

“Israeli Friday Night” and Jewish Continuity

Parashat Vayechi 5775

“Joseph was told that his father was sick. [Joseph went to his father,] taking his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, along with him... [Jacob] gave Joseph a blessing. He said, 'The God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked, is the G-d who has been my Shepherd from as far back as I can remember until this day, [sending] an angel to deliver me from all evil. May He bless the lads, and let them carry my name, along with the names of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac. May they increase in the land like fish.'... On that day [Jacob] blessed them. He said, '[In time to come] Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'” (Genesis 48:1, 15-16, 20)

Why did Jacob determine that all future generations bless their children to follow in the paths of Ephraim and Manasseh? Why them?

The commentators note the distinctiveness that these two brothers displayed. The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin 1817- 1893) comments that these brothers were unique in that Ephraim was the Scholar, and Manasseh was the communal leader. We in turn bless our children to display both of these characteristics.

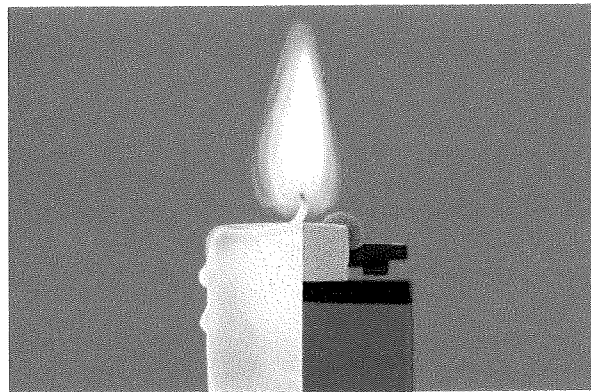
Other commentators note that they were the first brothers who actually got along nicely with each other, and that is their merit.

A commonly quoted understanding is that they were both raised in the exile, yet they overcame the negative Egyptian influences and remained true to their faith. Jacob foresaw the Jewish exile so he was blessing all of us to learn from the model of Ephraim and Manasseh, and not from the foreign cultures that will play host to us. – Rabbi Leib Irons

It seems strange that the blessing for boys singles out Ephraim and Menashe instead of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—or, for that matter, any other great biblical leaders who were men (Joseph, Moses, King David, King Solomon). A few answers have been proposed.

The view most commonly held is that of contemporary Israeli Rabbi Mordechai Elon who wrote that Ephraim and Menashe are the first pair of brothers in the Bible who do not see each other as competitors. They do not struggle for power, and their dynamic as a family never seems to be the source of great difficulty in either of their lives. By blessing our children to be like Ephraim and Menashe we seek to bestow upon our children the legacy of peace and harmony between brothers.

Another interpretation, by 19th century Israeli Rabbi Shmuel Hominer, notes that Ephraim and Menashe grew up in Egypt, unlike the patriarchs who all grew up in Israel. Ephraim and Menashe maintained their distinct identity as Israelites, even though they lived in a place where they were surrounded and outnumbered by the Egyptians and their gods. The ability to remain faithful to Judaism, even when it is a struggle, is a legacy that we want to pass on to our children. Tamar Fox (MyJewishLearning.com)



בצהריים פרלמנט, בערב קידוש.

מסורת של שישי ישראלי

Shabbat ad generates protest across the board

A television ad juxtaposes two Israeli families experiencing a typical Friday evening. (JPost)

An advertisement campaign designed to promote the values of Jewish tradition and the familial benefits of Shabbat meals has generated anger for negatively stereotyping secular families.

The campaign is being promoted by Shishi Yisraeli, an organization that says it wants to “draw people closer to Judaism and to emphasize and strengthen family values and national unity.”

The advertisement, which was uploaded to YouTube, shows a secular family on Friday night. The children are in their pajamas eating breakfast cereal, behaving poorly and shouting at their parents.

Later the family is sitting together watching TV while each person is engrossed in using his or her smartphones, before the children begin to fight with each other again.

The ad then switches to a family, with the men wearing yarmulkes, having a Shabbat meal together with the father reciting kiddush, the blessing over wine said on the Sabbath.

“Which kind of Friday night do you want your children to remember,” says the narrator.

The campaign includes bill board and posters, prominently displayed around Tel Aviv.

Details regarding Shishi Yisraeli are scarce and its website does not include any information

about the group or who stands behind it.

According to an article in The Marker last week, the organization was set up this year and was established by businessman Haim Taib.

The group's Facebook page says it was established by a group of secular businessmen who "believe national unity begins with family unity and family unity begins around the table, where it is possible to converse in comfort and to deepen family ties."

It says that bringing the value of Shabbat meals together with the family back to public prominence and "if Israeli families sit down together and strengthen their connection to each other... it could make a huge change in Israeli society."

The ad has, however, upset secular and pluralist groups, who have described it as offensive and derisive.

Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, president of the pluralist Shalom Hartman Institute, described the campaign as "anachronistic" and said it depicted a view of religion in Israel that was out of date by several decades.

The campaign is just silly, and it's an old narrative which is no longer relevant and ignores the fact that many Israelis today engage in Jewish practices and customs," said Hartman.

The advertisements do not respect the deep transformations that have taken place in Israel over the past 15 years, and that the country is now Jewishly very diverse. Many Israelis do not want to be Orthodox, but nevertheless engage in Judaism on Shabbat, in life-cycle events, and other aspects of their lives, and are exploring new ways to interact with their religion on their own," he said.

Rabbi Sivan Maas, the dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism Tmura Israel, said it reinforced the views of religiously observant people that secular people have no values and no beliefs.

"The Shishi Yisraeli ads suggest exactly this," said Maas.

"The family sitting around the Shabbat table is considered to have good values, but the secular family is shown as ridiculous," she said.

"Secular people are also believers. We believe in human rights, justice, good education for all and democracy.

We can choose how we observe Shabbat and many secular people have family experiences and enjoy family life outside of a religious context.

"The assumption that secular people have less of a Jewish experience is insulting and ignorant of what secular Judaism is about," Maas said.

ROUTINE EMERGENCIES by Allison Kaplan Sommer (Ha'aretz)

The stomach-turning campaign for an 'Israeli' Friday night dinner
How a \$1.3 million campaign makes traditional Shabbat meal controversial in Israel.

By Allison Kaplan Sommer | Dec. 22, 2014

There really shouldn't be anything controversial about a traditional Jewish Friday night dinner. After all, a nice meal with a blessing over candles, wine, and challah bread never hurt anybody.

Even secular Israelis who don't find traditional Jewish practice their cup of tea, or simply embrace the idea of Friday night as "family time," certainly were never threatened by it.

That all changed this week, when a new ham-handed campaign was unleashed, delivering the message that there's only one truly "Israeli" way to spend Friday evening, leaving many infuriated and insulted.

The new campaign called "Israeli Friday" (Shishi Yisraeli, in Hebrew) appeared suddenly. Seemingly overnight, the signs were plastered all over the billboards of Tel Aviv and on Facebook. The campaign's bright colorful graphics feature basic cartoons with a simple definition of what an authentic "Israeli Friday" entails. For example, one sign might feature a vegetable and a wine cup - "Market shopping in the morning, Kiddush in the evening." Or another, with a soccer ball next to challah bread, "Soccer game in the afternoon, kiddush in the evening." But what really fueled the angry responses was the campaign's video element, run both as TV commercials on primetime television and on YouTube featuring an utterly derogatory portrait of a non-Orthodox Israeli family on Friday night.

The clip begins with a little boy in his dark room dismantling his computer keyboard while he enthuses: "I love Friday evenings. Nobody bothers me!" Cut to his sister beaming over a bowl overflowing with milk and cereal, "There's nothing like Friday night dinner!" while her little brother screams over his empty bowl "Mommy, she finished all the cornflakes!" The older boy continues to narrate, "The beauty of Friday night as the whole family sits together." Indeed the whole family is shown together - each absorbed in their cell phone ignoring each other - stopping only to squabbling loudly.

The voiceover intones: "What kind of Friday night do you want your children to remember?" Quickly, the dysfunctional hyperactive family is contrasted with one spotlessly dressed in white - dad with a kippa - gathered around a table cloaked in white with Shabbat candles burning and

white flowers in the background. The children are calm, the parents are beaming, and all is harmonious.

The insensitivity of the 5 million shekel (\$1.28 million) advertising campaign hit on a number of levels.

First, the branding of a Jewish religious campaign as THE "Israeli Friday" negates the quarter of the country that is Muslim or Christian. It's something of a media illustration of the proposed nation-state bill, equating a Jewish ritual with "Israeliness."

Secondly, the implication that only morally superior Orthodox Jewish Shabbat customs can save the modern Israeli family from a gadget-obsessed value-free existence deeply insults those families who work hard to infuse their lives with meaning and values that aren't religious. By implication, it delegitimizes alternative Friday night family bonding activities - eating in a restaurant, attending a concert or theater performance together, or a bonfire on the beach.

The campaign also sends a clear message that a peaceful and pleasant family meal on Friday night is inconceivable without religious symbols. As if blessings over bread and wine and candles cast some kind of Harry Potter spell which magically turns squabbling children into perfectly behaved angels. (As someone whose family makes these blessings weekly, I can state authoritatively that it doesn't work.)

Who is behind the campaign? Registered on the recently-created non-profit "Israeli Friday" group are three prominent businessmen: Haim Taib, Yoav Ben Yakar and Itamar Deutcher. Haaretz was told that the campaign was funded by "totally private" money from the pockets of the members of the non-profit.

Crossing the line

It comes on the heels of other Shabbat-pushing campaigns that have taken place in past months, one of them the international initiative called "The Shabbos Project" and another local non-profit called "Israeli Shabbat," and of course, countless programs by religious organizations aimed at returning misguided secular Jews to the true path of observance.

All of the campaigns preach "unity" on the Shabbat - but it is always a one-sided unity. Always inviting the secular to experience an Orthodox Jewish Shabbat, or at least take a step closer to it, and see the light. As irritatingly missionary in spirit as some of these past campaigns have been, none of them crossed the line that "Israeli Friday" has by openly casting aspersions on non-Orthodox family life.

Secular Israelis don't appreciate the denigration of their life choices and pressure to change them, whether it is pushed hard by a religious organization, or soft-pedaled by private businessmen with mysterious motives. The boomerang effect against the campaign is everywhere: on the street, on opinion pages, in hostile comments on the campaign's Facebook page, and pretty much in every article written about the campaign. There have been reports in the Hebrew media of numerous complaints about the television commercial to the governmental television authority.

In essence, those behind the campaign have alienated the public they are trying to win over.

The backlash includes some snarky online "memes" with parodies of the campaign - showing the view of it as a right-wing religious brainwashing device. One satire features a mock billboard with brain matter and a wine glass: "In the morning: lobotomy, in the evening: kiddush"; or a weapon and a challah: "In the afternoon: occupation, in the evening: kiddush."

"It's a shame that respectable businessmen are showing Shabbat and the typical secular family as shallow and empty and the Orthodox religious Shabbat as superior," MK Ruth Calderon of Yesh Atid told Haaretz. "It is a condescending and degrading stand, and negates all non-religious community and cultural life."

Miki Gitzin, head of "Be Free Israel" organization, criticized the campaign as forcing people into a "conservative, conformist mold instead of celebrating the diversity of Israeli society." The campaign, he observed, "wants to promote Israeli unity, but is actually having the opposite effect. In an age where nobody thinks in dichotomies of purely "religious" and "secular" sets us back at least a decade and encourages factionalism, suspicion and hatred."

To Calderon and Gitzin's comments, I can only add a word that proponents of the so-called "Israeli Friday" would surely approve of: Amen.

The ridiculous controversy over Friday night Kiddush **by Shmuel Rosner (LA Jewish Journal)**

3 days ago

Israelis, it seems, have recently accustomed themselves to two types of behavior more than they did in the past: they put a lot of energy into unnecessary gestures and they invest a lot of unnecessary energy in being offended. These are the two types of behavior that turned a nice Jewish ceremony into a scandal. These – coupled with the investment of a large amount of money (according to some reports it is 5 million NIS) in a campaign aimed at advancing a cause

that needs no advancement; or maybe at solving a problem that doesn't exist; or maybe doing something else the nature of which is still unclear.

Surely, something good.

The controversy-igniting campaign attempts to convince Israelis to make a Kiddush on Friday evening, and have a Shabbat dinner. It was initiated by Shishi Israeli, an organization that says it wants to "draw people closer to Judaism and to emphasize and strengthen family values and national unity". In colorful graphics, the campaign uses simple definitions of what an authentic Friday entails – pleading Israelis to have the complete deal. There is a sign with a vegetable and a wine cup that says "Shuk (Market shopping) in the morning, Kiddush in the evening". Another sign has an image of a soccer ball next to one of a challah bread and says "Soccer in the afternoon, Kiddush in the evening".

But from the last comprehensive study of "beliefs observance and values of Israeli Jews" we learned that most Israelis already know this, and do this. Sixty percent of Israeli Jews have a Kiddush on a Friday night "very often" or "always", 66% light Shabbat candles, close to 70% have a special meal on Shabbat eve. Moreover: The study showed that the trend is an upward one – more Jewish Israelis do these things today than in the past.

This means there is no reason to suspect or fear that the Friday night Kiddush is about to disappear or is under any other threat. Its condition is stable, and even improving. A campaign to promote it is as necessary as a campaign to promote steady breathing, or fine digestion. It is a campaign to make us all do what we already do.

This campaign became controversial in a way not much different from the controversy over recent attempts to pass Basic Law: The Jewish State. In both cases, the debate concerns a symbolic gesture that is hard to justify. In both cases, the cause is a positive one (Jewish state, Jewish custom) – but the result is more contention.

The debate over Basic Law: The Jewish State made the term "Jewish State" – a term that a vast majority of Jewish Israelis accept without much reservation – an object of political debate. The campaign to promote the Friday Kiddush made the custom of Kiddush – a custom that is practiced by most Jews without much fanfare and with no objection even among those who choose not to make it a habit – an object of confrontation.

A Jew wakes up one morning and suddenly he is forced to decide if he is for or against the Friday night Kiddush. He also needs to decide: do I make the Kiddush because I like to make the Kiddush, because it's a Mitzvah to make the Kiddush, or merely because of a campaign that

aims to make this ancient custom a "trend". He also needs to decide: if I don't make Kiddush, is it because I'm lazy, or indifferent, or maybe it is a sophisticated form of protest against the campaign and against the general move toward more religiosity in Israel's public life. In other words: this campaign is a disruption for all those who want the Kiddush to just be a Kiddush – not a political battle.

You might ask: why would anyone be offended or enraged by this campaign? The reasons are many, and Israelis, who are falling in love with the idea of being offended, have a variety to choose from. You can be offended because the campaign is, well, offensive (it presents the Jews who do not make Kiddush as "shallow and empty", as one MK complained). You can be offended because the campaign is condescending. You can say it is racist (as one columnist did). You can say it is missionary ("openly casting aspersions on non-Orthodox family life"). You can say it is divisive.

Clearly, the people behind this campaign truly believe that a family in which a Kiddush is a Friday habit has richer life than the life of a Kiddush-free family. This should not be a shocking belief. Many Israelis (and non-Israelis) have similar beliefs. For example: some people believe that people who read books have richer lives than those of people who do not read books. Would you be offended by a campaign that calls on Israelis to play soccer on the afternoon and read in the evening? And there are those who believe that life without soccer is not as rich. Would you be offended if someone initiated a campaign calling on Israelis to work in the morning and watch soccer in the evening?

Many people believe that they have the key to living a better life. Many people would like to share with you their key to a better life. In most cases, the sharing is burdensome and pointless – in most cases, being offended by their good-intentioned effort is also pointless.

²⁰And he blessed them that day, saying: "By you shall Israel bless, saying: God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh." And he set Ephraim before Manasseh. ²¹And Israel said

COMMENTARY

important and perfect of the nations.²²³ ²⁰he blessed them. a. The youths [but the first blessing was to Joseph].²²⁴ b. Each one separately and differently.²²⁵ that day, saying. a. He declared that he would not transfer his right hand on to Manasseh's head; moreover, he explicitly gave preference to Ephraim in Joseph's presence by saying "as Ephraim and Manasseh."²²⁶ b. He gave them another blessing on that same day.²²⁷ c. This blessing was not for their future descendants, since he knew that some would not be worthy of it, but for Ephraim and Manasseh themselves, as they were on

that day; of them he said, "By you shall Israel bless."²²⁸ d. On that day his blessing went only so far as to say, "By you shall Israel bless." But the main blessing, that they should become two tribes and receive two territorial allotments, would take effect only in the future.²²⁹ e. His blessing was attuned to their condition of that day, when they were righteous.²³⁰ By you. a. By your children—this was directed to Joseph.²³¹ b. "You" is in the singular, because he spoke mainly in reference to Ephraim; but he joined Manasseh with him, so that he referred to each.²³² c. Whoever blesses his son shall say, "By you shall Israel bless" and "God make you," etc.²³³ d. He reached the furthest possible limit of blessing, so that all might say, "It is indeed fitting that Israel should bless by you."²³⁴ shall Israel bless. a. I.e., the people of Israel shall bless.²³⁵ b. Every man shall thus bless his son.²³⁶ as Ephraim and as Manasseh. Both being equally good.²³⁷ Ephraim before Manasseh. a. In all his blessings.²³⁸ b. Thus according precedence to the younger, for who would change Jacob's order?²³⁹ c. Not in his actual blessing to them, but in their positions as they stood before him.²⁴⁰

ANTHOLOGY

the moon stayed until the nation had avenged themselves of their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jashar? (Josh. 10:13). What is "the book of Jashar"? R. Hiyya b. Abba, quoting R. Johanan, said, The book of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are called righteous (*y'sharim*), as it says, Let me die the death of the righteous (Num. 23:10).³ Now, where is this intimated? In this text, His seed shall fill the nations. When shall his seed fill the nations [with amazement]? When the sun will stand still at Joshua's bidding.

[Another interpretation:] The word *m'lo* is similar in meaning to *amilam* [I will cut them off—Ps. 118:10]: he alluded to Joshua, who defeated thirty-one kings.

Gen. R. 97, 4; A. Z. 27a; Lekah Tob. T.S. 48, 119 and note. 120.

80. He blessed them that day.

Why does it say "that day"? Because he had already blessed them with the words, "The

angel who has redeemed me," etc. Scripture now adds that he blessed them that day, that is to say, On the very day that he blessed them [once], he added these blessings;¹ again, he blessed them on the very day that their father brought them to him.

He blessed Joseph's sons before his own, because a man loves his grandchildren more than his own children.

Sechel Tob; Zohar 1, 233a. T.S. 48, 122-3.

81. Lemor (saying).

This is written *plene*, full,¹ to intimate that he conferred a complete, full blessing on them. Jacob said to God: The *vav* which Thou didst take away from my name, do Thou add it to theirs.²

Midrash Habiur. T.S. 48, 124.

82. By you shall Israel bless, saying, "God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh."

The tribe of Ephraim brought its offerings

³ Which is understood to refer to the peaceful deaths of the Patriarchs.

§ 80 ¹ Lit., he kept the blessings.

§ 81 ¹ לאמר. The usual spelling is לאמר without the *vav*; only in three places is it written *plene*, and each is invested with a particular significance.

² His name is always spelt יעקב instead of יעקוב with a *vav*; it has this latter spelling only in Lev. 26:42. Thus

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on the seventh day [of the dedication of the Altar] and Manasseh on the eighth. This is the origin of the custom of exclaiming at a circumcision, "May he [the child] be a brother to seven and to eight,"¹ in fulfillment of the text, By you shall Israel bless, saying, "God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh."

Lekah Tob. T.S. 48, 125 note.

83. *B'cha* (BY YOU) SHALL ISRAEL BLESS. *B'cha* is [esoterically to be understood as] the Divine twenty-two-lettered Name, corresponding to the letters of the Torah,¹ this being the numerical value of *ebyeb asher ebye*—I am that I am (Exod. 3:14).²

Thus *b'cha* is the recondite Divine twenty-two-lettered Name, and Israel is blessed by none other than this Name, as we read, Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Thy servants, to whom Thou didst swear *bach* (by Thine own self) and saidst to them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven (Exod. 32:13); also, *b'cha* shall Israel bless; again: for by Thee (*b'cha*) I can run upon a troop (Ps. 18:30).

That too is the meaning of, We will rejoice and be glad *bach*—in Thee (Song 1:4), i.e., in the twenty-two-lettered Name by which Thou art designated.

Midrash Hahefetz; Zohar 2, 9a; Zohar Hadash, Shir ha-Shirim 68a.
T.S. 48, 126 and note.

84. BY YOU SHALL ISRAEL BLESS, SAYING, "GOD MAKE YOU AS EPHRAIM AND MANASSEH." R. Pinhas said, Ephraim was crowned with this crown by the Patriarch Jacob on his death bed. He said to him, "My son Ephraim, head of assemblies: the most exalted and distinguished of my descendants shall be called by your name." E.g., the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite (1 Sam. 1:1); and Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite (1 Kings 11:26); David was the son of that Ephraimite¹ (1 Sam. 17:12); do worthily in Ephraim² (Ruth 4:11).

MhG. T.S. 48, 127.

85. He set Ephraim before Manasseh.

Just as he preceded him here, so he preceded him on all occasions: In the family lists: "These are the generations of the children of Ephraim" is followed by "These are the generations of the children of Manasseh";¹ in genealogical lists: "Of the children of Ephraim, their generations, by their families . . . Of the children of Manasseh, their generations by their families" (Num. 1:32, 34). In inheritance: This is the inheritance of the tribe of the children of Ephraim (Josh. 16:8), and only later is the inheritance of the tribe of Manasseh recorded (*ibid.* 17:5 *et seq.*). In regard to standards: The standard of the camp of Ephraim . . . next to him shall be the tribe of Manasseh (Num.

his name permanently lost its *vav*, and he prayed that it be given to his grandchildren, i.e., that their blessing might be complete.

§ 82 ¹ I.e., a brother to Ephraim and Manasseh, who brought their offerings on the seventh and the eighth days respectively. This was (or is) a custom among oriental Jews.

§ 83 ¹ The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in which the Torah is written. (The numerical value of *b'cha* is twenty-two.)

² When Moses asked God how to name Him to the people of Israel (Exod. 3:13), He replied, "*Ebye* *asher ebye*." The numerical value of *ebye* (I am) is eleven, which gives twenty-two for its repetition; *asher* is disregarded, being a relative pronoun and not really part of the name. Perhaps the idea is: He answered him, Tell them that the God who appeared to you is the God of the Torah. Thus the esoteric interpretation of "*b'cha* shall Israel bless" will be, By God shall Israel bless.

§ 84 ¹ AJV: Ephrathite.

² AJV: Ephrath.

§ 85 ¹ While they sound biblical, these verses are not to be found in Scripture. Furthermore, as Etz Yosef notes, "family lists" means quite the same as "genealogical lists," which follows. Matnoth K'hunah seems to suggest omitting this part entirely. Y'feh Toar rather interprets *to'doth* (family lists) to denote begotten progeny, and quotes 50:23 as a hint of proof: "And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation, the children also of Machir son of Manasse were born on Joseph's knees"—Ephraim's children are mentioned first. But with this explanation the verses remain erroneous.

BRETTLER (BIBLE)

¹ "*Ephraim and Manasseh*" From Genesis 48:20, where Jacob blesses Joseph's two sons. The patriarchs—or at least Judah, or Reuben, Jacob's first-born—might seem more likely sources of blessing for us. We get Ephraim and Manasseh instead, because the Bible introduces their blessing with the promise, "*By you shall Israel invoke blessings....*"

² "*Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah*" Unlike the three patriarchs, the four matriarchs are never mentioned together in the Bible. *Imahot* (matriarchs) as a category is post-biblical. This blessing is otherwise odd as well, in that at least two of the four matriarchs (Sarah and Rachel) did not (p. 60)

DORFF (THEOLOGY)

¹⁻² "*May God make you like...*" Together or separately, parents put their hands on each child's head, and then recite the appropriate line for sons or daughters followed by the Priestly Blessing (see Volume 2, *The Amidah*, pp. 176–183). Some families bless children immediately (p. 60)

ELLENSON (MODERN LITURGIES)

Birkat Banim ("Blessing of Children") In keeping with the often heralded "return to tradition" that marks so much of contemporary liberal Judaism worldwide, the Priestly Blessing applied to children at home has begun to reappear in present-day (p. 61)

FRANKEL (A WOMAN'S VOICE)

Birkat Banim ("Blessing of Children") The sources of these three blessings—Jacob's blessing over his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh; an invocation of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah; and *Birkat Kohanim*, the magical Priestly Blessing—are among the oldest words in our liturgy. Even today, when recited by parents, these words take on fresh currency and power.

For some families, however, these blessings evoke pain: the physical (p. 63)

B. BIRKAT BANIM ("BLESSING OF CHILDREN")

[For sons, say]:

¹ May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.

[For daughters, say]:

² May God make you like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah.

[For both sons and daughters, continue]:

³ May Adonai bless you and keep you.

GRAY (TALMUD)

Birkat Banim ("Blessing of Children") Blessing children arose naturally as a sign of *sh'lom bayit* ("peace in the home"), the hallmark of Shabbat. The citation of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's two sons, is particularly poignant. Sold by his brothers into slavery, Joseph had not seen his father for years. Genesis ends with them finally being reunited and Jacob joyfully blessing not only Joseph, but Joseph's children as well, the grandchildren whom he never expected to meet. (p. 63)

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KUSHNER & POLEN (CHASIDISM)

Birkat Banim ("Blessing of Children")
Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard
University, the Talner rebbe of Boston,
once cited Maimonides' son, Avraham
Maimuni, saying that when Isaac
blesses Jacob (Gen. 27:28): "And may
God give you of dew of heaven, of fat
of earth..." the word "And" implies
that something has already been spoken
before the recorded words of the
blessing. The actual words of blessing,
he concludes, therefore are always
preceded by something ineffable. (p. 63)

[For sons, say]:

יְשׁוּעָה אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכִמְנַשֶּׁה.¹

[For daughters, say]:

יְשׁוּעָה אֱלֹהִים כְּשָׁרָה רַבֵּקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה.²

[For both sons and daughters, continue]:

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְיָ וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ.³

LANDES (HALAKHAH)

Birkat Banim ("Blessing of Children")
To show complete devotion, parents are
to put both hands on their children,
just as the *kohanim* ("priests") do when
they bless the people (*Birkat Kohanim*,
the "Priestly Blessing" in the *Amidah*;
see Volume 2, *The Amidah*, pp.
176–183). Parents say the blessing as a
continuation of the patriarchal blessing
in Genesis 48:20, for, as *kohanim*, they
too transmit blessings from God. In
some communities, children kiss their
parents' hands upon the (p. 64)

J. HOFFMAN (TRANSLATION)

Birkat Banim ("Blessing of Children")
The Hebrew word *banim* means
"children." Because it also means
"sons," some people add *banot*
("daughters") here, making this the
"blessing of sons and daughters." We
prefer to group them together in
English as we do in Hebrew, referring
collectively to the "blessing of
children."

Other examples where *banim*
clearly means "children" and not "sons"
include the *Avot* (Volume 2, *The
Amidah*, pp. 60–61), where we translate
"*banim* of their *banim*" as
"descendants" and certainly
not "male descendants."

¹⁻² "Make" Literally,
"put."

³ "May Adonai bless you
and keep you" See Volume 5,
*Birkhot Hashachar: Morning
Blessings*, pp. 122–123,
where we discuss the poetic
impact of the original
Hebrew.

WELCOMING SHABBAT

⁴ May Adonai shine his face toward you and treat you graciously.

⁵ May Adonai lift his face toward you and grant you peace.

⁴ יֵאָדָר יְיָ פָּנָיו אֵלֵינוּ וְיַחֲנֹךְ.

⁵ יֵשָׁא יְיָ פָּנָיו אֵלֵינוּ, וְיָשֵׁם לָךְ שְׁלוֹם.

BRETTLER (BIBLE)

enjoy particularly good fortune. The blessing is, therefore, late in origin and modeled after the corresponding male biblical version ("May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh").

³ "*May Adonai bless you*" According to the Torah, this blessing (from Num. 6:24–26) was to be recited by "Aaron and his sons" (Num. 6:23)—that is, by priests—though when and where are not specified. It is here democratized to a familial, non-priestly setting. The paraphrase of this blessing in Psalm 67:2, "May God be gracious to us and bless us; may He shine his face at us," as well as elsewhere (e.g., Pss. 4; 6; 119:130–135; Mal. 1:6–2:9), suggests that it was widely known in the biblical period. It is compactly structured, with each verse longer than the one before it, as if to suggest the growing outpouring of divine blessings. We know of several Mesopotamian parallels, and a slightly shorter version, written on silver (probably an amulet) in the seventh or sixth century B.C.E., was found in a burial trove in Jerusalem.

⁴ "*May Adonai shine his face*" These verses are strikingly anthropomorphic: Adonai shines his face on and lifts it toward the blessing's recipient. Biblical texts are comfortable with anthropomorphisms, and even rabbinic culture, which is often thought to reject them, frequently views God in human form.

⁵ "*May Adonai...grant you peace*" *Shalom*, usually translated as "peace," is better understood—both in its original context, and (especially) in its familial setting here—in the sense of "(personal) well-being."

DORFF (THEOLOGY)

after candle lighting; others do it when they return home from synagogue but before sitting down for dinner; yet others do it after reciting *Eshet Chayil* ("A Worthy Woman"—see p. 74). Sometimes the mother blesses the children immediately after lighting candles, and the father does so after reciting *Eshet Chayil*. When children marry, it is permissible, even desirable, for parents to bless their children-in-law too.

^{1–2} "*Ephraim* sons follows Ja fulfill the prom to provide moc Some object th unduly to striv children alone; not be perfect estimable, were aspire may bec the kind of per see themselves have been told

^{3–5} "*May Adonai* ing of what Go a fuller discuss *Blessings*], pp. 1

1. [In gene (Consequ
2. [When y you mor even bey
3. [When y his back with oth

On ordinari eat together; bu So while blessit Pausing to put whom we bless

ELLENSON (Mo Reform liturgy British Reform? the *Doorposts of the House*; ar parents are invi As we see h

¹⁻² “*Ephraim and Manasseh... Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah*” The formula for sons follows Jacob’s blessing of his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, said here to fulfill the promise of Genesis 48:20: “So shall Israel be blessed.” The intent was clearly to provide models for children to emulate. For daughters, the model is the matriarchs. Some object that praying for our children to be like ancient worthies pressures them unduly to strive to be better than they are. But the formula asks nothing from the children alone; rather, God is to make them as worthy as our ancestors. Also, they need not be perfect, like God, but only as meritorious as our ancestors, who, though estimable, were hardly faultless. Most importantly, providing a model toward which to aspire may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Telling children, for example, “You are the kind of person who cares for others” (when that is not obviously true) helps them see themselves differently; liking what they see, they may strive to become what they have been told they already are.

³⁻⁵ “*May Adonai...*” Because we are commanded to emulate God, our understanding of what God is being asked to do here has consequences for human behavior. (For a fuller discussion, see my commentary in Volume 5, *Birkhot Hashachar* [Morning Blessings], pp. 122, 129–130.)

1. [In general,] may Adonai give you all life’s good and keep you from the bad. (Consequence: we should strive to bring people blessing, not trouble.)
2. [When your relationship with God is good,] may Adonai smile on you and give you more than you deserve. (Consequence: we should treat others graciously even beyond what they deserve.)
3. [When your relationship with God is bad,] may God face you [rather than turn his back on you] and make peace with you. (Consequence: when we quarrel with others, we should look them in the face and make peace.)

On ordinary weekday nights, dinner may be so rushed that families do not even eat together; but with everyone at home together, Shabbat, as it were, stops the world. So while blessing our children is always in order, it is especially apt on Friday evening. Pausing to put our lives in perspective, we better appreciate the blessing of children, whom we bless in return.

ELLENSON (MODERN LITURGIES)

Reform liturgy. We find it first in American Reform’s *Gates of the House* (1977) and British Reform’s *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship* (1977); then, some time later, in *On the Doorposts of Your House* (1994), the American Reform Movement’s revision of *Gates of the House*; and in the British Liberal *Lev Chadash* (1995). In all these publications, parents are invited to bless their children at the Shabbat table.

As we see here, the normal introductory formula asks that sons be blessed in the

WELCOMING SHABBAT

name of Ephraim and Manasseh, and girls in the name of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. There seems to have been some hesitation to imagine our own children blessed exactly like the biblical worthies, however, since *Lev Chadash* omits this introductory formulae altogether, jumping directly to the blessing ("May God bless you....") and mentioning neither matriarchs nor patriarchs. Similarly, American Reform volumes, which include the preamble, alter the English to ask only that "God inspire you to live in the tradition [!] of [the matriarchs and patriarchs]." The notion of "tradition" plays a role in other books too, as in *Lev Chadash*, which urges, "A noble heritage has been entrusted to us; let us guard it well."

Marcia Falk (*The Book of Blessings*) expressly objects to the "specificity" of a formula that seems "restrictive rather than expansive." Preferring that parents wish only that their own child become "her or his best self," she recasts the blessing "to provide affirmation for the child and to foster awareness in the giver of the blessing." In place of the standard blessing, she proposes, "Be who you are—and may you be blessed in all that you are."

The American Conservative Movement (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 1998) adds further specificity, but gendered differently for boys and for girls:

May you be blessed by God as were Ephraim and Menasheh,
who understood that wherever they lived
their Jewishness was the essence of their lives,
who loved and honored their elders and teachers,
and who cherished one another
without pettiness or envy,
accepting in humility the blessings that were theirs.

May God bless you
with the strength and vision of Sarah,
with the wisdom and foresight of Rebecca,
with the courage and compassion of Rachel,
with the gentleness and graciousness of Leah,
and their faith in the promise of our people's heritage.

For its public synagogue ritual, this Conservative Movement liturgy provides no transliteration, because the editors assume competence in Hebrew. But virtually all of the home service for Shabbat eve, including such staples as the blessing for candle lighting and *Shalom Aleikhem*, comes with transliteration. The blessing of children is an exception. There, parents are expected to know by heart or to be able to read in Hebrew the Priestly Blessing.

FRANKEL (A WOMAN)

or emotional loss
In some families,
are not permitted
children, the tradition
And so we bless out
of heartache from

GRAY (TALMUD)

A suggestion of
Huna says, "Any of
Torah scholars." In
children. Abraham
instance, thought
merit giving birth
century later in the
(thirteenth century)
should pray for children
then, because God
performing another
Concerning Repentance
children who are so

3-5 "May Adonai
commanded Aaron
God's own example
God too observe
Blessing closes with
to *sh'lo' bayit* (Shema)

KUSHNER & POL

Each blessing begins
because it is so subtle
my soul may bless
from the soul. As I
for words.

15

FRANKEL (A WOMAN'S VOICE)

or emotional loss of children, the sting of barrenness, the lack or loss of a partner. In some families, children are not blessed but tolerated or abused. In others, parents are not permitted to bless but are blamed or rebuffed. Despite the risks of having children, the tradition teaches us that the blessings beckon more urgently than the risks. And so we bless our children with the words of our ancient forebears, who knew plenty of heartache from their own offspring.

GRAY (TALMUD)

A suggestion of such a blessing may be seen in the Talmud (Shab. 23b), where Rav Huna says, "Anyone who customarily kindles Shabbat light will have children who are Torah scholars." Medieval authorities expressly connect Shabbat light to the blessing of children. Abraham b. Azriel of Bohemia (*Sefer Arugat Habosem*, twelfth century), for instance, thought the two Shabbat candles symbolize husband and wife, who hope to merit giving birth to a son and daughter. This same link was elaborated nearly half a century later in the commentary to the Torah portion Yitro, by Bachya ben Asher (thirteenth century, Spain). When a woman lights Shabbat candles, Bachya says, she should pray for children enlightened in Torah. Such a prayer is particularly efficacious then, because God hears prayer more readily when it is offered in the context of performing another *mitzvah* (in this case, candle lighting). Jonah Gerondi too (*Epistle Concerning Repentance*, "Day 7": thirteenth century, Spain) directed women to pray for children who are successful in Torah as they kindle Shabbat lights.

³⁻⁵ "May Adonai...grant you peace" This threefold Priestly Blessing with which God commanded Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites (Num. 6:22-27) constitutes God's own example of an efficacious blessing, so it is particularly apt for Shabbat, when God too observed the primal day of rest (Gen. 2:2-3). In particular, the Priestly Blessing closes with the prayer that God's face be lifted and provide peace, an allusion to *sh'lom bayit* (Shab. 23b).

KUSHNER & POLEN (CHASIDISM)

Each blessing begins with something inchoate that can only be inferred or intuited because it is so subtle and sublime. Isaac says earlier in the Genesis story (27:4), "...that my soul may bless you...." This reminds us that the main idea of blessing must come from the soul. As Twersky said, the blessings from parent to child are simply too delicate for words.

WELCOMING SHABBAT

Johannes Pedersen, in his monumental, four-volume work, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (Oxford University Press, Branner Ogkorat, Copenhagen, 1926, vols. I–II, 198–200), offers a similar and extraordinary insight into the nature of blessing: “The act of blessing another,” he says, “means to communicate to [someone] strength of soul, but one can communicate to [another] only of the strength one has in oneself. [One] who blesses another gives [that person] something of his [or her] own soul.... The strength of the word of blessing depends upon the power that the word possesses to hold the real contents of a soul. By means of the word something is laid into the soul of the other....”

Thus, in the case of parents blessing children at the Sabbath table, the core of every blessing is the soul-pride, the sweetness, the *naches* (pronounced NAH-kh's) the parent has received from his or her child over the past week. And, in addition to the formulaic “...like Ephraim and Manasseh” etc., parents effectively return the *naches* in words of blessing. The litmus test of the blessing is that it should make the child smile.

Several commentators have attempted to explain why, of all the possible ego models, Ephraim and Manasseh are mentioned by name in the blessing of children. Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Lieb of Ger (d. 1905), author of *S'fat Emet* (I, p. 282; 5661), suggests that the reason is that these two sons of Joseph were effectively moved up one generation and treated as children. And this, in turn, reminds us of the direct relationship grandchildren enjoy with their grandparents. Through this grandchild-grandparent bond, we (all) possess an unmediated relationship with our ancestors. Thus, the blessing evokes a direct line to all previous generations. Others have noted that Ephraim and Manasseh, as the first ones born in exile, are symbols of Jewish survival in alien lands. And still others have suggested that Ephraim and Manasseh are mentioned by name because they are the very first set of brothers in the Hebrew Bible who get along with one another.

LANDES (HALAKHAH)

conclusion of the blessings, imbued with the idea of *k'vod av v'em*, “honor due to father and mother,” and love for the spirit of God that has hovered on their parents' fingers.

At the time of blessing, parents should consider the fact that during the week it is natural to become upset with children's misbehavior. This blessing should awaken parental commitment to avoid any further “curse” to their children from this point onward.

C. SHALOM AI

¹ Peace to you, angels
high, from the kin
kings, the Holy One ble

² Come in peace, angels
high, from the king ove
the Holy One blessed b

³ Bless me with peace, ar
on high, from the king o
the Holy One blessed b

⁴ Go in peace, angels
high, from the king ove
the Holy One blessed b