

## ***The Jewish Vaccine against Mimetic Desire: A Girardian Exploration of a Sabbath Ritual***

by Vanessa Avery-Wall

The Book of Genesis may be said to be a book about family struggles. In Genesis, we hear about issues pertaining to procreation and family rivalries; we hear about parental favoritism and competition for parental blessings and birthrights; we hear about the genesis and struggles of a people who are learning to live together and in covenant with God. According to Rene Girard, many of the narratives in Genesis are vehicles to reveal to us the human mechanism of mimetic desire, rivalry and scapegoating – the narratives expose the dangers of our imitative nature, the violence that is within our capacity, perhaps with the benefit of shocking us into an alternative way of being. The narratives in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the New Testament, use images of violence to reveal our own violence. In doing so, they are powerful testimonies against violence, against sacrifice; and they are warnings to us to be conscious of our mimetic impulses.

Religious rituals are phenomena manifesting the stories of a religious tradition. One purpose of religious ritual, according to Girard, is to contain violence and provide a nexus for communal reconciliation. In my readings within the field of Girardian studies, despite significant attention paid to the narratives of Genesis, relatively little attention has been paid to Jewish ritual, and how Jewish ritual might contribute to Girardian theory. It is my purpose here to explore the Jewish ritual called *Birkhat Banim*, “Blessing of Children,” and what it might mean in light of mimetic theory and the formation of Jewish identity.

I also take deeply to heart Sandor Goodheart’s statement in his article entitled “I am Joseph”:

In opposing the Old Testament to the New, in reading the old God as the sacrificial God of vengeance and anger and the new as the anti-sacrificial God of love, have we not unwittingly already slipped into the very structure we have wished to displace, believing in a new law or a ‘part two’ which it has already been by definition, as it were, the goal of the Old Testament itself to reveal to us, an Old Testament which is thus that much richer by virtue of having foreseen our sacrificial misunderstanding of it.<sup>1</sup>

In a religious economy, it is important and necessary to be able to hear from the inside of a tradition, to find the authentic voice. It is my hope that this discussion will find resonance not just within Judaism, but across the lines of other religious traditions as well.

To begin...The narrative origin of the blessing in question, in its context, is as follows:

In Genesis 48, Joseph brings his two children, Ephraim and Manasseh to see Jacob, who is dying. Jacob tells Joseph in this scene that he will make Joseph’s two sons as his own, and asks Joseph to bring his children forward so that he might bless them. Jacob then utters the blessing upon Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob then gives a blessing to each of the rest of his sons. The Book of Genesis ends with Jacob’s death and burial.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandor Goodhart, “I am Joseph: Rene Girard and the Prophetic Law” in *Violence and Truth*, Paul Dumouchel, ed., (CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 62-3.

Now it is the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh in particular that is significant to us here, but it also the manner in which it is given (and how the narrator describes it.) Though Joseph is careful to place Manasseh, the older of the two, before Jacob's right hand when bringing him forward (the right hand is the hand of spiritual primacy), and Ephraim before his left, Jacob crosses his hands so that his right hand is placed on the head of Ephraim and his left on the head of Manasseh.<sup>2</sup> Joseph tries to correct what he perceives to be his father's mistake, but Jacob knows what he is doing: Manasseh, he says, will have a great future, but Ephraim will be the greater of the two. Jacob then declares that "In this way shall Israel bless: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" (48.20) This is known in Judaism as the "Blessing of Children" (*Birkat Banim*).

Jacob's blessing of his grandchildren is called the "blessing of all blessings", and is one that is given a place of importance in Jewish ritual.<sup>3</sup> Jewish tradition places great emphasis on parental blessings in general. Think about Isaac and Esau's encounter after Jacob received the blessing in place of his brother: "Esau cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, 'Bless me, me also, father!'...Have you not reserved a blessing for me?'...And Esau lifted up his voice and wept." (Gen. 27.34, 36b, 38b)<sup>4</sup> Isaac has no more blessings to give. A blessing is effective language—blessings create reality and carve out a future for the one being blessed. The parental blessing is considered prophetic in this respect – they are a linguistic blueprint for the protection and rewards the divine will provide.<sup>5</sup>

The Blessing of the Children that has been passed down through generations of Jews is thought to be one of the most beautiful expressions of the Jewish ethic and spirit, which is devoted to a strong, supportive and peaceful family life. The blessing, like the Sabbath itself, is a rest, a stop in the midst of a hurried life, to connect with one's children, and to connect back to God, and the peace that God wishes for the humans of the earth. According to Chasidic tradition, the litmus test of the ritual is that the child or children given the blessing smile--- the smile being an external indication that they have received the parental love and affirmation of their being.

But while the affective aspect of this ritual is clear, what is the deeper significance? Why do we ask God to make our children like Ephraim and Manasseh? Why not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Moses? I believe that one reason Ephraim and Manasseh are named is a type of comment on mimetic desire.

### **History of Interpretation of Ephraim and Manasseh: Who Are They?**

Ephraim and Manasseh, having received their blessings from Jacob, are elevated to the status of his children, and they take their places as two of the twelve tribes of Israel in the remaining books of the *Tanakh*, replacing Joseph and Levi. For sake of time, I will not go into Manasseh. Suffice it to say that

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<sup>2</sup> The right hand is the preferred hand for the giving of *mitvos*, as it is associated with more spiritual power. See Rabbi Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Chumash*, (NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1993, 1994), p. 272

<sup>3</sup> *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* states: "The blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh will be the standard by which all blessings are measured." Walter J. Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, (TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 81

<sup>4</sup> All translations of the biblical text are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> When inquiring into the confusion regarding who received his blessing, Isaac declares about Jacob: "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came and I blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!" (Gen. 27.33) After the destruction of the second temple, and the death of the priesthood in Judaism, the religious traditions changed to accommodate the Jews' new circumstances. One change is that parents became *kohanim* (priests) and, as such, direct transmitters of divine blessings. Thus, whereas the *Birkat Banim* had once been uttered by the Temple priests, it is now uttered, and made effective, by parents.

Ephraim, as prophesied, becomes a figure much richer with symbolism.<sup>6</sup> There are many strands of tradition that interpret the figures of Ephraim and Manasseh, and I will review just a few of these here, mostly with regard to Ephraim.

First, some interpreters have looked at the Hebrew canon as a whole, and have determined that this passage is a later interpolation meant to justify or explain what comes later on, that is, the preeminence of Ephraim in comparison to his older brother, and the naming of Ephraim before Manasseh when they are named together. Thus, there is an aetiological significance ascribed to this narrative. This has been a popular historical critical-type of interpretation of the passage containing Jacob's blessing, but also an interpretation that validates Jacob's gift of prophecy. I think there must be more to it than this. Ephraim goes from being the son of Joseph to a tribal head; to the most powerful tribe of northern kingdom; to a symbol of the northern kingdom itself; to a symbol of the entire people.<sup>7</sup> In the Book of Jeremiah, Ephraim is used in its largest sense, and with theological overtones. God states: "For I have become a father to Israel/and Ephraim is my first-born." In Jeremiah, Ephraim becomes Yahweh's "precious child."<sup>8</sup> We must look even deeper at the significance of this figure.

A strand within early rabbinic tradition, taking the cues from *Tanakh*, assigned an apocalyptic meaning to the name Ephraim. This is the strand of interpretation I will follow here. In early apocalyptic rabbinics up until 250CE, a descendent of Ephraim (and sometimes Ephraim himself) becomes known as the Messiah *ben* Joseph, a figure that will appear before a second messiah, known as the Messiah *ben* David.<sup>9</sup> The Messiah *ben* Joseph is described as being an incarnation of an aspect of messianism different from that of the Davidic messiah.<sup>10</sup>

The delivering power of the Messiah *ben* Joseph is said to occur in the subjective experience of human beings. It is said that the transformation brought on by the Messiah *ben* Joseph will give Jews the patience and strength to endure history until the Davidic messiah appears. The tradition of Messiah *ben* Joseph is intertwined with the notion that the Messiah must also die for the advent of deliverance, which must be experienced through cataclysmic suffering, even death, termed the "pangs of the Messiah."<sup>11</sup> It is also tradition that the Messiah *ben* Joseph will die heroically in battle.<sup>12</sup> The death of the Messiah *ben* Joseph may be taken at face value, the death of the messiah being the revelatory shock needed to bring on psychic transformation. This sacrificing death, however, while it has sometimes been understood literally, has also been understood allegorically as the death of the evil inclination (*yezer ha-ra*) residing in humans.

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<sup>6</sup> Jer. 31.20

<sup>7</sup> An excellent overview of the "rise" of Ephraim can be found in Samuel Dresner, *Rachel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 149-174

<sup>8</sup> Jer. 31.9

<sup>9</sup> According to the JewishEncyclopedia.com, the earliest mention of the Messiah *ben* Joseph is in three statements attributed to Rabbi Dosa, in Suk. 52a, b. The last of these statements mentions only his name, but the first two speak of the fate which he is to meet, namely, to fall in battle ("as if alluding to a well-known tradition.") "Details about him are not found until much later, but he has an established place in the apocalypses of later centuries and in the midrashic literature—in Saadia's description of the future ("Emunot we-De'ot," ch. viii.) and in that of Hai Gaon ("Ta'am Ze'kenim," p. 59)."

<sup>10</sup> Aharon Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity*, State University of NY Press, 1988, p. 208. I am deeply indebted to Agus for his treatment of the Ephraim and Davidic Messiahs, and follow his argument closely in the following paragraphs, though I refrain here from treating their relationship to martyrdom (which is Agus' primary motivation.)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> In the Middle Ages, Kabbalistic Judaism has often been linked with interpreting the sacrificial death of the Messiah *ben* Joseph through the lens of martyrdom, misrepresenting what a Girardian interpretation would understand to be an anti-sacrificial revelation. For a detailed discussion of the Messiah *ben* Joseph and Martyrdom, see Agus.

The evil inclination is considered a part of creation, and thus “good;” it is said in *Genesis Rabbah* that the evil inclination is what compels us to marry, build a house and trade.<sup>13</sup> But the evil inclination is part of humanity’s base nature, and the inclination that drives humanity toward rivalry, lust and envy. Cain, for example, defended himself before God for having slain Abel by arguing that God had implanted in him the *Yezer ha-ra*.<sup>14</sup> According to the early rabbis, the evil inclination is a part of the self and must die in each and every one of us—we must overcome our will to power, to own, to compete in a mundane world; the slaughtering of the evil inclination is “as if one had sacrificed all the sacrifices together.”<sup>15</sup> This spiritual, internal slaughtering of this base part of human nature must happen before any type of historical redemption can occur. The slaughtering of the evil inclination is identified, in this line of rabbinic thinking, as the spiritual change first, and the necessary condition for the material change sought in history.

The scenario of the Messiah *ben Joseph*, then, takes place in the dimension of the self, and in the present, and it is no surface or superficial kind of change: “it is a total wrenching from one’s past, from the dimension of the past in one’s being...messianic repentance is a wrenching away from the very nature of man, regardless of whether he has sinned.”<sup>16</sup> A total break with the nature of man as it has unfolded through the dimension of history must take place. It is this break that will enable the Messiah *ben David* to then appear within history.

According to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a Mishnaic sage, keeping the Sabbath and commandments will save one from the “pangs of the messiah” and is crucial to bringing on the redemption offered by the Messiah ben Joseph.<sup>17</sup> The Sabbath is not only set apart physically from the rest of the week, it is metaphysically different-- the Sabbath is declared to be a time when Jews are endowed with an extra soul that protects them from the workings of the evil inclination. The Sabbath in this respect is understood to be “a taste of the world to come.” “Sabbath observance is aimed at freeing man from enslavement to his impulses, and from routine, tension, and the lower spiritual level of the workday.”<sup>18</sup> And God lends a hand in making this possible. The Sabbath is a day commanded for holiness, and for striving to the highest possible level of compassion, joy and communion with family and with God. According to Kabbalist Rabbi Luria, the messianic age will be as one great Shabbat.<sup>19</sup>

The Blessing that is given on this day to our children, to be like Ephraim and Manasseh, then, may have great resonance considering the symbol system that surrounds these figures, especially that of Ephraim. In the strand of rabbinic thought we have been reflecting upon, we have seen the figure Ephraim as the harbinger of the Messiah, sometimes referred to as the Messiah himself, who must die symbolically as a representation of the sacrifice of the evil inclination which wreaks havoc on the world and prevents the redemption of history (a.k.a. the Messiah *ben David*). Ephraim is God’s precious child, declared his first-born; he becomes connected, in this strand of rabbinic tradition, to an offering to the divine, an agent of reconciliation, the link between the world now and world to come—the movement from

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<sup>13</sup> Gen. R. 9. 9, from Agus, p. 290

<sup>14</sup> Tan., Bereshit, 25, ed. Buber, p. 10, from Agus, p. 291

<sup>15</sup> Ps. 51.19; BT Sanhedrin 436, from Agus, 291

<sup>16</sup> Agus., p. 215. And it is perhaps no coincidence that Ephraim, in Kabbalistic thought, particularly with commentators such as Radak in the Lurianic school of Kabbalah, associated Ephraim with one who had never sinned in his life. Cf. Benyosef, p. 101.

<sup>17</sup> quoted from Sab. 118b. Rabbi Hyrcanus lived in Palestine circa 45-117BCE

<sup>18</sup> Nathan Barack, *A History of the Sabbath*, (NY: Jonathan David, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> Ronal Eisenberg, ed., “Sabbath,” *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, (Jewish Publication Society of America, 2008).

the world dominated by the evil inclination to the world of compassion and peace. Whether the death of Ephraim (or the Messiah *ben Joseph*) is meant to be actual or symbolic, the result is meant to be a psychic transformation, redemption, deliverance from our own human nature, from our evil inclination. In apocalyptic style, it sounds as if this will be a real wrenching, a real lynching, too; transformation may require suffering. This seems to be no gentle progression.

### **Girardian Implications...**

Though anachronistic, might we be able to impose Girardian language on this tradition and call the evil inclination “mimetic desire”? Proposing this, Jacob’s blessing of the children at the end of Genesis seems to be calling for, at the very least, a kind of reconfiguration. Though Jacob is still prophetically pronouncing a greater blessing for Ephraim, both Ephraim and Manasseh are the recipients of the blessing—and this is a dramatic break from the past in which only one child could receive this honor. Jacob himself is, in effect, wrenching us from the past. And yet to ask God to make our children as Ephraim and Manasseh, especially Ephraim, one is still asking, if ever so allusively, for a spiritual transformation through a purported sacrifice – a sacrifice of our evil inclination. In typical fashion, the plea for redemption is enacted through an act of violence – to Ephraim, the Messiah *ben Joseph*, or symbolically to our own human nature. Or, in a Girardian sense, we might consider that the violence will literally fall on the Messiah *ben Joseph* if we do not first extinguish it in ourselves.

In modern Judaism, the figures of Ephraim and Manasseh are typically cast as representing strength of character and Jewish identity, the ability to maintain this identity in exile, models for building a purposeful and meaningful life and, last but not least, models of a peaceful relationship between brothers.

And this is where Manasseh’s name may perhaps become significant. Joseph names his first child Manasseh because, he declares, “God has made me forget all my hardship in my father’s house.” (NISB, 51) The “hardship in my father’s house” refers to the animosity he was subject to and violence done unto him by his brothers. Here, in naming Manasseh, he is letting go of the rivalries with his brothers – getting closure on his past so to speak—and this becomes important later on when he meets his brothers again and does not take revenge on them. Through Manasseh, one might say Joseph reconciles his past and breaks the cycle of violence. Manasseh, as the first born, is a rite of passage. “Forgetting” has closed the cycle of the past and opened the womb for a peaceful and fruitful future.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps wrenching one from the rivalries of the past might well occur as well through a birth, through one’s children, as through a death. The allusions brought forth at the end of Genesis are indeed of ends and new beginnings on many levels.

The blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob is a passage in the *Tanakh* that may have been inserted simply in order to justify these two grandchildren as legitimate tribal leaders next to the sons of Jacob. One could also read it rather literally as a prophetic passage foretelling the future greatness of Ephraim. But the narrative indicates that there is more to it than this. The narrative is startlingly self-conscious, with a twinge of tension and perhaps humor as Joseph tries to correct his father’s deliberately crossed arms. One could imagine Joseph thinking “Come on dad, not again. Let’s not create a problem.” In my estimation, this scene contains within it, and reverberates from a complex history of sibling rivalry, and competition for a blessing. It sits at the end of a book detailing the escapades of Cain and Abel,

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<sup>20</sup> It might be possible to look more closely, in another work, on how, Joseph’s wife bears the “pangs of the Messiah” for him, and extinguishes through her suffering and birth of Manasseh any evil inclination he might have had toward his brothers.

Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. Might we have here a continuous thread revealing the gradual overcoming of mimetic desire? Might the Book of Genesis, in one sense, be about the awakening into a peaceful sibling relationship? There is no further narrative about Ephraim and Manasseh because, without conflict, perhaps there is nothing left to drive the tale. Perhaps all that was necessary was for each child to receive their own blessing – to be affirmed in who they are, protected, entrusted with a legacy. Perhaps what we have here is the death of the evil inclination, the wrenching away from the mimetic portion of our nature, though it was wrenched from us ever so gradually throughout the book – so gradually we barely noticed the point at which it was gone.<sup>21</sup> Its disappearance was not as cataclysmic as we might have expected.

And so it is with the *Birkat Banim*, the Blessing of Children. It is a subtle yet beautiful blessing, a blessing which links the generations, and creates a lasting memory of goodness and affection. Perhaps we as parents can be like Joseph, who managed to “forget” the hardship of the past in his father’s house with the birth of Manasseh, so that he could be what he needed to be for his children. And perhaps the evil inclination that wreaked havoc through the rest of the Genesis narratives could now also be put in the past – at least between siblings – preparing a path for a messianic future. This certainly seems to be the goal. In Jewish tradition, though, as soon as one finishes reading the Torah, one immediately returns to the beginning and starts to read it again. So I think it must also be, at least for now, with the Sabbath and *Birkat Banim*. We must keep the tradition and get our booster shot every week. Like a real vaccine, there is a bit of mimetic desire in the booster, traces of narratives of rivalry and violence, just to ensure that we do not catch the disease. The Hebrews of the *Tanakh*, after all, are about to enter into the next phase of history in the Book of Exodus, in which they will need to unite, free themselves from oppression, and become a nation. In the words of Rabbi Arthur Waskow: “Genesis is unable to come to an end until there is a peaceful pair of brothers: Ephraim and Manasseh. Only then can the Bible turn to other problems.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Scholar Lippman Bodoff adds to the idea that Genesis proposes that the pattern of historical cycles is, indeed, breakable: “In Genesis, themes and motifs and symbols repeat themselves to illustrate that a long, unified process is going on. But people are continually given opportunities to redeem themselves from past mistakes by exercise of moral free will.” Lippman Bodoff, *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders, and Kabbalah*, (Israel: Devora Publishing Company, 2005, pp. 133-4 (Chapter entitled “Hellenism Versus Hebraism on the Inevitability of Tragedy: Studying the Cain and Joseph Stories.”)

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling*, (NY: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 15.

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