

Vayechi

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

No personality in the Torah seems to have more impact after his death than Yaakov. In his final speech he sets out different roles for each tribe and decides that Judah will be the primary tribe and dispossesses Reuven, the firstborn. He sets the tone for the future of the Jewish people.

But the first act he does in this process, on his deathbed, is to switch the position of Menasheh, the first of Yosef's sons, and Efraim, the younger. Yosef protests, but Yaakov insists. He changes the position of his hands, putting his right hand, the preferred one, on Efraim, the younger son.

Does Yosef protest because he has experienced the consequences of preferential treatment and does not want them repeated? Is it because, as did Yitzchak, he wants to stand by the firstborn regardless? Either way, Yaakov insists on the idea of merit. Yaakov was not the firstborn, so it is natural that he wants to express his belief that personal qualities should decide, rather than the accident of birth.

On the one hand, we have been given the notion of priesthood, of election, that birth confers automatic responsibility and duty. On the other hand, the prophetic tradition was one that stressed personal qualities that had nothing to do with birth or status. The automatic priesthood failed until Ezra imposed restraints and a sort of constitution. And out of Ezra's innovations emerged the rabbinic tradition, which has now become the essence of Jewish religious life. It seems that history has supported Yaakov's notion of meritocracy.