
In memory of our beloved talmid Yoni Jesner HY"D ,
whose 10th yahrzeit falls on Erev Sukkot.

PARASHAT VEZOT HA-BERAKHA

"This is the Blessing with which Moshe Blessed"...

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. INTRODUCTION

The parasha of Vezot Ha-berakha opens with Moshe's farewell address to Bnei Yisrael and his blessings to the tribes. This speech has an introduction (33:1-5) and a conclusion (26-29), with his words to the tribes occupying twenty verses (6-25). Since the tribe of Shimon is not mentioned (the reason for this will be discussed below), these twenty verses should be distributed more or less evenly over eleven tribes. We would expect each tribe to receive a brief blessing, one or two verses long, and this is indeed the case with regard to Reuven (verse 6), Yehuda (verse 7), Binyamin (verse 12), Zevulun and Yissakhar (verses 18-19), Gad (20-21), Dan (22), Naftali (23) and Asher (24-25). The exceptions are the tribes of Levi and Yosef, whose blessings are much longer: that of Levi covers four verses (8-11), while Yosef's blessing is a full five verses long (13-17). For what reason are these two tribes specifically given a longer blessing?

B. SHIMON VS. LEVI

The reason for Shimon's absence in the list would seem to be a realization of Yaakov's final words to Shimon and Levi: "CURSED is their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel" (Bereishit 49:7); Shimon is not worthy of "the BLESSING with which Moshe BLESSED." [1] In the shiur on parashat Vayishlach this year, we discussed at length the sin of Shimon and Levi in the story of Shekhem, and we focused on the severity of their having taken the spoils of the city, following Shekhem's abduction of Dina. [2] It was this act that invited Yaakov's harsh criticism, and their punishment – that they would not receive independent portions as inheritance: "I shall disperse them amongst Yaakov and scatter them amongst Israel." Indeed, the inheritance of the tribe of Shimon was destined to be an enclave within the portion of Yehuda: [3]

"The second lot fell to Shimon, to the tribe of the children of Shimon by their families, AND THEIR INHERITANCE WAS WITHIN THE INHERITANCE OF THE CHILDREN OF YEHUDA... out of the portion of the children of Yehuda was the inheritance of the children of Shimon, for the portion of the children of Yehuda was too much for them, SO THE CHILDREN OF SHIMON INHERITED WITHIN THEIR INHERITANCE." (Yehoshua 19:1-9)

This explanation obviously raises the question of why the tribe of Levi did, in contrast, receive a blessing – and a lengthy one, at that. [4] It appears that the tribe of Levi succeeded in repairing the stain left on them by the sin of Shekhem through their actions following the episode of the golden calf. The root of the sin in the story of Shekhem, as

mentioned, was the vested personal interest in a situation whose only justification would be fulfillment of a moral, Divine command, with no personal interest at all. But faced with the debacle of the golden calf, the tribe of Levi acts in exactly the opposite way:

"Moshe stood at the gate of the camp and said, 'Whoever is for God – to me!' – and all the sons of Levi gathered to him. He said to them, 'So says the Lord God of Israel: Place EACH MAN HIS SWORD at his side, and go to and fro from one gate to another in the camp, and each man slay his brother, and each man his neighbor, and each man his relatives.' And the sons of Levi did as Moshe had spoken, and about three thousand men from the nation fell on that day." (Shemot 32:26-28)

Previously, in Sefer Bereishit, Shimon and Levi took "EACH MAN HIS SWORD and they came to the city unopposed, and they killed every male." Now, in Sefer Shemot, the sons of Levi stand and carry out a deed that is opposed to every personal interest and natural emotion: they place "EACH MAN HIS SWORD at his side" (it should be noted that the expression "each man his sword" appears nowhere else in Tanakh other than on these two occasions), and they slay their relatives and neighbors. Thereby they demonstrate that they are capable of fulfilling an exceptional command to perform an act of manslaughter, purely for the sake of Heaven.

On the same occasion, Moshe tells them:

"Consecrate yourselves this day to God, even each man against his son and against his brother, that He may bestow upon you this day A BLESSING." (ibid. 29)

The curse that Yaakov had placed upon them now turns into a blessing. From now on, when the tribe of Levi is scattered amongst Yaakov and dispersed amongst Israel, it will no longer be a sign of curse and disgrace, but rather a sign of blessing:

"God said to Aharon: You shall not inherit in their land, nor shall you have any portion amongst them. I am your portion and your inheritance amongst Bnei Yisrael... and amongst Bnei Yisrael they shall not inherit an inheritance. For the tithes of Bnei Yisrael, which they offer to God as a gift – I give them to the Leviim as an inheritance. Therefore I have told them – amongst Bnei Yisrael they shall inherit no inheritance." (Bamidbar 18:20-24)

Therefore, in his blessing to the tribe of Levi, Moshe makes explicit mention of the episode as a result of which the children of Levi receive their blessing:[5]

"He said of his father and of his mother, 'I have not seen him,' and he did not acknowledge his brothers, nor did he recognize his children: for they observed Your word and kept Your covenant." (Devarim 33:9)

It was this act that made the Leviim worthy of performing the Divine service in the Mishkan, as Moshe goes on to explain: "They shall teach Your judgments to Yaakov and your Torah to Israel; they shall place incense before You and whole burnt sacrifices upon Your altar" (verse 10). It turns out, then, that the blessing to the tribe of Levi does not deviate from the pattern of the blessings to the other tribes; in effect, it occupies only one verse (11). The introduction is apparently meant to explain why the tribe of Levi, once cursed by Yaakov, is now receiving a blessing – in contrast to the tribe of Shimon.

C. THE LONE ONE OF HIS BROTHERS

We must now address the meaning of the lengthy blessing that Moshe gives to Yosef. While we could postulate that Yosef actually includes two tribes – "they are the tens of thousands of EFRAIM and the thousands of MENASHE" - it would seem that this is not sufficient grounds for the unusual length of the blessing.[6]

Just as we have explained Moshe's attitude towards the tribe of Shimon as arising from the deed of the father of the tribe – Shimon – it seems that his special affection towards the tribe of Yosef arises from his attitude towards Yosef himself. Moshe's sense of connection to Yosef is apparent in his commitment to bury Yosef (Shemot 13:19): "Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him, for [Yosef] had made Bnei Yisrael swear, saying, 'God will surely remember you, and you shall bring up my bones from here with you.'"[7] This connection may well be based on the considerable similarities between Yosef and Moshe, the essential elements of which are the following:

a. Both personalities started their lives in a quarrel with their brethren, which undermined their authority. Yosef's brothers attack him with the claim, "Shall you the rule over us; shall you then govern us?" (Bereishit 37:8), while concerning Moshe we are told, "It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out TO HIS BROTHERS... and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting, and he said to the aggressor, 'Why are you striking your neighbor?' And he said, 'Who has made you an officer and judge over us?'" (Shemot 2:11-14).[8]

b. As a result of the argument with the "brethren," both personalities are banished to a foreign society – to Egypt, and to Midian. Both marry wives who are daughters of foreign priests: Yosef marries "Osnat, daughter of Poti Fera, a priest of On" (Bereishit 41:45), while Moshe marries Tzipora, daughter of Yitro, the priest of Midian. Both have two sons - Efraim and Menashe, Gershom and Eliezer - and the names of these sons express their father's sense of alienation in exile: Efraim, son of Yosef, "For God has made me fruitful IN THE LAND OF MY DESTITUTION" (Bereishit 41:52), and Gershom, son of Moshe, "For he said, 'I have been a stranger IN A FOREIGN LAND'" (Shemot 2:22.)

c. Both personalities reach the royal palace of Pharaoh, and both are awarded special status.

d. Both men become leaders of Bnei Yisrael: Yosef leads his brothers in Egypt, while Moshe leads Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt.

e. Neither Yosef nor Moshe merits to enter the Land of Canaan. Yosef foretells Moshe's future mission: "Yosef said to his brothers: 'I am going to die, but God will surely remember you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov.' And Yosef made Bnei Yisrael swear, saying: 'God will surely remember you, and you shall bring up my bones from here'" (Bereishit 50:24). Moshe, as mentioned, fulfills Yosef's command, thereby closing this circle.

It is therefore reasonable to posit that Moshe felt a special closeness to Yosef. He must have perceived him as a man of vision who, despite the many difficulties that he faced in his life, merited to see the fulfillment of his dreams, and to be a loyal agent of the Divine

plan: "God sent me before you to make for you a remnant in the land, and to save you by a great deliverance" (Bereishit 45:7). Moshe, who will not merit to see the realization of his great dream and will not enter the Land, blesses Yosef's descendants with a blessed portion. It is within this portion of land that Yosef's sons will bury their father: "The bones of Yosef, which Bnei Yisrael brought up from Egypt, they buried in Shekhem, in the section of the field which Yaakov had purchased from the sons of Chamor, the father of Shekhem, for a hundred kesita; and they became an inheritance for the sons of Yosef" (Yehoshua 24:32). Moshe, who will not merit a burial in the land, is therefore comforted by the knowledge that at least one mission is to be completed in full: the burial of Yosef, and specifically in the inheritance of his descendants. This inheritance is therefore worthy of special blessing:

"Blessed of God is his land: for the precious things of the heavens, for the dew, and for the deep crouching below; and for the precious produce of the sun and the precious products of the moon; and for the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the primordial hills; and for the precious things of the earth and its fullness, and the good will of them that dwell in the bush – let them come upon the head of Yosef, and the top of the head of he who was separated from his brothers".

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]This possibility is raised by Ibn Ezra and Ramban. The commentaries offer further explanations as to why the tribe of Shimon received no blessing. Rashi writes: "For what reason did [Moshe] give [Shimon] no blessing for himself? Because he held against him what he had done in Shittim," with reference to the actions of Zimri ben Salu, a prince and head of a household in Shimon (see Bamidbar 25.)

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As to the question of why the entire tribe of Shimon should be punished for the actions of a single individual, Ibn Ezra answers: "Because those who served the idol [Ba'al Pe'or] were from Shimon, as evidenced by the numbers." What he means is that in the census of the tribes, in parashat Pinchas, the relatively small number of the tribe of Shimon - 22,200 (Bamidbar 26:14) - stands out when compared with the other tribes, and particularly when compared with their number at the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar – 59,300. This testifies to the fact that the great majority of the 24,000 who died in the plague that followed the sin of Pe'or were from the tribe of Shimon.

Ramban rejects this argument, maintaining that the sin of Ba'al Pe'or should not be attributed specifically to the tribe of Shimon:

"In my opinion their number is not a proof, for there would still be more than thirteen thousand missing aside from those who died in the plague. Some other tribes also lost people [if we compare the figures of the two censuses]: the tribe of Gad lost five thousand, while the tribe of Ephraim lost eight thousand. Moreover, since the text says (Bamidbar 25:3), 'Israel joined itself to Ba'al Pe'or,' and also (ibid. verse 4), 'Take all the heads of the people,' it would seem that the idolaters were represented in all the tribes, and all the judges had to judge them. Likewise it says (ibid., verse 11), 'I did not destroy Bnei Yisrael in My jealousy...' – heaven forefend that Moshe would refrain from blessing Shimon, and that a tribe of Israel would be wiped out, for all those who joined themselves to Ba'al Pe'or were already gone – as it is written (ibid. 4:3), 'For every person who had gone after Ba'al Pe'or – the Lord your God destroyed him from your midst.' Of all of those remaining it is

written (ibid., verse 4), 'And you who cleave to the Lord your God – you are all alive today.' Why, then, should he not bless them?"

Therefore Ramban proposes an essentially technical reason as to why no mention is made of the tribe of Shimon:

"What appears correct to me is that the text counts only twelve tribes of Israel, as it is written in the blessing of Yaakov (Bereishit 49:28), 'All of these are the tribes of Israel, twelve.' Yaakov explicitly counted his twelve children, counting Yosef as a single tribe, while Moshe chose to count Yosef as two tribes, as it is written (verse 17), 'They are the tens of thousands of Efraim and they are the thousands of Menashe,' and therefore left out Shimon, FOR HIS TRIBE WAS NOT A LARGE ONE, AND THE BLESSING THAT YAAKOV HAD GIVEN THEM WAS NOT A GREAT ONE; rather, he divided them amongst [the tribes of] Yaakov and scattered them amongst Israel. Hence here too they were blessed by way of the blessings to the other tribes, amongst which they found themselves".

[2]Let us review briefly our main argument: the Torah emphasizes that the operation to save Dina concludes as follows:

"It happened on the third day when they were in pain, that two of Yaakov's sons – Shimon and Levi, Dina's brothers – took each man his sword and they came to the city in stealth and they killed every male. And they killed Chamor and Shekhem, his son, by the sword, and they took Dina from Shekhem's house, AND THEY LEFT." (Bereishit 34:25-26)

It is specifically then, when there is no "military need," that Yaakov's sons take of the spoils:

"Yaakov's sons came upon the slain and they plundered the city that had defiled their sister. They took their sheep and their cattle and their donkeys, both that which was in the city and that which was in the field. And all their wealth and all their children and their women they took captive, and they plundered all that was in the houses." (ibid. 27-29)

This is in complete contrast to the law of the "destroyed city" – which, as we noted, has many thematic and linguistic parallels to the story of Shekhem, and which concludes with a clear warning:

"Destroy it completely and all that is in it, and all its livestock, by the sword. And all its spoils shall you gather in the open square, and you shall burn with fire the city and all its spoils altogether for the Lord your God, and it shall be a heap forever; it shall not be rebuilt. Nor shall anything remain in your hand from the spoils, in order that God may turn from His anger and give you mercy, and have mercy on you, and make you multiply as He promised to your forefathers." (Devarim 13:16-18)

We explained the importance of not taking anything from the spoils of the city, in accordance with the Netziv and the Ohr ha-Chaim: the slaughter of an entire city is an extremely difficult deed to undertake, and by nature such an act would usually cause a dulling of a person's moral sense. The Torah promises, therefore, that if a person acts for the sake of Heaven, then God will miraculously replant the trait of mercy in the hearts of the slayers (and this is the meaning of the promise, "He will give you mercy and have mercy on you, and make you multiply"), and erase the moral damage caused by the deed. However, in order for this to take place, there is a clear condition: the entire operation must be undertaken solely and purely for the sake of heaven, and not for any personal aim whatsoever.

The sin of Yaakov's sons was that even if the slaughter of Shekhem and Chamor had been justified (an issue which we discussed at length), and even if some justification could be found for the slaughter of all the males of the city, the taking of the spoils was not only unjustified, but actually undermined the morality of what they had done to the city. Taking the spoils left a moral stain on the very act of destroying the city, presenting it as an act

undertaken out of personal interests. Yaakov's rebuke – "Shimon and Levi are brothers; their swords are tools of cruelty... Cursed is their anger for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it was harsh" – implies that the taking of the spoils proved that "their anger" was indeed fierce, and their wrath harsh, and that there was therefore no justification for killing the men of Shekhem – which was also carried out in their "anger".

[3]The commentators note that in Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Yehuda we read, "HEAR ('shema,' derived from the same root as the name 'Shimon'), O God, the voice of Yehuda," which hints at the tribe of Shimon: "This is an allusion to a blessing to Shimon within the blessing to Yehuda; likewise when the Land was divided up, Shimon's inheritance was within the inheritance allotted to Yehuda" (Rashi.)

[4]Ibn Ezra (33:6) answers: "Out of honor for Aharon, the tribe was carried by him [i.e. the tribe received a blessing in his merit]; but there was none in the tribe of Shimon as great as he".

[5]Moshe mentions another context in which the uniqueness of the tribe of Levi was demonstrated, but here the reference is more opaque: "...whom you tested at Massa and with whom you strove at the waters of Meriva." In the verses describing the episode at Massa and Meriva (Shemot 17:1-7), there is no special mention of the tribe of Levi, nor is Levi highlighted in the episode of Mei Meriva (Bamidbar 20:1-13). Rashi writes: "They did not complain together with the other protesters" – but nowhere does the text actually say this.

Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe is actually referring to himself; i.e., it is he himself who is referred to in the beginning of the verse as "your pious one," and the meaning is – "Who was righteous and who had no fault, other than the matter of Meriva".

The Ramban agrees that the reference is to Moshe himself, but he understands the verse as recalling two different events:

"It seems correct to me, in accordance with the literal text, that 'at Massa' is meant literally – i.e., the place where they tested God at Refidim... when Bnei Yisrael sinned and tested God concerning the water, and he was not among the congregation that gathered against God, for he believed in God and in His word that He would bring forth water from the flint rock.

On the second occasion, 'you quarreled with him' and punished him for the 'mei meriva' ('waters of quarrel'), [i.e. the quarrel of] Bnei Yisrael, for it was because of their quarrel that he was punished, not because he himself rebelled against God, for from the start he believed that God 'God turns the rock into a pool of water,' for he had already witnessed it previously".

[6]The blessing to Yosef comprises 56 words – well over twice the length of the blessings to Reuven (7 words), Yehuda (13 words), Binyamin (12 words), etc.

[7]Chazal elaborate on the bringing up of Yosef's bones by Moshe – see, for instance, Sota 13a, and 20b.

[8] It should be noted that the expression "to his brothers" appears eleven times in the stories of Yosef and his brothers, and other than the above-mentioned verse concerning Moshe, it makes only one more appearance in all of the Torah (Bamidbar 25:6).