## [Embrace THIS: Aleph and Parshat Vayekhi](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/embrace-this-aleph-and-parshat-vayekhi)

The Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Yitzhak Eisik, had an ailment which caused him tremendous pain. And yet, his pain wasn’t noticeable from looking at him; never did he show that he suffered any agony. Once, his physician asked him, “How is it that you can endure such pain without complaining or groaning?”

“You would understand,” replied the rebbe, “if you thought of pain as scrubbing and purifying the soul in a strong solution. When you understand it that way, what can you do but accept it with love and without grumbling? And with practice, you can build the strength to endure any present pain. After all, one need only be concerned with the moment – all pain from the past is no longer present, and who would be so foolish as to worry about pain that hasn’t happened yet?”

The ability to transcend pain is one of the most powerful fruits of spiritual practice. This power is represented by the letter *aleph,* and is associated with the *middot* (qualities) of “equanimity” and “integrity.”

But this is not the equanimity of detachment or lack of feeling; it is just the opposite. The *aleph* represents the singularity of consciousness, the vast field of awareness within which arises both pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, fulfilment and loss, and so on. All of these polarities of experience are deeply felt, but they are felt within the unitary, open space of awareness. In knowing oneself as this openness, one tastes both the sweetness and the bitterness, but the polarities of experience are no longer seductive or dramatic; they are no longer compelling. They are simply the coming and going of qualities within the inner spaciousness that we are, and this spaciousness is infinitely more vast than any particular experience.

There is a *mishna* hints at this power:

רַבִּי יַנַּאי אוֹמֵר, אֵין בְּיָדֵינוּ לֹא מִשַּׁלְוַת הָרְשָׁעִים וְאַף לֹא מִיִּסּוּרֵי הַצַּדִּיקִים

*Rabbi Yannai said: it is not in our hands [to explain the reason] either the tranquility of the wicked or the afflictions of the righteous…*

* Pirkei Avot 4:19

On the surface, this *mishna* is expressing that old and tired philosophical and religious dilemma: why do good things happen to bad people, and why do bad things happen to good people? But on a deeper level, it is actually giving us an entryway into *aleph,* into being the space within which the שלוה *shalvah* (tranquility) and the יסורין *yisurin* (afflictions) both arise and disappear:

אֵין בְּיָדֵינוּ – *ayn b’yadaynu – it is not in our hands…*

When we recognize that the experience of this moment is not something we can control at all, that it is simply what is, we take the perspective of our essence – the space of awareness that simply perceives, prior to the judging activity of thought and emotion.

This does not contradict the fact that we can and must take responsibility for our actions, so as to not create unnecessary suffering for the next moment; it is only to say that in *this* moment, the present experience is already here. If we first of all *accept it,* we can *use it* to *transcend it;* this is the purification that Rabbi Yizhak Eisik was talking about.

Moreover, when we cease to view our יסורין *yisurin* as a problem, we will not be grasping after external things to make us feel better. We will not be tempted to cheat, steal, or act out of integrity in our dealings with our fellow beings.

לֹ֤א תַסִּיג֙ גְּב֣וּל רֵֽעֲךָ֔

*Lo tasig g’vul rei’akha – You shall not move your neighbor’s landmarks…*

* *Devarim* (Deuteronomy 19:14)

This *mitzvah* of not cheating our neighbors by respecting boundaries is an outer expression of the quality of *aleph;* when we know the strength and boundlessness of our own being, we need not forsake our integrity to get just a little more land, a little more money, and so on. When we know the strength and boundlessness of our own being, then our pain becomes like the יִּסּוּרֵי הַצַּדִּיקִים – *yisurei hatzadikim – the afflictions of the righteous.*

This week’s *parshah* finishes *Sefer Bereisheet,* the Book of Genesis, and also finishes the *Yosef* cycle. In the tradition, *Yosef* is often called *HaTzadik,* the “perfected one” or “righteous one,” because he perfectly embodies this quality of accepting and transcending all suffering. Earlier in the story, *Yosef* told his brothers not to be distressed about their having wronged him. He explains that it was all part of the Divine intelligence that he should be brought to Egypt in order to save them from the famine.

In this *parshah,* their father *Yaakov/Yisrael* dies, and the brothers bring him back to Canaanto bury him in the Cave of Machpelah, along with *Avraham, Sarah, Yitzhak, Rifka,* and *Leah.* Afterward, the brothers again become distressed, worrying that perhaps now that their father is dead, *Yosef* might take his revenge on them:

וַיֵּלְכוּ֙ גַּם־אֶחָ֔יו וַֽיִּפְּל֖וּ לְפָנָ֑יו וַיֹּ֣אמְר֔וּ הִנֶּ֥נּֽוּ לְךָ֖ לַעֲבָדִֽים׃

*His brothers went and fell before him, and said, “We are ready to be your slaves.”*

וַיֹּ֧אמֶר אֲלֵהֶ֛ם יוֹסֵ֖ף אַל־תִּירָ֑אוּ כִּ֛י הֲתַ֥חַת אֱלֹהִ֖ים אָֽנִי׃

*But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I instead* Elohim?

וְאַתֶּ֕ם חֲשַׁבְתֶּ֥ם עָלַ֖י רָעָ֑ה אֱלֹהִים֙ חֲשָׁבָ֣הּ לְטֹבָ֔ה לְמַ֗עַן עֲשֹׂ֛ה כַּיּ֥וֹם הַזֶּ֖ה לְהַחֲיֹ֥ת עַם־רָֽב׃

*Although you intended me harm,* Elohim *intended it for good, in order to do, as it is on this day, to keep many people alive…*

* *Bereisheet* (Genesis) 50:18-22

This is *Yosef’s* integrity – that he doesn’t hold a grudge, but accepts everything from the “hands of God,” which is another way of expressing the teaching in the above *mishna:*

אֵין בְּיָדֵינוּ – *ayn b’yadaynu – it is not in our hands…*

In other words, *Yosef* doesn’t hold a grudge because he is relating to Reality as God, rather than as something to be judged and manipulated. Judging and manipulating would be the activity of the ordinary, ego self – the sense of “me” that does not know how to receive the moment as it is. This is expressed beautifully in the *pasuk:*

וַיֹּ֧אמֶר אֲלֵהֶ֛ם יוֹסֵ֖ף אַל־תִּירָ֑אוּ כִּ֛י הֲתַ֥חַת אֱלֹהִ֖ים אָֽנִי׃

*But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I instead* Elohim?

Another way to read this would be,

“Don’t fear, because *takhat* אֱלֹהִ֖ים *Elohim* אָֽנִי *ani –*the “I” is underneath the Divine…”

When the *alef* of our *ani,* the open space of awareness that we are, opens to allow this moment to be as it is, then we can access the *Alef* of *Elohim,* the Divine Reality that removes all fear and reveals the miraculous intelligence that is behind and unfolds within all happening…

***More on Vayekhi...***

[**The Dog Hair – Parshat Vayekhi**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/the-dog-hair-parshat-vayekhi)1/6/2020 [0 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/the-dog-hair-parshat-vayekhi#comments)

When we’re about to sweep and mop the dining room floor in our house, I like to put the dog outside first.

Why?

Our dog sheds an uncannily huge amount of hair (a fact of which we were unaware when we took her in). If we didn’t put her outside during cleaning, there would be no point at which the floor would actually be clean, because the dog would be constantly dropping more and more hair on it as we cleaned it.

And yet, what even is the point? As soon as we let the dog back in, the floor will start getting coated with hair again.

מַה־יִּתְר֖וֹן לָֽאָדָ֑ם בְּכָל־עֲמָל֔וֹ שֶֽׁיַּעֲמֹ֖ל תַּ֥חַת הַשָּֽׁמֶשׁ׃
What gain is there for a person in all their work that they labor under the sun?
(Ecclesiastes 1:3)

The point, of course, is that it’s nice to experience a clean floor, even if just for a short time. If you thought that by cleaning the floor it would somehow stay clean forever, that would be הֶ֖בֶל וּרְע֥וּת רֽוּחַ hevel ur’ut ruakh – “vanity and striving after wind.” But if you value the temporary yet regularly recurring experience of a clean floor, it’s perfectly worth it to get out the broom!

And so it is with our spiritual life.

Just like the dining room, our inner world also has a “floor” that gets “dirty.” Meaning, there is root, an essence, a basic level to our beingness, that gets overlaid with thoughts, feelings, emotions, impressions, memories, ideas, opinions, and all kinds of experiences. That basic level is awareness itself – it is the simple miracle of perception, beneath and beyond our person-hood.

Most people never realize that there’s a difference between the “floor” and the “hair” – they never experience their own being in a pure way, and so life is assumed to be nothing but a tapestry of the overlay. But the miracle of meditation is that it “sweeps the floor” and reveals the essence beneath; that essence is spacious, free, creative, benevolent and inherently joyful.

It’s true, when we move from meditation back into the flow of life, awareness is bound to get “dirty” again. But that’s okay – when you know yourself as that pure awareness, you don’t need to be fooled by the “dirt.” You have seen the “clean floor” with your own eyes, and you can sweep it again, any time!

In fact, it is only because our awareness becomes overlaid with all kinds of experience that we are able to fully recognize our deepest nature. When we were infants, our awareness was fresh, pure and innocent, but we had no appreciation for it, no recognition of the beauty within our own being.

Of course, adults could recognize it – that’s why people love babies! But babies don’t recognize their own beauty. Only after we become adults, after our innocence seems to be lost, can we re-discover our essential innocence and appreciate it for the first time. We make think our innocence is long gone, but sweep the floor and see – it has never gone anywhere. At the root of all experience, beneath all the overlay – we are that freshness, that innocence, that open aliveness.

Life is not easy – its trials and tribulations, consisting of both what happens to us and of the misdeeds we commit, accrue over time and become heavy burdens, burdens which we may not even recognize until we experience freedom from them. But when we do, when we finally come to know the freedom that we are beneath all that accumulated past, the curse of the burden is no longer really a curse; it is, in fact, a blessing.

It is a blessing because without it, without the pain that life gives us, there cannot be a full knowing of who we are beneath the pain. Without the pain that life gives us, there can be neither the wisdom nor the experience we need to help others discover their essence as well.

There is a hint of this in the parshah:

כָּל־אֵ֛לֶּה שִׁבְטֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל שְׁנֵ֣ים עָשָׂ֑ר וְ֠זֹאת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּ֨ר לָהֶ֤ם אֲבִיהֶם֙ וַיְבָ֣רֶךְ אוֹתָ֔ם אִ֛ישׁ אֲשֶׁ֥ר כְּבִרְכָת֖וֹ בֵּרַ֥ךְ אֹתָֽם׃
All these were the tribes of Israel – twelve – and this is what their father said to them as he blessed them, each according to their blessing, he blessed them.
(Genesis 49:28)

He “blessed” them? But to at least half of them he delivered curses:

Shimon and Levi are a pair; their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel… Issachar is a strong-boned ass, crouching among the sheep… He bent his shoulder to the burden, and became a toiling serf… Gad shall be raided by raiders… Joseph is a wild ass… Archers bitterly assailed him; They shot at him and harried him….

But that’s the point: the “curses” are in fact the blessings, because it is through the pain of life experience that our true path of blessing is revealed. That’s why it says he “blessed them according to their blessings” – each of them had their own pain, their own “curses” that became their ultimate blessings. This is most clearly expressed in the story of Joseph, that through his tremendous suffering, masses of people were saved, as Joseph says to his brothers:

וְאַתֶּ֕ם חֲשַׁבְתֶּ֥ם עָלַ֖י רָעָ֑ה אֱלֹהִים֙ חֲשָׁבָ֣הּ לְטֹבָ֔ה לְמַ֗עַן עֲשֹׂ֛ה כַּיּ֥וֹם הַזֶּ֖ה לְהַחֲיֹ֥ת עַם־רָֽב׃
You intended me harm, but the Divine intended it for good, so as to bring about as it is today – to bring life to many people.
(Genesis 50:20)

And even deeper – whatever pain and negativity come from the past, עֲשֹׂ֛ה כַּיּ֥וֹם הַזֶּ֖ה – asoh kayom hazeh – to bring about as it is today – meaning, this moment is as it is because of what has come before. And in the embrace of this moment as it is, לְהַחֲיֹ֥ת עַם־רָֽב – the essential life beneath all pain is revealed as the vastness beyond person-hood…

[**Spiritual Double Take – Parshat Vayekhi**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/spiritual-double-take-parshat-vayekhi)
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The moment you wish to awaken, you have already awoken to a certain degree. That’s because the desire to awaken can’t even arise at all unless there is already a certain amount of objectivity on your thoughts and feelings. Even if you feel like you are failing, even if you feel that your mind is too busy, or you feel emotionally reactive or whatever, your awareness of that is already a movement in the direction of wakefulness.

The key is to use the wakefulness you already have to deepen your wakefulness further, rather than focusing on how not-awake you are:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה’ ... הַמַּעֲבִיר שֵׁנָה מֵעֵינַי
Blessed are You, Hashem… who removes sleep from my eyes…

This morning blessing gives thanks for waking up from sleep, but on a deeper level, it’s appreciating the tremendous grace we’re receiving just for being awake enough to say the prayer at all!

A little later the prayer says:

 וְדַבְּקֵנוּ בְּמִצְותֶיךָ
And attach us to your mitzvot (commandments)…

Traditionally speaking, the mitzvot, commandments, are the actions that the Divine “wants” us to do. So to do a mitzvah, in this traditional view, is to fulfill the meaning of your existence. The deeper desire expressed in this prayer, then, is the longing for meaning: Help me be motivated to fulfill my purpose!

This desire for meaning, for purpose, is core to the spiritual drive. But, it is only half of the equation. A little further on it says:

וְאַל תַּשְׁלֶט בָּנוּ יֵצֶר הָרָע
And don’t let the yetzer hara (personal impulses, literally the “bad desire”) rule within us…

The other half of the equation is the desire for freedom, for transcendence.

These two core desires that drive the spiritual path are, in a sense, the opposite of one another. The first wants to transform the world; the second wants to transcend the world. The first wants fulfill one’s role; the second wants to be liberated from all roles. The first wants to serve the Divine; the second wants to realize that All is Divine.

These two core desires are the opposite of one another, but they are not opposed to one another. In Kabbalah and Hassidic teaching, they must work together. You cannot really serve the Divine if you don’t awaken your own inner Divinity. You cannot really transform anything for the better, if you’re emotionally attached to things being a certain way.

In Kabbalah, this is called ratz v’shuv – running and returning. In meditation, we “run” – we transcend every particular aspect of experience and know ourselves as the ayin, the Nothing, the open space of this moment within which everything arises. In prayer, we “return” – we appreciate particular things and give thanks; we envision transformation and ask the Divine for help in its manifestation. On a broader level, all spiritual practices, including both prayer and meditation, are a kind of “running” and our ordinary work and life with people is “returning.”

In Judaism, both are necessary. This theme manifests at all levels of the tradition: Liberation from Egypt, followed by building the Sanctuary. Or, in the opposite order: six days of working the world, followed by a full day of letting everything be as it is onShabbat.

And, in this last example, we see the emphasis unique to Judaism: Six days of work, one day of rest – both are necessary, but transformation is emphasized. In many traditions, it’s the opposite; the holy person is the one who withdraws from the world. But in Judaism, withdraw and transcendence, while absolutely necessary, are not the goal.

These two poles are represented by Joseph’s two sons, Menasheh and Ephraim.Menasheh comes from leaving the past behind – transcending the world:

וַיִּקְרָ֥א יוֹסֵ֛ף אֶת־שֵׁ֥ם הַבְּכ֖וֹר מְנַשֶּׁ֑ה כִּֽי־נַשַּׁ֤נִי אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִ֔י וְאֵ֖ת כָּל־בֵּ֥ית אָבִֽי
And Joseph named the firstborn Menasheh, for "God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house."

But Ephraim comes from being “fruitful” – that is, successful – in the world:

וְאֵ֛ת שֵׁ֥ם הַשֵּׁנִ֖י קָרָ֣א אֶפְרָ֑יִם כִּֽי־הִפְרַ֥נִי אֱלֹהִ֖ים בְּאֶ֥רֶץ עָנְיִֽי
And the second one he named Ephraim, for “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”

Menasheh is the first born, hinting at the usual way that spirituality is viewed: transcendence is primary. But when Jacob blesses the two boys, he switches his hands to give the blessing of the first born to Ephraim instead:

וַיִּשְׁלַח֩ יִשְׂרָאֵ֨ל אֶת־יְמִינ֜וֹ וַיָּ֨שֶׁת עַל־רֹ֤אשׁ אֶפְרַ֨יִם֙ וְה֣וּא הַצָּעִ֔יר וְאֶת־שְׂמֹאל֖וֹ עַל־רֹ֣אשׁ מְנַשֶּׁ֑ה
But Israel stretched out his right hand and placed [it] on Ephraim's head, although he was the younger, and his left hand [he placed] on Manasheh's head…

This is why the traditional blessing for boys on Friday nights puts Ephraim first, even though Menasheh was first born – Y’simkha Elohim k’Ephraim v’k’Menasheh!

Transformation is the goal (Ephraim), but to achieve that goal, transcendence is also necessary (Menasheh). This is a basic key to living in awakened life: being involved, helping, serving, creating, but also letting go at the same time – accepting everything as it is, not trying to control anything, being the simple, open space of consciousness within which this moment arises.

I call this the Spiritual Double-Take.

The Double-Take is really not double; it is the simple, single move of Presence. But until it becomes integrated into the way we operate, it requires this ratz v’shuv attitude, this oscillation back and forth between effort and letting go. Eventually, this awakens a sense of effortless effort, of acting in the world without any sense of the “me” doing the acting. As Joseph responded to Pharaoh when asked if he could interpret Pharaoh’s dream:

בִּלְעָדָ֑י אֱלֹהִ֕ים יַֽעֲנֶ֖ה  – Biladi, Elohim ya’aneh! – It is totally beyond me, but the Divine will answer!

There is nothing but the Divine manifesting in all forms, and so from this awakened point of view, there need not be any tension whatsoever – life simply unfolds effortlessly. So may it be for us, amein! Good Shabbos!

[**Die Before You Die – Parshat Vayekhi**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/die-before-you-die-parshat-vayekhi)
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This week’s reading begins, “Vayekhi Ya’akov b’eretz Mitzrayim – Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years…”

The last time we heard about “seventeen years” was back in Parshat Vayeishev, where Joseph is described as a na’ar – a seventeen-year-old youth. Seventeen, then, symbolizes youthfulness. Joseph is the embodiment of youthfulness: he is both beloved and hated, he has BIG and unrealistic seeming dreams, and he has no common sense about how to get along with his brothers.

Egypt, on the other hand, means limitation, suffering, constricted-ness (Egypt is Mitzrayim, from tzar,which means “narrow). The youthful Joseph must first get enslaved in Egypt before his eventual ascent to Egyptian royalty.

Similarly, the youthfulness in each of us gets constricted by the limitations and conditioning of our physical bodies, families and culture. And yet, we need not be burdened by the temporary challenges of life. Like Joseph, we can be like cream – always “rising to the top” – if we can really let go of resistance to all our seeming limitations as they appear.

Ironically, this “letting go” isn’t really a quality of youthfulness, but of old age. As we get older and approach the ultimate Letting Go, it’s natural for attachments to fall away. This is hinted at in the blessing Jacob gives to Joseph’s two sons, Menasheh and Ephraim. Menasheh means “forgetting troubles,” hinting at old age, which is fitting since Menasheh is the elder. Ephraim means “fruitfulness,” which is fitting for the younger brother.

But Jacob deliberately switches his hands, giving the blessing of the elder to the younger, which is why the traditional blessing for boys is that they should be like Ephraim and Menasheh, and not the other way around, as if to say: Let go of your troubles while you are still fruitful! Die before you die!

On this Shabbat Vayekhi, the Sabbath of Life, may we recognize the precious opportunity we have while we’re alive, to die before we die, to get free now, in this life. Good Shabbos!

[**​Getting Real in the Trader Joe’s Parking Lot- Parshat Vayekhi**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/getting-real-in-the-trader-joes-parking-lot-parshat-vayekhi)
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Last Friday afternoon I went to pick up some kosher wine at Trader Joe’s. (Less than $5 for a cabernet and not too bad!) I pulled into the narrow entrance of the indoor parking lot and saw a woman getting into her car, so I paused to let her pull out so that I could take her spot.

Just then, a niggun (melody) came to me. I thought it would be great to sing in the service I was leading that night, so I pulled out my iPhone to record it and send out to the other service leaders.

Just then, I heard an angry voice yelling at me-

“What the hell are you doing?? Look at you sitting there on your phone- backing up traffic!!”

An older man was tensely yelling and walking toward me. I thought he might burst a blood vessel! I ignored him at first, but he kept walking right up to my car.

I rolled down the window a little and explained, “I’m waiting for this car to pull out so I can pull in.”

“What about that spot??” he yelled and gestured.

There was another open spot behind me, but I couldn’t pull in since there were now several cars blocking the way. Due to the angle of the turn, it wasn’t visible when I had first pulled in.

“Oh okay, I didn’t see that,” I said.

“Aaagghh!” he gestured angrily and stormed away.

Now, as far as I know, pausing and holding up traffic for a few moments in order to allow someone to pull out of their parking spot is kosher. But to this guy, I was clearly in the wrong, and he was letting me have it.

Why?

I assume it’s because he thought I was talking on the cell phone while driving, which really triggered him. As happens to folks so often, his mind judged something external (me) and then lost all self-awareness and composure. He became a jerk because he was convinced that I was a jerk.

At such moments of being triggered, people are often swept away by emotion. All the positive middot- wisdom, sensitivity, awareness, compassion and so on- are out the window.

How often do you experience such moments?

Is it possible to take another path? Can triggered emotion actually be put to good use?

Back in 1998, during a radically transformative time of my life, I had such an experience:

I was driving, when a car violently cut me off at an intersection. I gasped, adrenalin pumping. I felt the heat of anger swelling within me, and the urge to retaliate and curse the guy behind the wheel.

Then, the thought occurred to me that this moment of being triggered was the moment to be present.

I brought my awareness deep into the feeling of the anger. It burned within me, and it was extremely painful. Next, I felt it move upward through my body and out the top of my head. It was like a huge cloud of darkness left me.

As the last of it left my body, everything looked totally different. The road glistened with moisture from a recent rain and the sound of a bird’s caw filled the sky. I began to see that driver in a completely different way. He wasn’t against me- he was actually setting me free! It left me feeling raw, simple, innocent and at peace.

The truth is, the human nervous system is a heaven/hell engine.

Of course we want the heaven and not the hell. But, if you really want heaven to be born within you, the key is to not resist the hell. Like physical birth, there is pain in birthing heaven. If you’re willing to open to this pain, it can serve its function- to set you free. As in the birth of a child, it’s ultimately a blessing.

This week’s reading, Parshat Vayekhi, is the last reading of the book of Genesis. Jacob is dying, and he calls his son Joseph to bring him his two grandsons, so that he can bless them before he dies.

Joseph arranges his sons with the older brother Menasheh at Jacob’s right hand and the younger brother Ephraim at Jacob’s left. This way, the older will get the blessing of the first born from Jacob’s right hand, as was the custom.

However, Jacob reverses his hands, putting his right hand on Ephraim’s head instead. Then he says:

“By you shall Israel bless, saying, ‘May the Divine make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.’”

Today, there is a tradition for parents to bless their boys on Friday nights with these words. Girls are blessed with the names of the matriarchs.

Why does Jacob switch his hands and reverse the order? What’s so special about Ephraim and Menasheh that boys should be blessed with their names, rather than the names of the patriarchs?

Let’s go back a few readings to Parshat Mikeitz, when Joseph names his sons. He names his first-born son Menasheh because, he says,

“The Divine has made me forget (Nashani) my troubles”.

He names the second son Ephraim because-

“The Divine has made me fruitful (Hifrani) in the land of my suffering”.

These two names actually map out the process of spiritual awakening and the birth of the inner heaven:

First, there must be an intensification of awareness in the body, an anchoring of the mind in the present. This, by necessity, entails a surrendering of mental preoccupation with the past and the suffering created by that.

In other words, the “troubles”, are “forgotten.” This is Menasheh.

“Forgetting troubles” opens a new space in one’s consciousness that was previously taken up by excessive thinking. After that space has opened up, the spiritual “fruit” can be born within- the inner Light of joy, freedom and bliss- the inner heaven. This is Ephraim.

But, as Joseph said, “The Divine has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”

In order for this inner Light to come forth, one must first feel fully any emotional pain that has previously been blocked. Most people have a good amount of suppressed pain from a lifetime of difficult experiences. When feelings are unpleasant, we naturally want to avoid them. We can become expert at putting up inner barriers so we don’t have to feel them.

But those inner barriers take energy. They block us from feeling our own aliveness and from the life of this moment. They impede the blossoming of heaven on earth.

But open to the blocked pain, and the blockages begin melting away.

When you do, you may want to turn back. It’s easy to forget the good that lies at the other end. Perhaps this is why Jacob reversed his hands, putting Efraim first in the formula-

“Y’simkha Elokim k’Efraim v’kh’Menashe-
“May the Divine make you like Efraim and Menashe!”

In other words, remember that the “fruit” is the point. You won’t have to walk through hell eternally. Contrary to the Christian fundamentalists, the hell fires do burn themselves out eventually, if you feel them fully.

There is another hint of this in the verb Joseph uses when he says that the Divine made him “forget- Nashani”- his troubles. The verb root is Nun-Shin-Heh. Besides the meaning “to cause one to forget”, this verb also means, “to feminize”. In classical symbolism, “feminine” means “receptive”. It is the opposite of aggressiveness, which is often characterized as masculine. Perhaps this is why the blessing of Efraim and Menashe has traditionally been used for boys. If you truly wish to awaken, you need to temper the “masculine” activity of inner conflict with the “feminine” quality of openness. In this openness, you may have to suffer the pain that emerges, but it will pass, and its fire will transform you. Like the fiery sword that guards the Garden of Eden, you must pass through, allowing it to slay all that is false.

There’s a Hassidic story of the brothers Rabbi Shmelky of Nicholsberg and Rabbi Pinkhas of Koretz.

They were greatly troubled by a passage in the Mishna (Berakhot 9:5) that says one should say a blessing for bad things that happen as well as for good things.

They came to their master Rabbi Dov Bear, the Maggid of Mezrich, and asked him-

“Our sages teach that we should praise and thank Hashem for the bad well as the good. How can we understand this? Wouldn’t it be insincere to give thanks for suffering?”

The Maggid replied, “Go to the House of Study. There you will find Reb Zusha smoking his pipe. He will give you the answer.”

When they arrived at the House of Study they found Reb Zusha and put their question to him.

Reb Zusha simply laughed and said, “I think you’ve made a mistake coming to me. You had better go find someone else, because I myself have never experienced anything bad!”

The two brothers were taken aback. They knew that Reb Zusha’s life was riddled with poverty and misfortune. Then, they began to realize what Zusha was saying: He didn’t see his suffering as “bad”. Zusha's suffering had transformed him into the ecstatic saint he was.

On this Shabbat Vay’khi, The Shabbat of Life, let’s open to life as it is in its fullness, with its joy and suffering.

And when life brings you suffering, let it be a pointed reminder to once again become present, to allow the pain to break open your heart and reveal the light within. Rather than judge, snap or plot, let that light come through you in a word of kindness or act of service. And if the response you are called to give is harsh, let it be strong and clear- but without anger and malice.

Good Shabbos!
​-brian yosef

[**I Have Never Suffered In My Life- Parshat Vayekhi﻿**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/i-have-never-suffered-in-my-life-parshat-vayekhi)
1/1/2015 [2 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/i-have-never-suffered-in-my-life-parshat-vayekhi#comments)

​There is a Hassidic story of the saintly brothers Rabbi Shmelky of Nicholsberg and Rabbi Pinkhas of Koretz. They were greatly troubled by a passage in the Mishna (9:5) that says one should say a blessing for bad things that happen as well as good. They came to their master Rabbi Dov Bear, the Maggid of Mezrich, and asked him, “Our sages teach that we should praise and thank Hashem for the bad well as the good. How can we understand this? Wouldn’t it be insincere to give thanks for our suffering?

The Maggid replied, “Go to the House of Study. There you will find Reb Zusha smoking his pipe. He will give you the answer.”

When they arrived at the House of Study they found Reb Zusha and put their question to him. Reb Zusha simply laughed and said, “I think you’ve made a mistake coming to me. You had better go find someone else, because I myself have never experienced suffering in all my life.” At first, the two brothers were taken aback. They knew that Reb Zusha’s life was riddled with poverty and misfortune. Then, they realized- Zusha had a very different relationship with his “suffering”.

The human nervous system is a Heaven/Hell engine. Which one will your engine produce? The whole purpose of the spiritual path is to produce Heaven, for Heaven to be born within. To do this requires not just conscious choice, but also commitment. The moment you make this commitment, you are on the Path.

You need commitment because there is a common pitfall. If you wish to have Heaven and not Hell, you may think that you can somehow avoid the Hell, avoid the suffering. But, like physical birth, there is pain in birthing Heaven. A person must be willing to endure this pain, to get to the other side- to walk through Hell to get to Heaven. Without commitment, you are likely to give up at this point. But if you persevere, the pain of suffering begins to look entirely different. As in the birth of a child, it is ultimately a blessing.

This week’s reading, Parshat Vayekhi, is the last reading of the book of Genesis. Jacob is dying, and he calls his son Joseph to bring his two sons to him, that he may bless them before he dies. Joseph arranges his sons with the older brother Menashe at Jacob’s right hand and the younger brother Efraim at Jacob’s left. This way, the older will get the blessing of the first born from Jacob’s right hand, as was the custom. However, Jacob reverses his hands, putting his right hand on Ephraim’s head instead. He then blesses the boys with the words- “By you shall Israel bless, saying, ‘May the Divine make you like Efraim and Menashe.’” Today, there is a tradition for parents to bless their boy children on Shabbat with these words.

Why does Jacob switch his hands and reverse the order? What is so special about Efraim and Menashe that they should become the paradigm for blessing boys?

Let’s go back a few readings to Parshat Mikeitz, when Joseph names his sons. He names his first-born son Menasheh because, he says, “The Divine has made me forget (Nashani) my troubles”. He names the second son Efraim because “The Divine has made me fruitful (Hifrani) in the land of my suffering”.

These two names actually describe the process of spiritual awakening and the birth of the inner Heaven. First there must be an intensification of awareness in the body, an anchoring of the mind in the present. This, by necessity, entails a surrendering of mental preoccupation with the past and the suffering that is created by this type of thought. The ordinary worries of the mind, the “troubles”, are “forgotten”. This opens a new space in one’s consciousness that was previously taken up by excessive thinking.

After that space has opened up, the spiritual “fruit” can be born within- the inner Light of joy, freedom and bliss- the inner Heaven. But, as the verse says, “The Divine has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.” In order for this inner Light to come forth, one must first feel fully any emotional pain that has previously been blocked. Most people have a good amount of suppressed pain from a lifetime of difficult experiences. When feelings are unpleasant, we naturally want to avoid them. We can become expert at putting up inner barriers so we don’t have to feel them. But those inner barriers take energy. They divide us internally and block us from our own life energy and from life as it is happening in this moment. They block the blossoming of Heaven on Earth.

When you begin to open to this inner suffering, you may want to turn back. It’s easy to forget the good that lies at the other end. Perhaps this is why Jacob reversed his hands, putting Efraim first in the formula- “y’simkha Elokim k’Efraim v’kh’Menashe- may the Divine make you like Efraim and Menashe”. In other words, remember that the “fruit” is the point. You won’t have to walk through Hell eternally. Contrary to the Christian fundamentalists, the Hell fires do burn themselves out eventually, if you feel them fully. This means becoming deeply open to whatever arises in your field of awareness as your consciousness comes to dwell within your body, in your heart, in the present.

There is another hint of this in the verb Joseph uses when he says that the Divine made him “forget- Nashani”- his troubles. The verb root is Nun-Shin-Heh. Besides the meaning “to cause one to forget”, this verb also means, “to feminize”. In classical symbolism, “feminine” means “receptive”. It is the opposite of aggressiveness, which is often characterized as masculine. Perhaps this is why the blessing of Efraim and Menashe has traditionally been used for boys. If you truly wish to awaken, you need to temper the “masculine” activity of inner conflict with the “feminine” quality of openness. In this openness, you may have to suffer the pain that emerges, but it will pass, and its fire will transform you. Like the fiery sword that guards the Garden of Eden, you must pass through, allowing it to slay all that is false.

Jacob gives his blessing on the threshold of the Book of Exodus, where his descendents descend into the suffering of slavery, only to be saved and brought into freedom with the Divine Presence. May we all receive this instruction and with it the faith and commitment to walk through the fires of whatever “hell” emerges in service of the Divine Presence that wants to be born through each of us. Amein, Good Shabbos!​