

This photo is available in  
the print version of Children.

**Jacob's gracious blessing on both of Joseph's children  
became the model and inspiration for Jewish fathers  
invoking God's care for their children on the eve of each  
sabbath.**

*Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), JACOB BLESSING THE CHILDREN OF JOSEPH, 1656. Oil on canvas, 175.5 x 210.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Kassel, Germany. Copyright Foto Marburg / Art Resource, NY.*

# Invoking God's Care

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Summoned to the death bed of his father Jacob (Israel), Joseph presents his sons Manasseh and Ephraim to their grandfather for his blessing (Genesis 48). Joseph and his wife Asenath watch calmly behind the young boys.<sup>†</sup> The moment shown by Rembrandt deviates slightly, but significantly, from the biblical account: "Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them near him" (48:13).

The boys are in the opposite positions in this painting. Ephraim, the younger boy with long blonde hair, is on the right side of Jacob; he bows his head as Jacob blesses him with his right hand. Jacob places his left hand on the side of Manasseh's head. Rembrandt makes this position change rather than having Jacob cross his hands (as occurs in 48:14). The blessing, which invokes God's care, is given.

The instant when Joseph tries to stop and correct his aged father is the subject of the painting. We see the hand of Joseph under Jacob's right hand as if to lift it up and away from the younger son. Joseph said to his father,

*"Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.*

*Genesis 48:18-20*

In blessing both of his grandchildren, Jacob also invokes God's care for his son Joseph (48:15). Blessing the children is an act of faith and worship, the writer of Hebrews says: "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff'" (11:21).

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Asenath, not mentioned in Genesis 48, was Joseph's Egyptian wife and the mother of Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 41:45, 50). An extra-biblical story, *Joseph and Asenath*, speculates on her betrothal to Joseph and conversion to Judaism (Encyclopedia.com by Alacritude, LLC, 2003, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/P/Pseudepi.asp>, 21 May 2003).