

# Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

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## THE BIRTH ORDER EFFECT

**Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman**

In a fascinating analysis of 700 brothers who played Major League Baseball, psychologist Frank Sulloway found that younger brothers were 10.6 times more likely to try and steal a base, and 3.2 times more likely to be successful at stealing one than their older counterparts. This study aligns with previous research which indicates that sibling birth order influences personality development. The oldest sibling is generally more intellectual, responsible, and conforming. To carve out a space for themselves, younger siblings take more risks, are more creative, and tend to be non-conforming. Despite the supporting evidence, these findings are hotly debated. Subsequent studies showed that utilizing more robust research methods yielded no significant personality differences among siblings based on their birth order.

Without taking a stand on which side of this debate is more convincing, the topic of birth order is clearly central to the entire Sefer Bereishit, reaching its full development in Parshat Vayechi. To the chagrin of his older children, Yaakov, the youngest child, favored his two youngest children, Yosef and Binyamin. This contributed to the eventual sale of Yosef and set the stage for the reunification of the family in Egypt. It is therefore surprising that when blessing Yosef's two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, Yaakov switches his hands and gives the better blessing to the younger son, Ephraim. Yosef, having experienced the dangers inherent in favoring one child over the other, especially a younger child over an older one, tries to intervene, and tells his father that he has the order wrong. Yaakov, however, responds that his preference for Ephraim is intentional. He, after all, will become greater than Menashe, and is thus deserving of the greater blessing.

Does Yaakov not realize the dangers of his decision? Why does he insist on favoring one over the other at the end of his life? Perhaps Yaakov is communicating to his children, grandchildren, and to all subsequent generations, that success in life should have nothing to do with birth order. While being born first may have advantages, it does not determine one's future accomplishments. Being born second, third, or twelfth,

may have some disadvantages, but birth order does not dictate one's place in the world. The youngest child can succeed more than the oldest child, and for that matter, the oldest child can succeed more than the younger ones. Starting with Kayin and Hevel and culminating with Ephraim and Menashe, Sefer Bereishit subverts the accepted norm in which the oldest is automatically endowed with greatness and privilege. This sets the stage for Sefer Shemot, where a younger brother, Moshe, surpasses his older siblings, and everyone graciously accepts that their roles are based on merit alone.

As the scientific community continues to debate whether birth order statistically impacts personality, perhaps the message of Sefer Bereishit is that, either way, we should not let it impact our accomplishments. Success should be based on merit, not birth order.

## THE FATHERS' JOURNEYS FORESHADOW THE SONS'

**Rabbi Amnon Bazak**

The long description of bringing Yaakov's body for burial in Israel is surprising. Instead of going straight to Israel, the mourners cross the Jordan River: "They came to Goren ha-Atad, which is beyond the Jordan" (50:10). Why take this circuitous route? Why not travel directly northward to

## ONKELOS CORNER

**Rabbi Jack Abramowitz**

3. Yaakov said to Yoseif, "God Almighty was revealed to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and He blessed me. (Genesis 48:3)

The Torah says *va-yitnaklu*, which Onkelos translates as *va-atevni pisgama*, as "was revealed" which is less anthropomorphic than the Hebrew "appeared."

— Adapted from *The Complete Targum Onkelos*

Hevron? Hizkuni suggests that “beyond the Jordan” simply means “in the land of Canaan,” which is beyond the Jordan. This explanation is difficult to accept, because throughout Tanakh, the expression “beyond the Jordan” on its own always refers to the eastern bank of the river.

The rest of that *pasuk* is even more difficult to understand: “They held there a very great and solemn lamentation; and he observed a mourning period of seven days for his father” (50:10). Why would they hold a mourning ceremony there? Yaakov died in Egypt, and he was going to be buried in Hevron. What is the significance of Goren ha-Atad?

Consider this journey in light of the journey that the Jewish people will make, many years later, from Egypt to Israel. Now the reason for mourning here becomes clear. It parallels the mourning for Moshe that would later occur on the eastern shore of the Jordan.

Other phrases link the two journeys. In both cases, the Jews brought themselves and others up out of Egypt. Here we read, “Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a very large troop” (50:9). Later, “Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds” (Ex. 12:38). The burial procession of Yaakov and the exodus from Egypt are the only two times the Torah speaks of horses and chariots. Here, we have “Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him” (50:9), and when the sea split, “Waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen” (Ex. 14:28).

It seems that Yaakov’s burial procession is meant as a foreshadowing of the later journey that the Jewish people will make as they leave Egypt. The connection between them is clear: before Yaakov dies, he mentions repeatedly that the people will go back to Israel. Yaakov tells Yosef of God’s appearance, when Yaakov was about to leave Israel for the first time. He promises Yaakov, “I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession” (48:4). Later Yaakov blesses Efraim and Menashe and promises them a double portion in the land. He reiterates, “I am about to die; but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers” (48:21). Clearly, Yaakov is worried that as the family thrives in Egypt, they will be less inclined to return to Israel. Therefore, Yaakov’s final journey home is structured so as to foreshadow the trip he hopes his descendants will soon be making themselves.

## PATHWAYS TO THE HEART

### Rabbi Reuven Boshnack

Yaakov Avinu said to his grandchildren, “Through you, the Jewish people will be blessed. They will bless their children, ‘Hashem should make you like Efraim and Menashe’” (Bereishis 48:20).

In *Sefer Yetzirah*, we find the following quotation: There are twelve leaders within each person, male and female. These are the twelve tribes, and each person requires them all, sometimes this one, and sometimes a different one. Similarly, Hashem sometimes uses some shevatim versus other shevatim, depending on the situation. When Hashem wants to expand the Jewish people, he uses the *middah* of Yosef (of Efraim and Menashe), since the Jewish people cannot increase on their own. The status quo of the Jewish people, when left on their own is to be connected to the unity of Hashem. In the face of this close connection, there is no place for expansion. The Jewish people needed to enter exile in order to expand. Once they were in exile, they were not overwhelmed and overshadowed by the strength of Hashem’s unity. Their individual attributes could shine, and they could expand.

Yosef called his first child “Menashe,” meaning (Bereishis 41:51) “He caused me to forget my father’s home.” He called the second child Efraim (Bereishis 41:52), which means “to increase.” The בֵּית יְעַקָּב says he thinks that this should have been reversed. Yosef’s mourning should have been mitigated by the increase in his family. However, growth can only come as a result of forgetting.

When someone stands before a king, the enormity of the experience inhibits his own growth and self-expression. Therefore, Yosef thanked Hashem for allowing him to forget, to feel distant from his father’s home so that he could have the room to increase. This is why Yaakov blessed them, Menashe and Efraim, individually, so that the nation of Israel could increase. Afterwards, Menashe and Efraim were counted and blessed with Yosef. Any place where Levi was counted as its own tribe, Efraim and Menashe were considered subsumed by Yosef. This is because Levi means “clarity in avodah,” the strong feeling that we know what Hashem wants. This clarity prevents the distance required for growth. This closeness shows itself as all of the Jews united, serving the one Hashem, Who is great and awesome. Therefore when we count Levi there is no place to count Menashe and Efraim.