

"Power of Judgment" – Shimon and Levi in Shekhem

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I. INTRODUCTION

This week's *shiur* focuses on Chapter 34 of *Bereishit*, which describes the episode of Shekhem or – as it is more commonly known – the episode of Dina. As in many other stories in *Sefer Bereishit*, and in *Tanakh* in general, we are faced here with a problem of judgment. What is the problem, or dilemma, of judgment?

The Torah describes a series of actions and behaviors. Some of these behaviors may be considered negative or morally reprehensible, or alternatively – positive and praiseworthy, depending on the reader's point of view, his set of values, his way of analyzing the story, etc.

Obviously, the significance of the story is dependent, to a considerable extent, on the judgment that we make in its regard. If we believe, for example, that Shimon and Levi were correct in slaughtering the men of Shekhem and in deceiving them in their proposal of circumcision and the related agreement, then their behavior becomes a paradigm for emulation and imitation. If, alternatively, we believe that they were mistaken or – even worse – they sinned, then the lesson that we learn from them is, obviously, how NOT to behave.

There is yet another question at stake here: can we admire the brothers Shimon and Levi unconditionally, or – if our judgment of them is indeed negative – should we adopt a cautious and more critical stance?

How are we to approach this problem?

At the outset, let us set forth our working assumption, that the problem must be addressed as an exegetical question, rather than as a problem in the sphere of ethics. We assume this for two reasons:

- a. Often – even when addressing *Tanakh*, but also in our treatment of life's dilemmas – we make judgments before we have a full picture with all the facts. In the story in question, the moral issues are weighty ones. They have the power to exert a powerful influence on our judgment. Therefore, we must first address the facts. When considering a written account, "addressing the facts" means a superficial exegetical analysis aimed at putting together a clear picture of what happened.
- b. When we learn Torah, what we need to clarify is not OUR moral position concerning the events, or how WE judge the characters in question, but rather the TORAH's position, or the prophetic position. In other words, our question is, what is the internal-biblical judgment? The

answer to this question may be attained only by means of an exegetical analysis of what the text says. Only rarely does the Torah express a direct and unequivocal judgment of its characters. We have no doubt, for example, as to the guilt of Kayin, since God testifies to it explicitly and Kayin is punished. In many other instances, however, the text leaves us without any clear, unequivocal answers:

- Did Sara sin in her treatment and expulsion of Hagar?
- Did Avraham sin in presenting Sara as his sister?
- Did Yaakov sin in acquiring the blessing through deceit?

It is possible that in some cases the absence of any explicit judgment is itself meant as a judgment: the silence of the text may imply criticism. But this conclusion may be too hasty. Many times the Torah does judge its characters, but without saying so explicitly. The judgment is implied by asides strewn throughout the story, by literary hints, by the structure of the plot and the internal dialogues, or by the development of events connected to the character at the center of the dilemma.

An example of these techniques of judgment is to be found in the story of Dina [1].

II. THE CENTRAL DILEMMA

It seems that our central problem in assessing the Torah's position with regard to the deed of Shimon and Levi, is the tension that arises between the story here and Yaakov's words to them at the end of his life.

In the text here, the impression we get is that, from a purely moral point of view, Yaakov is not opposed to their actions. We read; "Yaakov said to Shimon and Levi: You have brought trouble upon me, to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land – the Canaanites and the Perizzites; since I am few in number, they shall gather against me and smite me and I shall be destroyed – I and my household."

Yaakov speaks here as what we would call, in today's terms, a pragmatic leader. He thinks about what may now transpire as a result of Shimon and Levi's actions. Using plainer language, Yaakov tells his sons: We are going to be regarded as a violent clan, as hot-heads. We just arrived from outside the country, and we're already rioting among the locals.

None of the country's inhabitants, upon hearing what has happened, will be prepared to accept this.

But Shimon and Levi are not taken aback by his response; they reply with stinging words of their own, "They said: Shall our sister be treated as a harlot?!"

The Torah concludes the narrative with this rhetorical question that serves to clarify their moral motivations to Yaakov. In light of their proud stance and their severe answer,

Yaakov's complaint seems like an expression of meekness, of weak leadership.

We listed above the various ways in which the Torah manifests moral judgment. Here we have an example of one of these techniques: the text presents a difference of opinion between characters as to the proper course of action. Who is given the final word? Who concludes the dialogue with his punch line? There can be no doubt that we conclude the chapter with the proud declaration by Shimon and Levi ringing in our ears, with Yaakov trailing far behind.

But this is not the only proof that the Torah supports Shimon and Levi. We read on a few more verses about Yaakov's journeys, and come across further evidence of vindication:

"They journeyed, and the fear of God was upon the cities that were around them, and they did not pursue after the children of Yaakov."

This verse is not coincidental. This is another form of judgment. We mentioned above the phenomenon of later events proving something about earlier ones. The basic assumption of all of Torah is that Divine Providence extends over both nations and individuals. A person's fate is not arbitrary. If he experiences distress or receives deliverance, this is always part of the recompense due to him.

In our case, the verse tells us that, contrary to Yaakov's fears that the nations of the land would gather against him and that his sons' action would represent a stumbling block for the family, the reality turns out quite the opposite. The fear of God (both literally and in the superlative sense) falls upon the nations of the land, and they do not pursue "the sons of Yaakov" – not "Yaakov" or "Yaakov's household," but "Yaakov's sons" – i.e., Shimon and Levi, and – by extension – the other brothers. In other words, if we had any doubts until this point as to which claim – the pragmatic one proposed by Yaakov or the moral one propagated by Shimon and Levi – held greater weight, it now turns out that even on the pragmatic level, Yaakov was mistaken. A proud stance and revenge not only did not worsen their situation, but apparently served to strengthen their position in the eyes of the nations of the land.

We may summarize by saying that the story of Dina itself seems to point to a fault and weakness in Yaakov's leadership, and to a justification – both moral and pragmatic – of the actions of Shimon and Levi in slaughtering the men of Shekhem.

When we get to Yaakov's blessing to his sons, the picture is reversed. Yaakov now voices a scathing condemnation of their act: "Shimon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are their swords. Let my soul not be part of their counsel, nor my honor be joined to their assembly. For in their anger they killed a man, and willfully lamed an ox. Cursed is their anger, for it is fierce, and their fury – for it is cruel. I shall divide them among Yaakov and scatter them among Israel."

Various commentators have attempted to interpret this fierce criticism – practically a curse – in the most generous possible way. In this regard, we note especially those who suggest that Yaakov's condemnation refers to the sale of Yosef, rather than the deed in Shekhem, and explain that the "curse" is

really meant for their benefit. Rashi, commenting on the words, "Cursed is their anger," notes that it is their anger that is cursed, not them themselves. But on the literal level of the text, it is very difficult to avoid the clear intention of what Yaakov is saying. Yaakov's accusation concerns the episode of Shekhem – since this is the only place where Shimon and Levi act and are mentioned by name. Yaakov's words also leave little room for doubt. The expressions, "instruments of cruelty," "killed a man," etc., can be understood – at least as far as we know from the Torah – only as a reference to Shekhem.

But the seriousness and profound significance of Yaakov's words is borne out not only by their severe content, but also by their historical realization. His curse/prophecy, "I shall divide them among Yaakov and scatter them among Israel" was fulfilled both in the case of the Tribe of Levi, whose cities are scattered throughout the tribes of Israel and who receives no portion among his brothers, and in the case of the Tribe of Shimon, who settles mainly within the portion assigned to Yehuda, but fails to obtain an independent portion. In the blessing given by Moshe at the end of his life, in *Parashat Ve-zot Ha-berakha*, the Tribe of Shimon is omitted altogether – evidence of his rejection. Levi receives a blessing, but it concerns his role and activities, not his portion – as the other tribes are blessed.

The realization of Yaakov's blessing also testifies to the fact that this is not merely the outburst of an elderly patriarch seeing to avenge his dignity, but rather the words of a prophet, emanating from a strong sense of morality and expressing the will of God. It is specifically for this reason that the contradiction between Yaakov's blessing – with its harsh condemnation of the episode of Shekhem, and the narrative itself – which seems to support the actions of Shimon and Levi, appears so irreconcilable.

In fact, the question must be asked on two levels:

From the point of view of Yaakov: if his criticism is indeed so fearsome and it is based on morality, why did he not voice his views at the time of the incident, or immediately thereafter?
From the point of view of the Torah: how does the Torah judge the actions of Shimon and Levi, and how are we to view them?

III. ANALYSIS OF THE STORY AND CLUES TO JUDGMENT

Let us now examine the story of Dina (putting aside for a moment the question arising from Yaakov's blessing), using some exegetical tools:

1. Judgmental comments

Whenever we read a narrative – and this applies even to secular literature – a distinction must always be made between the plot itself (which is described from the internal perspective and includes the actions of the characters, background, descriptions of scenery, people, etc., and – obviously – dialogues and monologues), and comments emanating from the narrator (which are external to the action and secondary, from the point of view of the plot). Such comments may fulfill all kinds of different roles. At present, we are interested in the judgmental dimension. Our story contains several such comments:

"Yaakov's sons came from the field when they heard of it, and the men were grieved and they were very angry,

FOR HE HAD DONE A DISGRACEFUL ACT IN ISRAEL BY LYING WITH YAAKOV'S DAUGHTER; SUCH A THING SHOULD NOT BE DONE." (7)

"Yaakov's sons answered Shekhem and Chamor, his father, with guile when they spoke FOR HE HAD DEFILED DINA, THEIR SISTER." (13)

"The sons of Yaakov came upon the fallen, and they plundered the city FOR IT HAD DEFILED THEIR SISTER." (27)

The phrases highlighted in upper case represent asides that are not part of the story. The comment in verse 7 is particularly blatant. What is its role? On the simplest level, it explains the ethical-emotional motivation for the anger and fury of Yaakov's sons. But this explanation is not provided as part of the story (as it would have been if, for example, the Torah had put it in the mouth of one of the sons). The choice to describe the motive from an external perspective awards it objective significance. This is not a mere feeling or a window into someone's heart; it is a reason with universal validity. But in this case the point is even more trenchant. If we pay attention to the statement expressed in the verse, we notice that its formulation is altogether anachronistic: "For he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel" – what is "Israel?" The concept of "Israel" does not exist at the point in time in which the story takes place; Yaakov and his sons are not yet a nation, and certainly not "Israel." It is only at the beginning of *Sefer Shemot* that the title "*Bnei Yisrael*" ("the Children of Israel") first appears, and even there "the children of Israel" is meant in the literal sense, not as the name of a nation. Clearly, the Torah's intention here, then, is to express the absolute nature of the disgrace embodied in this act from the perspective of the values of the eternal nation of Israel, not just the emotions of the characters involved. The final phrase emphasizes this: "Such a thing should not be done!" This is a seemingly superfluous addition that can only be understood in light of what we have said above. The Torah (as narrator) is judging the act of rape and thereby providing external justification for the future decision by Yaakov's sons, led by Shimon and Levi.

The comments in verses 13 and 27 also explain the motivations of the deceit and the acts of killing and plundering, thereby providing external justification. We must consider the fact that from an informative point of view, they are entirely redundant. We are quite familiar with the background, and the motive is clear. Hence, this is not an additional piece of information, but rather a judgment. The purpose of the text in inserting this external comment is to provide a moral basis for their actions.

2. Exchange of names

Another point that we would like to address is the various titles by which Dina is referred. This is an important literary technique, employed most importantly in the exchange of names for God. A change of name or title indicates a change of attitude or relationship. Dina could have been referred to simply as "Dina" throughout the story, and this would undoubtedly be the simplest option. The text chooses to use different titles, and this variation is not an end in itself, but rather a technique. Let us examine the chapter in its entirety, highlighting all the places where reference is made to Dina, by any of her titles:

(1) DINA, DAUGHTER OF LEAH, WHOM SHE BORE TO YAAKOV, went out to see the daughters of the land.

(2) Shekhem, son of Chamor the Chiwite, prince of the land, saw HER and he took HER and lay WITH HER and raped her.

(3) And his soul was drawn to DINA, DAUGHTER OF YAAKOV, and he loved THE GIRL, and spoke kindly to THE GIRL.

(4) And Shekhem said to Chamor, his father, saying: Take THIS CHILD for me, to be my wife.

(5) Yaakov heard that he had defiled DINA, HIS DAUGHTER, but his sons were with the cattle in the field, and Yaakov held his peace until they returned.

(6) And Chamor, father of Shekhem, went out to Yaakov, to speak with him.

(7) And the sons of Yaakov came from the field when they heard of it, and the men were grieved and were very angry, for he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel, to lie with A DAUGHTER OF YAAKOV; such a thing should not be done.

(8) Chamor spoke with them, saying: "The soul of my son, Shekhem, desires YOUR DAUGHTER; please give HER to him as a wife.

(9) And make marriages with us: give us your daughters, and take our daughters for yourselves.

(10) And dwell with us, and the land shall be before you: dwell and trade in it, and acquire property in it."

(11) And Shekhem said to HER father and to HER brothers: "Let me find favor in your eyes; whatever you say to me – I shall give.

(12) Whatever huge dowry and gifts you burden me with – I shall give, according to what you say, but give me THE GIRL as a wife."

(13) The sons of Yaakov answered Shekhem and Chamor, his father, with guile, as they spoke – for he had defiled DINA, THEIR SISTER.

(14) They said to them: "We cannot do this thing – to give OUR SISTER to a man who is uncircumcised, for it is a dishonor to us.

(15) But thus we may consent to you: if you will be like us – that every male among you shall be circumcised.

(16) Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will dwell with you and be a single nation.

(17) But if you do not listen to us – to circumcise yourselves – then we will take OUR DAUGHTER and go."

(18) Their words pleased Chamor and they pleased Shekhem, Chamor's son.

(19) The young man did not delay to perform this, for he desired YAAKOV'S DAUGHTER, and he was the most honored of all of his father's household.

(20) So Chamor and Shekhem came to the gate of their city, and they spoke to the men of their city, saying:

(21) "Those men are peaceful towards us; let them dwell in the land and trade in it, for behold – the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters as wives for us, and let us give our daughters to them.

(22) Only by this will the men agree to dwell with us, to be a single nation: if all the males among us are circumcised, as they themselves are circumcised.

(23) Their cattle and their property and all their animals – are they not ours? Let us only consent to them, that they may dwell with us."

(24) All those who went out of the gate of the city listened to Chamor and to Shekhem, his son, and all the males among all who went out of the gate of his city were circumcised.

(25) And it was on the third day, when they were in pain, that Yaakov's two sons Simon and Levi, DINA'S BROTHERS, each took up his sword, and they attacked the city with no resistance, and they killed every male.

(26) They killed Chamor and Shekhem, his son, by the sword, and took DINA from Shekhem's house, and they left.

(27) The sons of Yaakov came upon the fallen, and the plundered the city for having defiled THEIR SISTER.

(28) They took their sheep and their oxen and their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and whatever was in the field,

(29) and all their wealth, and all their children, and their wives – as captives and spoils, as well as whatever was in the houses.

(30) And Yaakov said to Shimon and to Levi: "You have brought trouble upon me, to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land – the Canaanites and the Perizzites; since I am few in number, they shall gather against me and smite me, and I and my household shall be destroyed.

(31) But they said, "Shall OUR SISTER be treated as a harlot?!"

The following is a list of all the different titles for Dina that appear in the chapter:

DINA, DAUGHTER OF LEAH, HER, GIRL, CHILD, DAUGHTER OF YAAKOV, HIS DAUGHTER, THEIR SISTER, OUR SISTER, OUR DAUGHTER, DINA'S BROTHERS.

We shall now propose an hypothesis for the role of each title, and then examine the hypotheses within the text.

- Dina – simply – her name.
- Daughter of Leah – emphasizing specifically the connection to Leah, not to Rachel or the handmaids.
- Her – colorless title highlighting the attitude towards her as an object.
- Girl – her actual status.
- Child – a title of disdain.
- Yaakov's daughter – emphasizing the emotional and moral obligation that rests upon him as her father.
- His daughter – as above.
- Their daughter, our daughter – emphasizing their connection to her. With regard to Shimon and Levi, this hints particularly to the fraternity via their mother, Leah.
- Our daughter – a sort of Freudian slip. She is not their daughter, but they act as though she is.
- Dina's brothers – only they. They are concerned for her and act as true brothers.

If we take another look at the order of appearances of the different titles in the chapter, the situation that arises is a dismal one indeed. Let us start with the outer framework:

At the outset, we read: "Dina, daughter of Leah, who she bore to Yaakov, went out...." The text supplies her lineage in full, although it does not say, "the daughter of Yaakov, whom Leah had borne to him"; rather, it links Dina specifically to Leah. Rashi detects this, and – following *Chazal's* lead – he explains: "'daughter of Leah' – rather than 'daughter of Yaakov.' Because of her 'going out' she is called the 'daughter of Leah,' for she, too, was a woman who went out (*Bereishit Rabba*), as it is written: 'Leah went out to greet him' – and it is concerning her that the idiom came about – Like mother, like daughter."

But perhaps the text is hinting in a different direction. This is a sort of exposition, conveying information which – although long familiar to us – is important to mention for a better understanding of the rest of the story. The Torah wants to remind us that Dina is specifically Leah's daughter. This idea is made even clearer when we move to the end of the story, where Shimon and Levi declare to Yaakov,

"Shall our sister be treated as a harlot?!" (The word order in Hebrew reads, "Like a harlot shall he make of our sister?"). The story concludes with "our sister" (*achoteinu*), and it stands out against the background of the introduction, where the text mentions that she is Leah's daughter. Indeed, she is their sister, born of the same mother, and Shimon and Levi feel that this is definitely relevant. Why does Yaakov himself not take any action? Why is he paralyzed with fear? Why does he not think that this is an abomination and disgrace? The answer emerges from the mouths of Shimon and Levi: We acted as brothers, with brotherly love burning in our hearts. You, our father, have not acted as required of a father. The statement here is a harsh one, difficult to hear, but the silence that follows testifies that Yaakov admits to more than just a grain of truth in their accusation.

If we examine the appearance of the various titles during the course of the story, it seems that they confirm our hypothesis. Shekhem treats Dina as an object for exploitation. In his eyes she starts off as "her," no more. Later there follows a process during which he perhaps falls in love, perhaps suffers slight regret, maybe discovers that she is the daughter of an important man, and his attitude changes. Therefore he now refers to her as a "girl" or "child." (Concerning the latter we are not certain whether it is meant in a demeaning way, or whether he means that negotiations must be conducted with Dina's father because she is a minor.)

Let us return to Yaakov. At the beginning of the story, the text takes care to refer to Dina as "Yaakov's daughter" or "his daughter," in order to create some expectation on our part. Then Yaakov hears that Shekhem has defiled Dina, HIS DAUGHTER; that a disgrace has been committed in Israel, to lie with A DAUGHTER OF YAAKOV. We expect Yaakov to act like a father whose daughter has been assaulted. But upon reading the description of his reaction, our impression is that his response is somewhat anemic: Yaakov hears... and holds his peace. This absence of emotion is particularly striking against the background of the reaction of the brothers: "They were grieved," "they were angry."

The expectation that Yaakov will treat Dina as his daughter is not realized, and it is apparently for this reason that his sons assume the helm. When Shekhem and Chamor make their proposal, instead of Yaakov answering Chamor – as appropriate for the head of the household – it is the brothers who reply: "The sons of Yaakov answered Shekhem and Chamor, his father, with cunning as they spoke...." Henceforth Dina is referred to not as "the daughter of Yaakov," but rather as "their sister" or "our sister," since it is only her brothers who act in accordance with the appropriate sense of fraternity. The Freudian slip, "We shall take our daughter" is simply an extreme expression of the fact that they have assumed Yaakov's place, to the extent that Dina is considered as though she is their daughter.

Finally, when the action takes place, we read: "Yaakov's two sons, Shimon and Levi, Dina's brothers, took up each man his sword...." The insertion, "Dina's brothers" is, of course, superfluous, and its role here is not to fill in information, but rather to provide an explanation. It is they, Dina's brothers, sons of Leah, who behave properly and as expected of brothers, acting to deliver her and to protect her honor. Yaakov, meanwhile, sits at home.

In light of this analysis it arises that the story of Dina should be understood against a broader backdrop that represents the source of most of the problems that arise in Yaakov's household, and which arises from Yaakov's preference for Rachel over Leah. At first, his ardent love for Rachel leads to Leah's jealousy. Ultimately, his great love for Yosef, son of Rachel, leads to the jealousy of Leah's children. In between these two end-points, his relative apathy concerning the fate of Leah's daughter galvanizes her brothers, Shimon and Levi, born of the same mother, into action that gets out of control and ends in mass slaughter.

3. Deceit

The third problem that we would like to address is the deceit practiced by Yaakov's sons. The text itself attests to this trickery: they "answered with guile, when they spoke." But this is not necessarily to be understood as a criticism. The deceit is a means – and a negative means is morally justifiable, under certain circumstances. It is undoubtedly permissible, for instance, to use deception in order to capture a terrorist. Thus, the question of judgment does not necessarily turn on the word "deceit." But we propose a more balanced view of deceit, arrived at through an analysis of the literary repetition of the proposed agreement between Yaakov's sons and the men of Shekhem. Nechama Leibowitz (in her studies on *Parashat Chaye Sara*, in the story of Rivka and the servant) discusses the need to give serious thought to the repetition that we sometimes find in the Torah within a story – repeating either speeches or parts of the plot. The repetition in our story concerns the agreement, which is first presented by Shekhem and Chamor to Yaakov and his sons.

Shekhem and Chamor say:

"Make marriages with us; GIVE US YOUR DAUGHTERS, AND TAKE OUR DAUGHTERS FOR YOURSELVES.

AND DWELL WITH US, AND THE LAND SHALL BE BEFORE YOU: DWELL AND TRADE IN IT, AND acquire property in it." (9-10)

The brothers respond to Shekhem and Chamor:

"BUT THUS WE MAY CONSENT TO YOU: if you will be like us – THAT EVERY MALE AMONG YOU SHALL BE CIRCUMCISED.

THEN WE WILL GIVE OUR DAUGHTERS TO YOU, AND WE WILL TAKE YOUR DAUGHTERS FOR OURSELVES, AND WE WILL DWELL WITH YOU AND BE A SINGLE NATION." (15-16)

Shekhem and Chamor then tell the inhabitants of their city:

"Those men are peaceful towards us; LET THEM DWELL IN THE LAND AND TRADE IN IT, FOR BEHOLD – THE LAND IS LARGE ENOUGH FOR THEM; LET US TAKE THEIR DAUGHTERS AS WIVES FOR US, AND LET US GIVE OUR DAUGHTERS TO THEM.

ONLY BY THIS WILL THE MEN AGREE TO DWELL WITH US, TO BE A SINGLE NATION: IF ALL THE MALES AMONG US ARE CIRCUMCISED, AS THEY THEMSELVES ARE CIRCUMCISED.

THEIR CATTLE AND THEIR PROPERTY AND ALL THEIR ANIMALS – ARE THEY NOT OURS? Let us only consent to them, that they may dwell with us." (21-23)

Let us now compare the different versions of the agreement for similarities and differences:

There is a prominent addition that appears in the latter two versions but is absent in the first: this is the demand of circumcision. This, after all, is the crux of the brothers' intention. But this point is not enough. Attention should be paid to the other details. The original proposal is fairly generous. It includes several promises:

- free intermarriage
- free trade
- equal civil status: "Acquire property in it."

In their repetition, the brothers agree, in principle, to receiving equal status: "We shall be a single nation." But they add the requirement of circumcision, and also repeat exactly the proposal of intermarriage. The interesting changes are to be found in the repetition by Shekhem and Chamor, detailing the agreement before the inhabitants of their city:

- They repeat the principle of civil equality (to be a single nation), as well as the requirement of circumcision, but make changes and additions in order to make the proposal more palatable to their subjects and to present the agreement as though it benefits them.
- They invert the proposal of intermarriage, declaring: "We shall take their daughters for ourselves," instead of the original "You shall give us your daughters." I.e., it will be by our will, not by their will. And conversely: "And we shall give our daughters to them," instead of the original "You shall take our daughters for yourselves" (and also not "We shall give to you") proposed by Yaakov and his sons. In other words: we shall give - at our discretion.
- They add: "Their cattle and their property... are they not ours?" In other words, their property belongs – or will ultimately belong – to us. This intention, of course, is hidden from Yaakov and his sons.
- Likewise, the addition: "Behold, the land is large enough for them" comes to soften the threat that the inhabitants of Shekhem may feel concerning their sources of subsistence – their pasture grounds and fields. Chamor and Shekhem imply that Yaakov's household need not necessarily dwell right next to them.

The picture that arises from the above should, to our mind, change the prevalent view of Shekhem and Chamor as innocent men who agreed to be circumcised and were tricked. They are hard-boiled politicians who make a cold calculation of profitability and even cook up a plot of their own. This picture may certainly serve to change our view of the deceit practiced by Shimon and Levi.

IV. SUMMARY AND SOLUTION OF THE DILEMMA

It appears, in light of the analysis above, that the picture may be viewed as follows:

There is no doubt that, in various ways and using different techniques, the text of Chapter 34 supports the actions of Shimon and Levi. A number of elements converge to produce this conclusion: the judgmental comments and aside,

the analysis of the different titles used in reference to Dina, the development of the agreement between Yaakov's sons and Shekhem and Chamor, as well as the recriminations traded by Yaakov and Shimon and Levi at the end of the story. The opening and closing of the narrative serve to reinforce this general impression, while the Torah's comment in Chapter 35 – "The fear of God was upon the cities... and they did not pursue after the children of Yaakov" provides irrefutable vindication of Yaakov's sons' claim.

Since this conclusion is unequivocal, we are forced to re-examine the principal dilemma that we presented at the outset: i.e., the contradiction that arises between the narrative itself, with all its aspects, and Yaakov's blessing – or, more accurately, his curse – to Shimon and Levi. We propose that the solution be sought by paying attention to the respective locations of the two different evaluations of the act and its significance.

The supportive judgment is the internal evaluation within the story; it arises from the development of the plot.

The negative judgment is pronounced from afar; it is uttered in a general, rather than personal context – related to the future of the tribes. The "closeness" and "distance" are a metaphor for two different perspectives:

- The closer perspective symbolizes the emotional, existential positions that are to be expected from the characters involved.
- The distant perspective symbolizes the objective – not subjective - moral point of view.

This distinction is the key to understanding the matter

Yaakov is depicted in the story as manifesting weakness, and the text is unforgiving in its indirect criticism of him. His timidity may be a symptom of a general fear of conflict (Eisav, Lavan, etc.). There may also be an element of alienation from Dina as Leah's daughter, as we have suggested. In any event, it is unthinkable to us that he should stand aside and do nothing, failing to react to the rape of his daughter and not lifting a finger to save her (it must be remembered that the Torah tells us, "They took Dina from Shekhem's house, and left": i.e., during the negotiations, Dina was still there). When the brothers take over the reigns that Yaakov should properly have grasped, he loses his moral right to attack them for losing control of the horses. When the wagon driver is asleep, the horses do as they please. And the horses are not driven by moral considerations or a perspective of absolute justice; they are motivated by their heated emotions – their anger and zealotry on behalf of their sister's honor. Therefore, the Torah silences Yaakov and presents his opposition as a weak leader's fear for his household – a fear which turns out to be unjustified.

But this understanding cannot justify all actions. Even if the brothers are justified and correct in their anger and zealotry, there are still proportions and limitations of punishment, revenge and justice. This, after all, is precisely the significance of morality: "Will You slay people even though innocent?" The "innocent" here is not necessarily a person who is perfect in his traits, but rather one who is vindicated, acquitted in his case. A person who is not guilty should not be punished together with those who are.

Yaakov's curse concerns proportion. And proportion is the crux of the moral question. The justification for harming a person who is guilty - in order to exact revenge and in order to save others - is entirely clear. But why must every male in the city be killed [2]? And why do they plunder the city? We note, in contrast, how Megillat Ester takes pains to note that "they did not lay their hands on the plunder"...

"Their anger," "their fury" – in other words, the inability to channel their most justified emotions into a morally and legally justified course of action, brought about the situation of a *mitzva* that turned into a sin, and caused the brothers to be cursed. But it was only at the very end of his life that Yaakov was permitted to express this. At the time, the Torah held him responsible, too – because had he acted, events would not have transpired the way that they did.

If what we have said here is correct, the overall view of the Torah's judgment gives us profound and complex guidance as to proper moral behavior, as well as placing an emphasis upon the necessity of leadership that is active, sensitive and responsible at such times. Yaakov failed, and Simon and Levi also failed. He was right, and they were right. But ultimately, their failure was a greater one – and this verdict finds expression in the curse.

In conclusion, it must be noted that even Yaakov's curse is not the final word on the matter. A decree may be altered. The Tribe of Levi merited to turn its zealotry in a positive direction – so much so that this tribe became God's servants in the Temple; instead of the inheritance taken from them by Yaakov's curse, they receive "the portion of God." Anger directed by a leader, in accordance with law and judgment – as manifested by Moshe after the Sin of the Golden Calf, where the Tribe of Levi joined his campaign – is a holy instrument in times of crisis.

Notes:

[1] A great many commentators have addressed this *parasha*, and we are unable to list all of them here. Much of this *shiur* has been inspired by various books and articles, some even from the commentaries of the Rishonim. Readers who are unfamiliar with all the background material will no doubt regard much of the discussion as innovative. Those with greater familiarity may detect a contribution in the systematic point of view and the summary, and the conclusion arising from them.

[2] Concerning the Noachide Laws, Rambam writes: "For this reason the men of Shekhem (*"ba'alei Shekhem"*) were deserving of death." This is not to be understood – as many have in fact understood it – as a reason for the slaughter of all the males of the city, but rather as the reason for putting the leadership to death, since the leaders did nothing to prevent or halt the abomination. The term *"ba'alei"* is used here, as in *Sefer Shoftim* in the story of Gidon, to refer to the leaders who could have provided deliverance but failed to do so, and are therefore guilty. The masses cannot be held accountable for all that goes on around them – certainly not with the same severity. Can anyone imagine that all of *Bnei Yisrael* should be stoned to death because of the sin of Akhan, in *Sefer Yehoshua*? Did God answer Avraham, when he argued on behalf of Sodom, that all the inhabitants of the city were deserving of death because they did not object? Even where there is indirect responsibility, the principle of proportion

balancing the crime with the punishment must hold firm, and our expectations must be reasonable. A person who argues that every Arab who lives in the same building as a terrorist is considered – and should be treated – as a terrorist himself, is justifying the slaughter of innocent people. On the other hand, those who claim that the leadership bears responsibility for what goes on under its rule, and that its punishment should be harsher – as Rambam teaches – is correct, in our opinion. This note is meant to give rise to thinking on the theoretical level; obviously, we have not presented a full picture here, nor a full array of sources.

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