

This פרשת ויחי is a very special פרשה for us because we're celebrating, Baruch Hashem, the extremely happy occasion of the בר מצוה of Ephraim Asher Boehm נ"י. May we see a lot of נחת from him and from all of the family, all of the אייניקלעך, אור אייניקלעך, and everyone, including the Zeidys and the Bobbis.

I conducted a little survey on the day I recorded this. I asked people, "Who was the greatest רבי of all time?" Almost everyone, with only a couple of exceptions, said משה רבינו. Then I asked the important follow-up question: "Who is the second-greatest רבי of all time?" Here, I got a range of answers. Some said רבי יהודה הנשיא. Others said רבי, רבי, רבי. Others said שמואל הנביא. One person even mentioned רש"י, which is an excellent answer. However, the majority said יהושע.

In this regard, יהושע doesn't always get the credit he deserves. Yet, if you look at the beginning of פרקי אבות, it says: משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע. יהושע was next in line, chosen ahead of everyone else. So, what is יהושע's real place in our מסורה? How do we judge his גדלות? It's not a contest, but we aim to understand who is חשוב and why they should be considered great.

The answer can be found in this week's פרשה. Among the most momentous and memorable human actions described in the תורה, there is an event in פרשת ויחי that stands out. While הקדוש ברוך הוא performs עקדת יצחק, יעקב gives his ברכות to יוסף's sons, and אפרים and מנשה cross his hands, placing his right hand on אפרים and his left hand on מנשה. The תורה dedicates several פסוקים to this moment, underscoring its importance. In this episode, the פסוק says (48:20): וישם את אפריים לפני מנשה. Why did יעקב do that? רש"י explains (48:19): שיעתיד יהושע לצאת ממנו, וינהייל את הארץ וילמד תורה. יהושע, who will apportion all of ארץ ישראל and be a rebbi in ישראל - Who will come from אפרים? יהושע, who will apportion all of ארץ ישראל and be a rebbi in ישראל.

אברהם קלאגסבאלד of Antwerp, author of ספר מנחת חן (a ספר that shares its name with R' Oelbaum's ספר), asks an important question: While אפרים's future greatness is undeniable, מנשה was still the בכור. בכור carries tremendous חשיבות. In fact, when משיח comes, it is said that בכורים will return to perform the עבודה in the בית המקדש instead of the לויים. [I hope so because I am a בכור!] So, which is greater: the present greatness of בכור, or the eventual greatness of צדיקים emerging from אפרים?

He offers a profound answer. What is a person's true purpose in life? It is to realize his potential, to turn what is within him into actual accomplishments. בכור is automatic. From the moment a בכור is born, his status is set. It requires no effort on his part. However, greatness achieved through effort, through personal growth and fulfillment of potential, is far more significant. אפרים exemplified this. יהושע's achievements were a reflection of the כוחות inherited from אפרים, and these כוחות stemmed from אפרים's own efforts and greatness. יעקב recognized this distinction. By placing אפרים before מנשה, he demonstrated that the מעלה of striving for and achieving greatness through personal effort outweighs automatic status. (This recognition had practical implications - דגל אפרים was placed ahead of מנשה's in the desert encampments, and during the חנוכה המזבח of the משכן, אפרים also preceded מנשה).

This is a powerful lesson for all of us, especially for every בר מצוה boy. Every day when we put on תפילין, we can relive the excitement of the first time we put on תפילין. I personally feel the same thrill each time I put on תפילין as I did the first time. This is the fountain of youth for Jews - we can be בר מצוה boys and בת מצוה girls every single day by fulfilling our potential. If we're serving Hashem and not only with doing what we have to, but doing it with התלהבות, זריזות, with real great concentration and putting our full כוחות into it, then we'll be fulfilling our full potential and הקדוש ברוך הוא will reward us. Im Yirtzeh Hashem, we should see נחת and געזונט, and may we see all of our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren be successful in this endeavor. Good Shabbos!

