaYehi, Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe, all share a scene. And in this one scene each of the characters has a role to play. Jacob, the blind grandfather is called upon to bless his grandsons who he has adopted as children of his own. Joseph brings the boys forward for the blessing helping his father to put his right hand on Menashe, the elder of the sons, and the left on the younger, Ephraim. He wants both sons to be blessed in the natural order, and why shouldn't he? He doesn't want his father to show favoritism to one son or the other. No one knows how painful and destructive that can be more than Joseph himself. It took most of his life to come to grips with it, but he wants his boys treated fairly. Jacob, of course, has something else in mind. He switches his hands and deliberately blesses the younger son over the older one.

Now much has been made of the fact that even though the younger son got the first born blessing, they don't have the same blow up as Jacob and Esau. Unlike their ancestors, they are not at each other's throats. As far as we know they live happily ever after. And so, to this day, we bless our children, "May Gd make you like Ephraim and Menashe." In other words, "May Gd keep you from fighting with one another." Good. But I don't think enough credit is given to Joseph here. He was the one who stood up and said, "No, just do it right." He was the one who willfully and deliberately chose to break the pattern of sibling rivalry that he had lived most of his younger years. He was determined to have it stop with him. He was not going to pass it on to his children and he was going to undo what was already done to him.

I have a terrible fear of lightening. I just can't stand being outdoors when lightening is in the vicinity. A while back, someone shared a story about lightening with me. This woman actually liked thunderstorms. In fact, from the time she was a child, she would always run to the window to look at the lightening, listen to the thunder and watch it rain. One time her mother was visiting and it began to rain. Then came the thunder and the lightening and, instinctively she ran to the window just as she had done since she was a child. She turned to her mom and said, "Wow, I really love thunderstorms!" And her mother said to her, "You know why?" The daughter said, "No, why?" And the mother told her, "That's because when you were little, every

time there was a thunderstorm I brought you to the window and said to you: 'Look how beautiful the thunderstorm is!' And do you know why I did that? It was because I was afraid of thunderstorms. I was afraid of thunderstorms, but I was determined not to pass that fear on to you." Amazing story, no?

Each of us is leaving a legacy every single day. We determine what we will pass on to the next generation. The most important aspect of our legacy, the most important part of our kids *Yirusha*, their inheritance, is not material - it is emotional, it is spiritual, it is psychological. We want our children to be successful and one of the ways we can help assure that is by giving them strong coping skills and a positive, healthy outlook on life. The weaknesses, the frustrations, the self-doubt, the pettiness, the character flaws we live with ourselves do not need to be part of their mindset, their way of looking at the world, even if it is a big part of who we are. We have the power to craft our own legacy and to determine what gets carried forward to the next generation. We determine how they will be blessed.

And you know what, it's not OK to say, "Well I inherited this *mishagass* from my father". It's not OK to say, "That's the way my mom raised me, it's in my blood." Maybe it is, but that doesn't give you the right or privilege to force your kids, or your grandchildren, to shoulder the same thing. Too many people blame their present on the past, and feel that their future is foreordained. But it's not true. The choices you make today don't need to simply be based on the patterns of the past - you have the power to craft the future.

Every week we stand and bless our children because of the words of Torah we read today. We say, "May Gd make you like Ephraim and Menashe". But I think that at the same time, deep inside our hearts, we should also say a little prayer for ourselves: "Dear Gd, make me a little bit more like Joseph. Help me to realize ALL that I am giving my kids, and let me only pass on the good stuff." I hope that in the New Year ahead you focus on the good stuff, and that you make sure that it is passed on to the people who look to you for guidance and leadership in their lives. Shabbat Shalom