

Dear Rabbi,

Last week I was invited to have a Shabbat meal with an observant family, and before the meal the father put his hands on his children's heads, one by one, and recited a blessing. I was embarrassed to ask what he was saying, but could you please fill me in? (I kind of wish I would have given a blessing to my kids when they were little, they might of turned out differently than they did!)

Thanks!

Chuck W.

Dear Chuck,

The blessing is known as the "birchas hayelidim" or the blessing of the children. It is based upon the blessing Jacob recited upon his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe before he passed away. At the end of his blessing, it says "So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you shall Israel bless (their children) saying, 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe' ". (Genesis 48:20) We therefore blessed our boys that they should be like Ephraim and Menashe, which is the first part of that blessing.

We end the blessing by reciting the priestly blessing, which says, "So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them: 'May G-d bless you and safeguard you. May G-d illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May G-d lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you.'" (Numbers 6 23-27).

This is a very important time in the life of a child, something they look forward to all week, and remember throughout their lifetimes. It brings an aura of love and holiness into the family, and shows the child the respect his parents have for him, (Some have the custom that the mother, too, recites these blessings).

It has been asked what did Ephraim and Menashe do to deserve to be the prototype of blessing for the Jewish people throughout the generations. I think the reason is, that Ephraim and Menashe grew up differently than all their cousins. Their cousins grew up in an atmosphere of holiness, surrounded by the 11 tribes of Israel. Joseph, their father, was the "lost tribe", living alone in Egypt, and there they grew up. They were surrounded by Egyptian children, and un-holy adults in the best case. Despite the tremendous difficulties in doing so, they remained observant. Not only were they observant, but they clung to their father and became great tsaddikim, righteous individuals. For this reason they were elevated by Jacob, their grandfather, to the status of tribes, and the tribe of Joseph was split into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe. Not only did they stay at the level of their cousins, they surpassed them and were considered of an earlier generation.

This is our blessing to our children for all time: no matter what the surroundings, they should always have the strength and fortitude to rise above, and retain their holiness and greatness, not bowing or swaying to the pulls of the waves and winds of their times. They should be like Ephraim and Menashe!

The great Rebbe of Klausenberg, in the DP camps after surviving the horrors of the holocaust, was approached by a girl on the eve of Yom Kippur, asking him for the parental blessing, as she had lost her own blessing. With tears in his eyes, he bestowed it upon this girl. Soon the word got out, and dozens of girls in the DP camp were flocking to the holy Rebbe to receive their blessings as well. Even in the worst of times, this blessing has been a source of hope and comfort to Jewish children.