Jewish Tribune – Vayechi

**Lofty Aspirations**

The widespread minhag in Klal Yisroel is to bensch our children on Friday night. Aside from anything else, it should contribute towards a special feeling of closeness between parents and their children as the Shabbos is ushered in.

Some families save this blessing for erev Yom Kippur. This is the practice of my wife’s family. Although one of my wife’s sisters was keen to introduce it on a weekly basis and persuaded her father to do so just for her. It did look a bit strange to unaccustomed guests when my father-in-law bensched his youngest daughter and not his other children!

The words used around the Jewish world for this brocha comes from this week’s sedra (Bereishis 48,20):

יְשִׂמְךָ אֱלֹקִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכִמְנַשֶּׁה

May Hashem make you like Efraim and like Menashe

Why do bensch our children to be like Efraim and Menashe? Why not Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov? After all, we bensch our daughters to be like Soroh, Rivka, Rochel and Leah?

Several answers are given to this famous question. Some say that this was the first generation where there was no sibling rivalry or jealousy between brothers. And that is our aspiration for our children. To get on with each other and, as one person I know reminds his children almost daily, that they should be each other’s best friends.

Another answer often given relates to potential. The hope and dream of every parent is that their children live a life of Torah and mitzvos, have happy and productive lives and fulfil their potential. And that they use the unique talents that HKBH has given them to paint their masterpiece, to contribute to Klal Yisroel and the society in which they live and serve HKBH to the best of their ability.

Quite a hope and quite some dream. But as we bensch our children on Friday night, we actually ask for more.

Menashe and Efraim were the sons of shevatim but became shevatim. In a way, they exceeded their potential. We daven that our children don’t just fulfil their potential, but they exceed it. Talk about high expectations of Jewish parents!

In fact, when the Torah (Bereishis 48,5) says:

אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה כִּרְאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן יִהְיוּ לִי

Efraim and Menashe are like Reuven and Shimon to me,

the Rosh and other meforshim note that the gemtria of the names of רְאוּבֵן and שִׁמְעוֹן add up to the same gematria as אֶפְרַיִם and מְנַשֶּׁה. Well almost. רְאוּבֵן and שִׁמְעוֹן totals 725 and אֶפְרַיִם and מְנַשֶּׁה comes to 726. We actually want our children not just to reach the spiritual heights of the previous generation but to exceed them!

But there is another answer. Let me preface it in reference to an article I read recently. The article was written by a well-known journalist in a well-known broadsheet. This is what it said:

*If I told you there was something which is freely available and totally accepted, yet which poses a vast, insidious threat to millions of children, you’d probably think I was mad. Surely, if that were true, whatever it was would be banned. No government would allow our young people to exposed to such a hazard.*

*I’m not talking about drugs. At least society disapproves of drugs. No such universal opprobrium attaches itself to smartphones (which should really be called dumbphones) although it becomes clearer by the day that these things make kids sadder, lonelier, less inclined to study or to have fun and more inclined to end their precious young lives.*

*How much more evidence do we need that smartphones are the nicotine of our age?*

While the figures will hopefully be much less in our communities, the statistics for the UK as whole are shocking.

91% of British children have a smartphone by the age of 14. This rises to 96% by the time they are 16. Although I do not have data on this, I presume the vast majority of these phones are unmonitored and unfiltered.

We are not talking about a few hundred kids. There are over 14 million young people in the UK. And what about the rest of the world? I doubt the above statistics vary greatly in other countries.

This means that our holy and precious children are growing up in an increasingly decadent world, where deprivation is normalised and where children can see things that no child should see.

It is also an increasingly complicated world. The fallout from the rapid rise in use of smartphones is unchartered and scary. Even if our children or grandchildren do not have smartphones, they live in a world that does.

Rav Gifter notes that Efraim and Menashe grew up in golus and in a spiritually decadent society. Yet, Yosef succeeded in imbuing them with the ability to live unaffected by their environment. They reached the levels of kedusha of earlier generations and were worthy of establishing tribes of their own.

This is the brocha we give our children. Like Yaakov before us, we hope and pray that our children remain pure and maintain the levels of kedusha of the generations that preceded them. Never have these brochos been more needed.

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