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MISHNEH BERESHIT: **THE FORM AND CONTENT OF GENESIS 48**

Perhaps the dominant theme of the Book of Genesis is the issue of chosenness; who will continue God's covenant into the next generation and who will not; who will receive the blessing of progeny and inheritance of the Land of Israel and who will not receive that blessing. The centrality of this theme is exhibited by the frequency with which the verb "to bless" appears, eighty-five times in all. Chapter 48, which features this verb six times, is the chapter that constitutes the last step in the transmission process, as Joseph is labeled the first-born amongst his brothers, and Ephraim is given supremacy over Menasseh. The language employed by the Torah in this chapter and the allusions to previous events make Genesis 48 more than a story about Jacob, his favorite son Joseph, and his two children. It is a review and composite in reverse chronological order of many scenes in the book of Genesis in which a choice is made concerning who shall receive the blessing and who shall not.¹ This review opens with an oral reflection by Jacob and then goes on to recreate events surrounding the blessing from the age of Isaac and finally from the era of Abraham. The parallels to earlier episodes form an appropriate summation of the book as a whole, and shed new light at each step of the drama that unfolds between father, son and grandsons within the verses of the chapter itself.

Jacob begins his reflection on the blessing in verse 3. But in verse 2 there is already evidence that the tradition of transmission of the blessing is on his mind:

When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to see you," Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

Why does the Torah tell us that Jacob sat up in bed? Rarely does the Torah relate a character's posture when he speaks. At this point in his long life, Jacob is preparing to pass on the blessing of the Patriarchs, the blessing that he received from his father. When he sits up in bed, he is

merely assuming the posture that Isaac took when he conferred the blessing on to Jacob in chapter 27:

Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you have told me. Pray *sit up* and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing (verse 19)."

In verses 3–7 Jacob offers an open contemplation of his journeys. He refers to each of the three great periods in his life, in Canaan, Padan-Aram, and in Egypt; "*El Shaddai* appeared to me at *Luz in the land of Canaan*" (verse 3); "Now your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt *before I came to you in Egypt*" (verse 5); "I, when *I was returning from Padan*" (verse 7). The summary of details, however, is far from complete. There is no explicit mention of the encounters with Esau, the rape of Dinah, the absence of Joseph, to name a few of the many events that span the twenty-five chapters that are devoted to Jacob's life in the Book of Genesis. Specifically, Jacob refers to only two events; the blessing he received at Luz, and the death of Rachel.

The blessing at Luz is the appropriate event for the Torah to begin its review of blessing scenes, for it was at Luz that God, for the final time, promised the patriarchs that they would be blessed with progeny who would inherit the Land. A comparison of the text of the blessing as Jacob quotes it here in chapter 48 and the original version as it appears in chapter 35 reveal some illuminating discrepancies:

48:3–4

El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and He blessed me, (4) and said to me

I will cause you to be fruitful and to multiply

making of you *a community of peoples*,

and I will give this land to your offspring to come

for an everlasting possession.

35:11–12

And God said to him, "I am *El Shaddai*

Be fruitful and multiply

a nation and an assembly of nations shall come from you

and kings shall come from your loins

(12) and the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac

to you and your offspring will I give the land.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two versions is that Jacob fails to mention that the blessing was originally given to Isaac and to Abraham before him. Indeed, later in the chapter (verses 15–16) Jacob

emphasizes that he is transmitting the blessing that had been given to his father and grandfather. But at this point, in verses 3–7, he is relating to his son the implications that the blessing had for him personally. The personal account is accentuated by the name change that occurs between verses 2 and 3. In verse 2 it is *Israel* who sits up in bed. In doing so, Jacob rises out of his own context, and re-enacts the preparation his father made for transmitting the blessing. Israel is generally substituted for the name Jacob when the consequences of Jacob's actions are not limited to his particular historical context, and have some bearing on the fate of the Jewish people as a whole.² The name Jacob is used when Jacob the man is operating, as it were, as a private citizen, functioning only in his own context. That Israel sat up in bed is a preamble for the entire process of the transmission of the blessing, and thus the name Israel is appropriate. In verses 3–7, however, it is precisely Jacob who is communicating his own personal encounter with this blessing.

Three other differences between the two versions are of note. God said in the command form, "Be fruitful and multiply." But Jacob quotes God as saying, in the causative, "I will make you fruitful, etc." God blessed Jacob that he would become "a nation and an assembly of nations (*goy u-kehal goyim*)," but Jacob changes this to "an assembly of peoples (*kehal 'amim*)." Jacob was promised in chapter 35 that kings would emerge from his loins, but he does not relate this to Joseph. Like two keys that resemble one another held side by side, the general structure of the two accounts is similar. But incongruities exist that make for an imperfect match. The incongruities are removed, however, when Jacob's version here in chapter 48 is compared with an earlier version of the blessing, the blessing he received from Isaac as he prepared to flee from the enraged Esau:

48:3–4

El Shaddai appeared to me in Luz in the Land of Canaan and blessed me.

(4) And said to me

I will cause you to be fruitful and to multiply

and I will make you an assembly of peoples (*kehal 'amim*)

and I shall give this land to your offspring to come

for an everlasting possession

28:3–4

El Shaddai will bless you

He will cause you to be fruitful and to multiply

and you shall be an assembly of peoples (*kehal 'amim*)

(4) And he will give you the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring to come

to inherit the land of your dwelling which God gave to Abraham.

The match between the two versions presented here is much closer. In both, God declares that he will cause Jacob to be fruitful and to

multiply; in both Jacob is promised he will become “an assembly of peoples”; Jacob’s claim that the land will be an everlasting possession is matched in Isaac’s blessing by the description of the Land as an inheritance. All that stands between the two versions are the references Isaac makes to Abraham, as original recipient of the blessing. As explained before, however, Jacob here is relating his personal encounter with the blessing, and its implications for him. These two comparisons are brought here to illustrate one point. Even as Jacob recalls the blessing given him by God Himself at Luz when he returned to Canaan, in the back of his mind is that God’s blessing is really a copy of the original one that Isaac had given him when he fled Canaan. We must hold on to this understanding for it will prove to be of paramount significance in a later verse.

Verses 5 and 6 follow naturally from the ones that recall the blessing of offspring and inheritance of the Land. Concerning progeny, Jacob establishes the status of Menasseh and Ephraim as equal to that of Reuben and Simon. Concerning inheritance of the Land, Jacob declares that only these two will inherit on their own. Any subsequent children born to Joseph will be counted among the first two. But then in verse 7, Jacob seemingly digresses from the issue at hand:

And I, when I came from Padan, Rachel died upon me while I was journeying in the Land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath, which is Bethlehem.

Many commentators see this as an apology.³ Having asked Joseph to make the trip to the Cave of Machpelah upon his own death, Jacob feels the need to explain why he did not do the same for Rachel. There are two difficulties with this explanation. First, the tone of the verse does not seem to be one of apology, but one of deep lament. Second, even if the language used can be shown to reflect remorse, why here in the middle of chapter 48? The natural place for such an apology would have been at the close of chapter 47, at precisely the time when Jacob made his request of Joseph. At this juncture in the story, such an apology is late in its timing, and without relevance to the events that surround it.

It is at this point that we return to the fact that Jacob has his father’s blessing on his mind. The circumstances surrounding Isaac’s blessing reveal that it was given conditionally:

(1) And Isaac called for Jacob, *and he blessed him, and he commanded him, saying to him, ‘Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.’* (2) Arise and go to Padan-Aram, to the house of Bethuel, the father of your mother, and take for yourself from there a wife from the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. (3) And *El Shaddai*, etc. . . . (5) And Isaac sent Jacob, and he went toward Padan-Aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esau. (6) And Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob, and had sent him to Padan-Aram, to take from there a wife, *commanding him as he blessed him, saying, ‘Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.’*

It is clear from Isaac's words, and in Esau's eyes, that Jacob would receive the blessing from *El Shaddai* on the condition that he took an appropriate wife. From the moment that he laid eyes upon her, Jacob perceived that Rachel was his true wife.⁴ As he looks back upon the fulfillment of that blessing, the reflection is a bittersweet one for Jacob: "*El Shaddai* appeared to me in the Land of Canaan and blessed me—with the same blessing that my father gave me when I left Canaan twenty years earlier. I left Canaan to fulfill the condition of my father's blessing, and in the interim was indeed blessed with many offspring, to whom I can now add Menasseh and Ephraim. When I was to return to the Land of Canaan, the blessing would have been completed as I took possession of the Land. But no sooner did I return to the Land, did the blessing unravel. And I, when I came from Padan-Aram, Rachel died upon me *in the Land of Canaan*. Just as I was to see my offspring resettle the Land, Rachel, the very source of the blessing, was taken from me." In the review of his life, Jacob mentions only two specific events, the blessing at Luz and the death of Rachel, both in the land of Canaan. These events stand in tragic contrast, for just as the blessing was to be fulfilled, Rachel's death undermined the sweetness of its bestowal.

The history of the blessing in the house of Isaac is recreated in verses 8–14 as Jacob and Joseph maneuver to prepare for the blessing itself. To appreciate this section, we must analyze the thoughts of these two figures as the tactical posturing began. Let's begin with Joseph. In his interaction with others, Joseph's constant and overriding concern seems to be the fulfillment of what he perceived was his divinely ordained fate of supremacy over his brothers and over all of Egypt.⁵ In his own eyes, though second youngest, he lay legitimate claim to the birthright—that he was now the first-born, and in this he was correct. As he brings his sons to be blessed, Joseph wishes that birthright to be continued through the son of his choice, namely Menasseh. Joseph clearly saw Menasseh as the legitimate heir to this blessing, as is evidenced by the episode in which Joseph names his two sons (41:51–52):

Joseph called the name of the first-born (*ha-bekhor*) Menasseh, "for the Lord has caused me to forget (*nashani*) the grief of all my toil, and the grief of my father's entire house." (52) And he called the name of the second Ephraim, 'for God has made me fruitful (*hifrani*) in the land of my destitution.'

Of all the birth scenes in the Book of Genesis, this is the only one where a son's status is announced as first-born (*bekhor*) at the moment of birth. This reflects not merely the biological fact that Menasseh was the oldest, but his father's understanding that he would inherit the birthright. This is seen in the child's name as well: "Menasseh, for the Lord has

caused me to forget the grief of my father's entire house." Unaware of the welfare of his aged father and his fathers' other sons, Joseph sees in Menasseh the next link in the patriarchal scion. The name Menasseh reflects Joseph's view concerning inheritance of the birthright. Since he himself was his father's first-born, this meant, by extension, that Menasseh would carry that right into the next generation. As such, Menasseh's birth and its ramifications for the continuation of the family chain provide Joseph with comfort concerning the grief of his father's entire house. As he prepared his children for the blessing, it is likely that Joseph was disturbed to hear Jacob say (verse 5), "Ephraim and Menasseh, will be unto me like Reuben and Simon." As he presents the children to Jacob, Joseph is caught in the tension between his own hopes, on the one hand, and the requirement for filial obeisance, on the other.

As he prepared to pass on the blessing, the dominant thought in Jacob's mind might well have been of his own experience as he received the blessing at the end of his father's life. This reflection was surely reinforced by the striking similarity of circumstances between the two events. Once again, two sons were vying for the birthright, just as Jacob and Esau did in chapter 27. Once again, the natural first-born would be usurped by the younger brother, just as Jacob had emerged over Esau. After seventeen years in Egypt, Jacob was no doubt conscious of Joseph's preference of Menasseh. Jacob, aware of his blindness, probably sensed, in the present confrontation of the blind father and the seeing son, the echo of his own past confrontation with his blind father Isaac some seventy-five years earlier. To demonstrate how prevalent the earlier scene is in Jacob's mind, the description here in verses 8–10 is patterned after the account in chapter 27:

48:8–10

(8) Israel saw Joseph's sons and asked, "Who are these?"

(9) Joseph said to his father, "My sons." . . .

(10) The eyes of Israel were blind with age, he could not see

he brought them close to him
(*va-yagesh*)

and he kissed them

and hugged them

27

(18) . . . He said, "Father." "I am here, who are you my son?"

(19) Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your first-born."

(1) When Isaac became old his eyes could no longer see.

(27) He came close (*va- yigash*)

and he kissed him

(22) and he felt him

Because Jacob could almost not help but to think of how he fooled his father, the outcome here is quite different. In chapter 27, the blind father is deceived. In chapter 48, however, the blind Jacob ensures that he retains control, and demonstrates his spiritual vision, while Joseph is proven to be the one lacking true insight.

In verses 8–13 the dialogue is between Jacob and Joseph, and the allusion to chapter 27 highlights the tension between them. In this episode of the transmission of the blessing, however, the father and the grandfather are not the only figures that are active. Menasseh and Ephraim act almost as props. In verse 14, though, Joseph is now offstage, and the action occurs directly between Jacob and the two boys. It is at this point that the Torah reveals the impact that the blessing has on them. Once again, the measure of what is happening here in chapter 48, is best understood by reference to another scene from the house of Isaac that concerns the issue of chosenness. In verse 14 we see for the first time the use of two critical words:

Israel cast his right hand and placed it over Ephraim, *the younger (ha-tsa'ir)*, and his left he placed over Menasseh, crossing his hands for Menasseh was *the first-born (ha-bekhor)*.

In chapter 27, the Torah never describes Jacob as the younger (*tsa'ir*), nor Esau as the first-born (*bekhor*). Indeed, Esau declares himself to be the first-born when he presents himself to Isaac, but this is his subjective and mistaken bias. In chapter 27, the Torah modifies the names Esau and Jacob by referring to Esau as “his/her bigger son (*beno/ah ha-gadol*),” and to Jacob as “his/her smaller son (*beno/ah ha-katan*).” This is because at stake in chapter 27 is only the blessing; the birthright was contested and won by Jacob earlier in chapter 25. Verse 14 is an allusion to that episode. In that chapter, the words *bekhor* and *tsa'ir* are prominent. Rebecca is told (verse 23) that the greater (Esau) will be subservient to the younger (*rav ya'avod tsa'ir*). When the children are grown, Esau sells his birthright as first-born to Jacob (*va-yimkor et bekhorato*). Effectively what occurs in that chapter is that the natural positions of *bekhor* and *tsa'ir* are switched. This is what happens to Menasseh and Ephraim; the crossing of Jacob's hands results in the switching of the status of *bekhor* and *tsa'ir*.

In verses 3–8, Jacob reflected on the meaning of the blessing for him in his lifetime. In verses 9–14, the drama between the present characters began to unfold, and simultaneously reconstructed the history of the struggle for the blessing as it had been originally played out in the house of Isaac. Notice that whereas in verse 3, the Torah referred to Jacob by his personal name, in verse 9 this name is substituted with the more universal Israel. In verses 3–8, Jacob spoke of his personal reflections. In verse 9 and following, however, events in the present begin to take on a timeless dimension, fusing past and present into one. This dimension that extends beyond the personal, is reflected by the exclusive use of the name Israel. It is the name Israel that is employed throughout the remainder of the chapter, as the events that unfold are shaded by the history of the blessing in the house of Abraham.

Jacob confers the blessing upon the boys in verses 15 and 16. Twice he mentions the names of his father and grandfather, emphasizing the continuity of the blessing from one generation to the next:

The Lord, before whom *walked (hit-halchu)* my fathers, Abraham and Isaac; the Lord who has shepherded me from the beginning until this very day; (16) *the angel* who has redeemed me from all evil—bless the lads; in them may my name and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac be recalled, and may they be multitudinous in the midst of the land.

The blessing itself contains the three standard elements; continuity from the forefathers, offspring, and the Land. The invocation of God, however, bears an unusual element. Who is the angel that Jacob calls upon to bless the lads? Why doesn't Jacob call upon God directly to bless them? It is interesting that there is one other invocation in the Book of Genesis where the angel is summoned for help, and where the term "walking before God (*le-hit'halekh lifnei*)" is employed. Before Abraham sends the servant to Padan-Aram to find an appropriate wife for Isaac, Abraham blesses him with success. When the servant reports of this blessing to the House of Bethuel, he says as follows (24:39–40):

I said to my master, "Perhaps the woman will not want to come with me." (40) He said to me, "God, *before whom I walked (hit'halakhti lefanav)* will send his *angel* with you and prosper your way, and you shall take a wife for my son from my family, and from my father's house.

Though the stylistic similarity seems apparent, what connection could there be between Abraham's blessing to the servant, and Jacob's transmission of the patriarchal blessing to Menasseh and Ephraim?

Recall that foremost in Jacob's mind is the sense of continuity that exists concerning transmission of the blessing from father to son, now into the fourth generation. Though it is not evident that Jacob had any direct contact with Abraham in his lifetime, at this juncture Jacob was likely dwelling on what the transmission of the blessing was like between Abraham and Isaac. In truth, a formal act of transmission never occurred, as it was preordained that Isaac would be the recipient of the blessing. In fact, in only one place does Abraham explicitly mention that Isaac will be the standard bearer into the next generation. This is when he commands the servant to go to Padan-Aram to find an appropriate wife (24:7):

God, the Lord of the Heaven, who took me from my father's house, and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me saying, "Unto your offspring will I give this land," he will send his angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there.

The servant's search for a wife is tied to the continuation of the blessing through Isaac. It is this declaration that the servant quotes to the

House of Bethuel, which in turn is borrowed by Jacob when he invokes God's help as he blesses the sons.

Why did Abraham and Jacob respectively call upon the assistance of God's angel rather than God himself? As Radak and Seforno point out, assistance via the angel implies a lower level of divine assistance than when the aid comes from God Himself.⁶ It may be that in both cases, the patriarchs were responding to the fact that they were calling for divine assistance outside the bounds of the Land of Israel, as Abraham was sending the servant to Padan-Aram, and Jacob was blessing his grandsons in Egypt. The implication may be that God's direct help can only be summoned within the Holy Land itself; outside the Land God can be called upon, but only via the angel. The connection between the two episodes is legitimate even if Jacob never heard the story of Abraham and the servant. The fact that the Torah reports that he used the same language as his grandfather is a literary device to show his reflection on the process of transmission from Abraham to Isaac as he himself blesses Menasseh and Ephraim.

Verses 17–19 focus on Joseph's response to his father's actions, and depict the inner conflict that he confronts:

(17) Joseph saw that his father had extended his right hand to the head of Ephraim, and it was evil in his eyes, so he took hold of his father's hand to remove it from the head of Ephraim onto the head of Menasseh. (18) Joseph said to his father: "It is not so, my father, for this one is the first-born; place your right hand on his head."

Verse 18 could have read, simply, "Joseph said, 'It is not so.' " In its full form, however, the verse depicts the tension that Joseph feels. On the one hand, the Torah emphasizes that Joseph is talking to his own father, and addresses him so by name, remaining loyal in his filial piety. But at the same time, he boldly asserts his own agenda, takes hold of Jacob's hand, declares Menasseh to be the first-born, and employs the command form in his entreaty to Jacob to reverse his hands. In these verses Joseph is distraught over the treatment given one son over another, but ultimately submits to the will of a higher authority. Joseph's struggle is reminiscent of an earlier episode of similar proportions, the expulsion of Ishmael:

48:17–19

(17) Joseph saw that his father extended his right hand over Ephraim and it was evil in his eyes . . .

(19) His father refused saying, "I know my son, I know

he too will be a nation, and he too will be great . . .

21:10–13

(10) She said to Abraham, expel this maidservant and her son . . .

(11) The issue was very evil in the eyes of Abraham concerning his son.

(12) The Lord said to Abraham, "Let it not be evil in your eyes concerning the lad . . .

(13) The son of the maidservant too will I make into a people . . .

In the comparison between verses 8–13 and the parallel episode from the house of Isaac in chapter 27, the similarities were heightened by the contrasts that existed, and it is the same here as well. Both Abraham and Joseph struggle with the relative treatment of their two sons, and must resign themselves to the Divine will. They differ, however, in the motivation behind their displeasure. Abraham is distressed by the proposed expulsion of his elder son. Joseph in contrast, is not concerned for Menasseh's well-being, but rather, by the denial he has received concerning his status as first-born. Abraham is driven by natural paternal instinct; Joseph, by his frustrated desire to shape the leadership of the Jewish people according to his own vision.

In verse 20 Jacob adds a new dimension to the blessing, that all of Israel will bless their sons in the name of Ephraim and Menasseh. This unique element in the blessing given to Ephraim and Menasseh is simply a narrower application of the blessing that God first gave to Abraham that the people of the world will bless their children in his name (see 12:3, and 18:18). Rashi, in his commentary on “and through you shall they bless” in 12:3 notes the similarity of the two blessings:

A man says to his son: “May you be as Abraham.” This is the meaning of every, “and through you shall they bless” that appears in scripture. The proof for this is the statement, “Through you shall Israel bless, saying, ‘May God make you as Ephraim and Menasseh.’”

Having completed the blessing of the two sons, Jacob turns to Joseph in the final two verses of the chapter with a prophetic vision:

(21) Israel said to Joseph: “I am about to die; and God will be with you and will return you to the Land of your fathers. (22) And I give you one portion (*shekhem*) more than your brothers, which I have taken from the hand of the Amorites, with my sword, and with my bow.

In this vision, three elements remind us of yet an earlier episode in the history of the blessing in the time of Abraham. The announcement of death, the promise of a return to the Land, and acquisition of land from the Amorites draw a comparison to the revelation at the Covenant of the Parts:

48:21–22

I am about to die

and God will be with you and will return you to the land of your fathers.

(22) And I give you one portion . . . which I have taken from the hand of the Amorites . . .

15:15–16

And you shall go to your fathers in peace, and shall be buried at a ripe old age

(16) and the fourth generation shall return here

for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

Beyond continuing the review of events from the era of Abraham, the image of the Covenant of the Parts adds insight into Jacob's message as he takes his part of Joseph. The Covenant of the Parts is, essentially, a long answer to a short question, Abraham's query, "How do I know that I will inherit it? (15-8)" At the outset of chapter 15, God promises Abraham, once again, that his offspring will be vast and that they will inherit the land. But to the childless Abraham, God's promise seems remote, and so he challenges God, which prompts the response of the revelation of the Covenant of the Parts. In the wake of the blessing to Joseph and the sons, Jacob has spoken quite a bit about inheriting the land and populating it with vast peoples. For Joseph, viceroy of Egypt, these visions undoubtedly seem remote. Not a member of his family has lived there in seventeen years; they now enjoy aristocratic status with ties to the royal court; he himself has not seen the land of Canaan in nearly forty years. Jacob's prediction of a return to Zion is as foreign to Joseph's reality, as a forecast of mass aliyah would be to ours. Jacob buttresses his claim by invoking the image of the Covenant of the Parts, as sign and symbol that these events will come to pass.

In the penultimate phrase in the chapter, Jacob awards Joseph and extra portion, a *shekhem ehad*, above his brothers.⁷ *Shekhem* is an unusual word in this context, and cannot be stripped of the double entendre of Shechem the city. In a chapter that winds its way back through patriarchal history, citing major events surrounding the blessing, the allusion to Shechem at the very end brings the process to full close, for it was at Shechem that Abraham received the very first blessing of the Land in chapter 12.

In conclusion, Jacob modifies this claim, by declaring that he took this portion with his sword and with his bow. In a chapter that is so sensitive to the language of blessing, the words "sword" and "bow" are laden with meaning. For it was Esau who was explicitly blessed with the sword, when Isaac declared, "By the sword you shall live, (27:40)⁸ and it was Ishmael whose strength lay in his bow, as it says, "The Lord was with the lad, and he grew, and dwelled in the wilderness, and became a bowman. (21:20)" Why does Jacob conclude his remarks by invoking images of blessings given to others explicitly excluded from the blessing of the patriarchal tradition?

A subtheme exists in this chapter that mirrors the book as a whole and that is the theme of reversal. The most glaring example of this, of course, is the exchange of first-born status between Menasseh and Ephraim, symbolized by Jacob's crossed hands. But there are more examples as well. Once upon a time it had been Joseph who dwelled in Jacob's house for seventeen years, but now it is Jacob who has lived under Joseph's protection for that same period of time. It is Jacob who is blind,

but it is Joseph who lacks spiritual insight. When Jacob prepared to descend to Egypt he was told by God, “I will go down with you to Egypt and I will surely bring you up, *and Joseph will extend his hand (yashit yado) over your eyes ('al 'aynehah)*. (46:4)” But in 48:17 it is Jacob who *extends his hand (yashit yad yemino)*, an evil in the eyes of Joseph (*vayera be-'aynav*). Jacob and Joseph were both clever men.⁹ They each, on many occasions, attempted to change existing realities for the sake of what they perceived was God’s will. Sometimes their tactics succeeded and sometimes they backfired. The great presence of reversals in this chapter reflects their manipulative personality, their penchant for reversing and reshaping their roles and the roles of others in accordance with their own vision. When Jacob declares that he too has a sword and that he too has a bow,¹⁰ it combines the primary theme of blessings and the subtheme of reversals in one: the reversal and manipulation of the blessing record, a usurpation of the blessings given his brother and uncle.

What is the significance of such an approach to Genesis 48? The historical review provides psychological insight at each stage of the drama, but in overview, two important ramifications emerge.

First, it marks the emergence of Jacob as a patriarch of full status in his own eyes. When Jacob met with Pharaoh, he told him that the days of his life were few and unhappy and that he had not reached the age that his fathers had. Jacob lived his whole life in their shadow. Though he suffered through many travails, as they did, he never partook in the kind of spiritual forge that was the Binding of Isaac. Jacob never got the chance to test and show his full spiritual stuff. In this chapter, as he reviews and recreates the history of his fathers, consciously and sub-consciously, he executes the quintessentially patriarchal act—he passes on the blessing. “And they shall be called in *my name* and in the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac.” At the very end of his life, in his own eyes, Jacob has joined the ranks of his fathers.

Second, the narrative of Genesis 48 witnesses a spiritual ascent in the personality of Jacob. At the close of chapter 47, and the opening of chapter 48, Jacob is portrayed as a frail sickly old man. One can vividly imagine Jacob as he pushes himself up to sit on the bed. As he begins the account of his experience with the blessing, he discusses himself in spiritual terms, as one who was blessed. In verses 8–14, he rises another step. In the simulation of the history of the blessing in the House of Isaac, Jacob plays the role of Isaac. In other words, Jacob rises to the level of one who gives the blessing, not merely one who receives it. As the chapter progresses and events are relived from the era of Abraham, in verses 15–22, Jacob reaches his crescendo. It was God who corrected Abraham

at the expulsion of Ishmael, it was God who revealed the prophecy of the Covenant of the Parts, and it is Jacob who plays the role of God Himself in the closing verses of the chapter.

The Book of Deuteronomy is often called *Mishneh Torah* for it recounts the highlights of post-Exodus history. In like fashion, Genesis 48 can be called *Mishneh Bereshit* for it recalls the salient episodes from the history of the patriarchal blessing. It is a review that portrays Jacob's ascent of the spiritual ladder whose highest rung approaches God Himself. It is from this spiritual peak that Jacob launches into chapter 49 and bestows the blessings that will mark the character of each tribe for the rest of eternity.¹¹

NOTES

1. The use of such type-scenes, and how they shade the meaning of a biblical passage is discussed in Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Chapter 3, "Biblical Type Scenes and Uses of Convention" (Basic Books, 1981) pp. 47-62.
2. *Ha-Amek Davar*, 35:10.
3. According to *Ramban* and *Radak* Jacob's defense was that with so many cattle and sheep it would have been impossible for him to get away. *Seforno* explains that Jacob could not make the trip because he was too distraught by the enormity of the loss of Rachel. *Rashi* and *Ibn Ezra* also see this statement as an apology.
4. A support for this is seen in the genealogy listing in Genesis 46 when Jacob and family descend to Egypt. All the wives are mentioned by name, but only Rachel is referred to explicitly as Jacob's wife (46:19).
5. At least on the surface, Joseph seems to sow discord among his brothers by bringing home evil reports about some of them (37:2); the generosity he extends to the butler when he interprets the butler's dream turns out to be a ploy so that the butler will help him get out of jail (40:14); from the moment the brothers arrive in Egypt, Joseph plays with them until they literally bow at his feet (ch. 42-44); Joseph's economic plan leads to the steady enslavement and nationalization of all of Egypt (47:12-26).
6. This is most clearly seen by God's decision not to lead the people directly but via the angel in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf (Ex. 33:2-3).
7. There are many varying explanations of this phrase. According to *Rashi* and *Ibn Ezra* Shechem here literally means the city itself. *Rashi* in his second understanding and *Ramban* understand Shechem to mean the birthright. In my translation I have followed the majority of medieval commentators (*Seforno*, *Radak*, *Rashbam*, *Sa'adiah Gaon*, *Hizkuni*) who understood Shechem to mean an extra portion of Land. It is not my purpose in this essay to decide between them, but merely to point out that there is an allusion here to the city of Shechem, if not in the primary understanding of the verse as *Rashi* and *Ibn Ezra* read it, then certainly on a second level of interpretation.
8. See *Rashi* here, quoting *Midrash Rabbah* 97:6 who also notes this.
9. Jacob exploited Esau in his moment of weakness to gain the birthright (25:29-34); he fools his blind father into thinking that he is in fact Esau (27:18-24). *Rashi* and *Chizkuni* on 35:10 both maintain that Jacob's name itself focuses on this aspect of his personality.
10. There is a divergence of opinion concerning the meaning of this final phrase. *Rashi* in his first understanding, where he took the name Shechem literally, explains that the sword and bow are a reference to the assault by Simon and Levi. *Rashi* in his second explanation and *Onkelos* emphasize Jacob's delineation, "my sword and my bow," and say that these refers to his wisdom and his prayer, or alternatively his prayer and his supplication. Most commentators, however, (*Rashbam*, *Ibn Ezra*, *Ramban*, *Chizkuni*) maintain that the sword and bow are a prophetic vision to the day when Joshua's armies will conquer the Land of Israel. Once again, my aim is not to side with any one explanation, but to note the literary allusion to earlier blessings, and to try to understand that allusion within the context of the chapter as a whole.

11. In this essay I have tried to show how the Bible looks to itself for interpretation via allusions to earlier passages. This phenomenon is quite widespread. Two short examples will hopefully suffice for the curious reader. Every single phase from the brief depiction of the tragedy of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1–3) is woven into the narrative of the Korach rebellion (Num. 16:1–17:5), inviting comparison. A second example is seen in Numbers 20:14–21 when Moses sends a delegation to the King of Edom. Much of the dialogue there echoes earlier encounters between Jacob and Edom in Genesis 32–33 and Genesis 25.