

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOSEF'S OTHER CHILDREN?

RAV YEHUDA HERZL HENKIN Z"l'S CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN ORTHODOXY

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Until the 19th century, Christians in Ottoman Egypt were required to wear special attire and pay special taxes. The rise of Egyptian nationalism under Muhammad Ali Pasha fostered a new Egyptian identity that included Copts, and members of the Coptic economic elite attained political and social prominence. Boutros Ghali became prime minister under King Fuad in 1908 and served until he was assassinated in 1910. Some weeks before his death, in a fatalistic moment, he called in his grandson Boutros Boutros-Ghali (later Egyptian Foreign Minister under Anwar Sadat, and UN Secretary General) and made him swear to bury him in Paris.

Not really, although the historical parallels to Jews in Ancient Egypt, and Modern Europe, may be instructive. But Boutros Boutros-Ghali's memoir Egypt's Road to Jerusalem does include the following, which may shed light on aspects of this week's parshah:

We left for Alexandria aboard a special train that had belonged to King Fuad. Every year at the start of the summer season the king had taken this train from Cairo to Alexandria, accompanied by all his cabinet members, making Alexandria for three months the second capital of Egypt. Then in September, they would return via the same train, with the same ceremony, to Cairo. For generations, every member of the Egyptian oligarchy had to own a second residence in Alexandria. As a boy, I was obsessed by such social niceties and humiliated because my family did not own a second residence in Alexandria but only rented a villa there. Every time I asked my father to buy a villa, he would ask me whether I preferred our second residence to be in Alexandria or in Europe. I would always reply "Europe!" "Then, do you see why we have no Alexandria villa?" my father would ask.

I was put in mind of this section last week by Rav Yehuda Herzl Henkin z"l's essay on Vayechi (the Hebrew is in Shut Bnei Banim vol. 4, p. 128, available on Hebrew Books and Sefaria; available in New Interpretations on the Parsha, but the translation below is my own). In honor of Rav Henkin z"l, I'll first provide the essay in full, with some comments of my own following.

Yosef certainly had sons aside from Efraim and Menasheh, as in Yaakov's statement "*but your progeny whom you sired after them...*" (48:6). Even according to Rashi's opinion that this statement was made in future tense = 'if you sire more,' as Onkelos had translated, we must say that in the end such sons

were born. Otherwise, why would the Torah tell us of things that Yaakov said which were purely theoretical?

At first glance the mystery is deep. There is not mention of additional sons of Yosef anywhere else in Scripture, nor in texts of Chazal. They do not appear in Parshat BaMidbar in the lists of the Children of Israel who exited Egypt, so it seems that they did not exit. They assimilated, remained in Egypt, and their traces were lost.

On this basis we can understand Yaakov's words:

"Now, your two sons that were born to you in the Land of Mitzrayim ere I came to you to Mitzrayim – they are mine. Efraim and Menasheh, like Reuven and Shimon, will be mine. But your progeny whom you sired after them – they will be yours; they will be called under their brother's names in their homesteads."

Yaakov and his sons had portable wealth: silver and gold, flocks and cattle and camels. Just as they brought this wealth into Egypt, they would be able to bring it out. But Yosef, the one with authority over the land, had fields and vineyards, houses and palaces full of all goods – immobile possessions that could not be transported.

So this is what Yaakov meant by saying:

"Now, your two sons that were born to you in the Land of Mitzrayim ere I came to you to Mitzrayim – they are mine. Efraim and Menasheh, like Reuven and Shimon, will be mine."

Efraim and Menasheh will be like the son of Yaakov for all purposes, and they will share in the estate of their grandfather equally with Reuven, Shimon, and their father's other brothers, whereas the wealth of Yosef will be inherited by Yosef's other sons and not by Efraim and Menasheh. This is the meaning of "*they will be called under their brother's names in their homesteads*": "called under X's name" means that one person takes another's place as heir, as in Devarim 25:6: "So the first-born to whom she subsequently gives birth will stand up under the name of his dead brother," which is speaking about inheritance. Yaakov was concerned that if Ephraim and Menasheh would inherit their father, they would take possession of his wealth, and when the day of redemption

came – they would not want to leave. This is what Yaakov sought to prevent in every way.

All the above (parshanut) was revealed in our beit midrash. It remains to ask: Why did Yaakov foresee that the remaining sons of Yosef would melt (into Egyptian society), and therefore he focused on saving Efraim and Menasheh alone? Really it should be the reverse: If Efraim and Menasheh, who were born and reached the age of educability while Yosef was by himself in Egypt, before the arrival of Yaakov and his brothers, nonetheless remained faithful to Israel and his Torah, then all the more so their younger brothers, who were born when they already had a grandfather in Egypt, (should have remained faithful)!

But it seems to me that this is not astounding, and there are several explanations for the matter:

1) When Yosef was by himself in Egypt, he took pains to educate Efraim and Menasheh in the heritage of his father's household, because who other than him would do it? But after his family reached Egypt, he did not devote himself to the education of his other sons to the same extent, but rather relied on the family influence. However, this influence was not effective, because Yosef and his sons lived in Egypt's capital, the place of the king and officers, and not with Yaakov and his sons in the Land of Goshen.

2) Before his father and brothers arrived, Yosef felt alone and solitary in Egypt, as emerges from the names by which he called his two sons. He transmitted this feeling of alienation to Efraim and Menasheh, and this was effective in enabling them to avoid blending into Egypt. However, after Yaakov's household arrived, Yosef felt expansive and relaxed in Egypt, and his younger sons felt even more this way, and therefore they blended in, and ultimately melted.

3) What is astounding is not that Yosef's other sons assimilated, since they were members of the elite in Egypt. The astounding thing is that Efraim and Menasheh did not melt also. However, Efraim and Menasheh saw and experienced the spiritual whirlwind that passed over their father when Yosef made himself known to his brothers and when Yaakov came to him in Egypt. These experiences left a deep impression in their souls and served as a shield against assimilation, which was lacking for Yosef's other sons.

The fundamental question Rav Henkin addresses is whether it is reasonable to expect Orthodox children in America to become authentic Jewish leaders. This is powerful stuff from a posek so vital to our community's development. We owe it a full hearing whether or not we end up agreeing. Rav Henkin himself made Aliyah in 1972.

The textual peg is why Yaakov grants Tribe status to Efraim and Menasheh, who grew up without his influence, and preemptively

denies it to any children of Yosef whom he would know from the cradle. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Rav Henkin's third answer is that the two oldest children were witnesses to powerful identity-forming experiences with their father. Yosef was a baal teshuvah, and his family became baalei teshuvah with him. But later children would grow up knowing only the restrictions generated by those experiences, which were imposed on them rather than assumed autonomously, and would not find them meaningful. There are of course ways to avoid this trap, but Yaakov knew Yosef too well to believe that he would adopt them.

Rav Henkin's second answer is that Yaakov's arrival made Egypt home. This sounds like a charedi critique of Modern Orthodoxy, but historical context inverts that parallel. The most likely parallel to Yaakov's arrival in Egypt is the post WWII arrival of European Torah greats in America. Perhaps the worry is not assimilation of individuals, but assimilation of the community as a whole. Yosef's later children would superficially maintain their Jewish identity and Orthodox practice, but their values and their prejudices would become fundamentally Egyptian.

Rav Henkin's first answer is the most subtle and yet perhaps the most directly challenging. Yosef was a successful father when fully engaged, but it's also true that the village matters. You just have to make sure it's the right village.

Maybe the village that matters most is not where you live, which can be dictated by duty or economic necessity, but where you would **choose** to be, and with whom. Do you buy in Alexandria and rent in Paris, or buy in Paris and rent in Alexandria? In other words: Are you in Alexandria because you must be, or because your fundamental identity and desires are those of a royal hanger-on? Yosef's later children spent vacations in Goshen out of duty and necessity, but lived in Cairo by choice.

Rav Henkin's challenge applies to how we spend time just as much as it does to where we spend time.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.