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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VEZOT HABERAKHA

Moshe's Blessing to the Jewish People

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Parashat Vezot HaberaKha is Moshe's farewell to the Jewish People. In *Devarim* 33, he invokes God, then blesses each tribe or pair of tribes in turn, then gives a general blessing. However, the precise transition is unclear. The name Yeshurun is used in each section:

And he was king in Yeshurun, when the heads of the people and the tribes of Yisrael were gathered together. (v. 5)

There is none like the God of Yeshurun. (v. 26)

However, according to Rashi, the preceding verse, "Your boots shall be iron and brass" (v. 25), already turns back to the nation as a whole. Hence, the connection between the two parts of the general blessing might be explained as follows: The king will lead the army of Yeshurun to conquer the land with the help of He who rides upon the heaven, His excellency on the clouds, Who rules over His heavenly abode as over the land, and underneath are the everlasting arms, and He shall cast out the enemy from before you.

The blessing addressed to the nation as a whole thus has the following structure: God appears from Sinai, from Se'ir and from Paran; Yisrael is chosen; Moshe commands us a Torah; a king for the tribes of Yisrael; blessing the tribes; conquest with God's help; confidence in His blessing and its abundance.

Interpretation of the general blessing (vv. 1-5; 25-29)

Moshe, the man of God – up until now, Moshe has been referred to as "Moshe, the man" or "the man Moshe." Only here, as he speaks for the last time, is he called "the man of God": man – because he is about to die like every mortal (see Rashi), but also of God – because even this, his final blessing, represents the words of God concerning the Jewish People (Ibn Ezra, Ramban).

Sinai, Se'ir & Paran – these are places of revelation, where God appears before Yisrael in the desert, His Presence wandering with the nation during their journeys. The revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah likewise move from Sinai to Se'ir and Paran. The revelation at Sinai is described in a similar fashion in the song of Devora, in the prophecy of Chavakuk (3), and in *Tehillim* 68.

And He came (ve-ata) from holy multitudes (rivevot kodesh) – God came and appeared from the multitudes of the holy nation that encamped at Kadesh [Barnea] and in Kadesh [the wilderness of Tzin].

At His right was eshdat for them – South (=right) of the Israelite camp in the Plains of Moav rises the mountain range

of Ashdot Ha-pisga, from atop which God shows Moshe the land to the west of the Jordan before he dies. *Eshdat* is written (the *ktiv*) as a single word, and the verse speaks of God's appearance in the wilderness, throughout the nation's journeys, until Moshe's last stop. The Midrash, following the *keri*, reads *esh dat*, fiery law, anticipating the content of the revelation ("Moshe commanded") within the description of the event.

Truly He loves the peoples – the peoples here refer to the tribes of Yisrael, all of whom God loves (Rashi). The verb *chovev* (loves) comes from the Aramaic (as does the verb in the previous verse, *ve-ata*). An alternative interpretation of *chovev* (Ramban) understands it as meaning that God brings them to the hidden secrets of His Presence, as in "the hiding (*chevyon*) of His power" (*Chavakuk* 3:4). Perhaps it is an allusion to the family of Chovav (Yitro), who joined himself to Moshe and Yisrael at Sinai (Rashbam).

All his holy ones are in your hand – the singular form recalls the nation encamped at Sinai like a single person with a single heart (Rashi, *Shemot* 19:2).

And they stood at Your feet – the plural takes us back to the tribes, who stood at the foot of Sinai (Rashi).

Everyone shall receive of Your words – once again a reference to the nation of Yisrael, receiving the Ten Commandments (the Torah which "Moshe commanded us") based on the legacy (inheritance) of Ya'akov our forefather.

And He was king in Yeshurun – God reigns forever in Yisrael, by virtue of the gathering of all the heads and elders of the nation at Sinai (just as at the coronation of any mortal king, whose sovereignty is affirmed and accepted by an assembly of representatives of the people) (Rashi, Ramban). Others (see Chizkuni, Ramban) understand the phrase as referring to Moshe.

All the tribes of Yisrael together – the heads of the tribes, as a single man (as in your heads, your tribes – *Devarim* 29:9).

...

Your boots are iron and brass – Now [Moshe] addresses all of Yisrael (Rashi) – in other words, this is a continuation of the opening part of the speech (as discussed above). The conquest of the land is a continuation of God's kingship. The army of Yisrael is the army of God, whose boots are an allusion to their battle-gear. However, Rashi and Ramban interpret relate *minal* to *manul* ("your locks are..."), meaning the firm closure of borders keeping the enemy out.

And as your days, so shall your strength (davekha) be – the root *d-v-a* appears only once in all of *Tanakh* (Ibn Ezra) and so its meaning is not clear. Onkelos translates "your strength" on the basis of the context, and it makes sense that this is the opposite of *da'av* (sorrow; see Rashi). Others have understood the word as "flowing," from the root of *zav*, since the letters *dalet* and *zayin* are interchangeable (Ramban).

There is none like the God of Yeshurun – this relates to the verse in the first part of the blessing, "And He was king in Yeshurun," as explained above.

Who rides upon the heaven to your aid; [and it is He Who] in His excellency [rides] on the clouds, [in His] dwelling place (*meona*) – In some Second Temple manuscripts the word *maon* appears here; a similar message is hinted to in *Tehillim* 90: “A prayer unto Moshe, the man of God: Lord, You have been for us a dwelling place (*maon*) for all generations.” The descriptions of riding upon the heaven, the clouds, and the dwelling place on high all convey the glory and greatness of God, Who spreads everlasting arms to aid the Jewish People and strike its enemies. *Mi-tachat* (underneath) may have a dual meaning here, depicting God also as stretching His everlasting arms to the earth below.

O people saved by God, the shield of Your aid, and Who is the sword of your excellency – your victories come from Him.

Your enemies shall be brought down before you – they will gradually become depleted, as promised: “Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you are increased, and inherit the land” (*Shemot* 23:30; cf. *Devarim* 7:22-23).

And you shall tread upon their high places – your feet will stand firm upon the battlefields and the portions of your inheritance, as promised: “Every place where the sole of your feet treads shall be yours” (*Devarim* 11:24).

Blessings the tribes – by territory, southeast to northwest (vv. 6-24)

Let Reuven live and not die, and let his men be of [considerable] number – The tribe of Reuven was threatened with the punishment of *karet*. According to some opinions (see Rashi, Ramban), this danger arose from the harsh rebuke by Ya’akov prior to his death (*Bereishit* 49:4), since Moshe’s blessing parallels that given by Ya’akov. Other commentators explain the danger as relating to the fact that the tribes of Gad and Reuven had taken it upon themselves to lead the Israelite army to conquer the land, and therefore they needed Moshe’s blessing (a second interpretation offered by Ramban). In my view, the plain meaning of the verse can be understood in more immediate and literal terms: the tribe of Reuven was severely depleted in the wake of the rebellion of Dan and Aviram (*Bamidbar* 16:12-34) and also faced great danger owing to its habitation of the eastern side of the Jordan. The tribe of Gad surrounded Reuven with a protective ring (see the list of cities of Gad in *Bamidbar* 32, in contrast to the description in *Yehoshua* 13) because the men of Gad were stronger – as stated explicitly in the blessings of both Ya’akov and Moshe. In fact, there is no contradiction between the different explanations. The weakness manifest in this tribe in the desert and in its inheritance was the result of Ya’akov’s rebuke, and Moshe’s blessing came to mitigate and sweeten Ya’akov’s harsh words, without making explicit mention of earlier wrongdoing.

And this is to Yehuda, and he said: Hear, God, the voice of Yehuda, and bring him [safely] to his people [i.e. tribe and inheritance]. Let his hands be sufficient for him, and be a help to him from his enemies – The blessing to Yehuda is relatively brief, and, in contrast to Ya’akov’s blessing, makes no mention of Yehuda’s greatness or status as leader. The two leading tribes in Ya’akov’s blessing are Yosef and Yehuda, while the leading tribes in Moshe’s blessing are Yosef and Levi (Yehoshua bin Nun and Elazar ben Aharon).

The blessing to Yehuda reflects the shared fate of Yehuda and Shimon: “Hear (*Shema*), God, the voice of Yehuda” – for they will go out jointly to fight for a joint inheritance (*Shoftim* 1:3; *Yehoshua* 19:1, 9; see Rashi and Ramban), with a conspicuous distancing from the tribes of Yosef, on one hand,

and the tribes of the Galilee, on the other, as though they were a people in their own right (“and bring him to his people”). Indeed, this was the situation of tribe of Yehuda during the time of the Judges.

Geographically speaking, the inheritance of Reuven lies in the southernmost part of the eastern side of the Jordan, close to where Moshe died. Yehuda’s inheritance is in the south on the western side of the Jordan; Moshe saw it before him, from the top of the mountain.

And to Levi he said: Let your Tummim and your Urim be with your pious ones, whom you proved at Masa, and with whom you strove at the waters of Meriva – being found faithful (Onkelos, Rashi and others). This speaks in praise of Aharon, the head of the tribe of Levi. Moshe is convinced that Aharon committed no sin relating to the waters of Meriva. The continuation of Rashi’s comment here is therefore most puzzling: he understands Moshe’s words as praise for the Levites who showed their loyalty to God after the sin of the Golden Calf: Moshe had prayed for Aharon, too, to save him in the wake of that sin (*Devarim* 10:20), and the mention of this sin is a disgrace for Aharon rather than praise for him. Moshe, who starts off by praising Aharon, would not then go on to disgrace him. The verses that follow might therefore be understood in accordance with Chizkuni’s view, as we shall see.

Who said of his father and of his mother, I have not seen him; nor did he acknowledge his brothers, nor knew his own children, for they have observed Your word and kept Your covenant – “For if his father or mother, brother or son, dies, he must proceed as someone who did not know him, as it is written [concerning the High Priest], ‘he shall not be defiled for his father and for his mother’ (*Vayikra* 21:11). And why so? **For they have observed your word**, in which You stated (ibid. v. 12), ‘And he shall not emerge from the Sanctuary’ – even in his time of sorrow he may not go out after [a funeral procession].” According to Chizkuni’s interpretation, all the verses continue the praise of Aharon and his sons, the High Priests and the teachers of Torah, who dedicate themselves to holiness, to the point of ignoring and transcending their personal pain. In the case of Aharon, on the eighth day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, when his two sons died, he was forbidden to depart from his state of holiness and to defile himself by busying himself with their burial. He kept himself apart from their burial and the mourning over them, “for they have observed Your word and kept Your covenant.” Therefore, by virtue of that devotion, **They shall teach Ya’akov Your judgments, and Yisrael Your Torah. They shall place incense before You, and whole burnt sacrifice upon Your altar.**

In conclusion, Moshe asks that God bless the leadership of the High Priests, the heads of the tribe of Levi, who are in charge of the law, the Torah, and the Sanctuary, against anyone who might undermine their status: **Bless, God, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; smite the loins of those who rise against him, and those who hate him, to never rise again.**

To Binyamin; he said: The beloved of God, he shall dwell in safety by him; He shall cover him all the day long, and He shall dwell between his shoulders. The entire portion of Binyamin is considered sanctified. We see in *Yehoshua* 18 that his portion is surrounded by those of Yehuda and Efrayim, Reuven [to the east of the Jordan at Jericho] and Dan [to the west], and these tribes are the standard-bearers for the camp of Yisrael around the *Mishkan* (*Bamidbar* 2). We also see (*Yehoshua* 18) that the expression shoulder/ side (*katef*) occurs (almost) exclusively in relation to the portion of Binyamin: there is the side of Jericho; the side of Luz, which is Beit El; the side of

the Jebusites, which is Jerusalem; we also find the side of Mount Ye'arim which is close to the point where the portions of Yehuda, Binyamin and Dan meet, at Kiryat Ye'arim. Further on, the northern border of the portion of Yehuda is mentioned as the side of Ekron – this is the only instance in *Yehoshua* of a *katef* outside of Binyamin.

The meaning of the blessing, in light of the borders of the portion of Binyamin, is as follows: God will dwell upon Binyamin in his portion; the wings of the Divine Presence will be a constant canopy over him, and the holy places for revelation of the *Shekhina* will be between his shoulders: between the *katef* of Luz, which is Beit El, and the *katef* of the Jebusites, which is Jerusalem, and between the place where the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant ascended from the Jordan – at Gilgal, on the eastern border of Jericho (*Yehoshua* 4:19), which is surrounded by the *katef* of Beit Chogla... the *katef* of Beit Ha-arava... the *katef* of Jericho, up to the *katef* of Mount Ye'arim, which is close to Kiryat Ye'arim, where the Ark of the Covenant would rest for many years, following the destruction of Shilo, after the Ark's return from the Pelishtim (*Shemuel I* 7:1-2).

The place where Bnei Yisrael assembled to God in Mitzpeh (*Shoftim* 20:1; 21:1; *Shemuel I* 10:17), the stations of the *Mishkan*, and the great *bama* in Nov (*Shemuel I* 21) and later in Givon (*Melakhim I* 3:17; *Divrei Ha-yamim I* 21:29; II 1:3) were likewise located within Binyamin's portion, between the *katef* of Luz, which is Beit El, and the *katef* of the Jebusites, which is Jerusalem. Thus, the history and geography of the *Shekhina* converge in the portion of Binyamin.

This is how *Chazal* understood the blessing, when they consulted *Sefer Yehoshua* and traced the border of Binyamin and Yehuda, concluding: "The Divine Presence [resides] in the portion of Binyamin" (*Zevachim* 53b-54b; see my book, *Vezot Haberakha*). They went so far as to define a strip emerging from the portion of Binyamin as far as Shilo, so that it, too, could be included in the holiness of the Divine Presence residing in the portion of Binyamin (*Zevachim* 118b). The sanctity of the Temple, in the portion of Binyamin, is mentioned by most of the commentators on this verse, but they do not set forth the principle of the shoulders/ sides, and the portion of Binyamin as a whole, as recorded in *Sefer Yehoshua* and the gatherings at Beit El, Mitzpeh and Givon.

How did Binyamin merit to be called the beloved of God (see Ramban), and to have the Divine Presence rest in his portion? Binyamin is the twelfth son, completing the count of the tribes of Yisrael. *Chazal* note that he was the only one of the brothers to be born in *Eretz Yisrael*, the only one who did not bow before Esav (because he had not yet been born), and who had no part in the sale of Yosef (see my book, *Vezot Haberakha*, and see Chizkuni; see also my article "*Nachalat Binyamin – Nachalat Shekhina*" on my website).

The order of the blessings to the tribes goes from southeast to south, and then northward – Reuven; Yehuda with Shimon within a single portion; and then Levi, who is located precisely in between Yehuda and Binyamin, close to the sanctified portion that lies within the borders of Binyamin. Then comes the blessing to Yosef, and the tribes of the north. This order is a clear and exact reflection of the state of the tribes at the start of the period of the monarchy, with the selection of Jerusalem, on the border between Yehuda and Binyamin, and David's returning of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, along with the *kohanim*, members of the tribe of Levi, in anticipation of the building of God's House. Only through far-sighted prophecy could Moshe have blessed the tribes in this order, and indeed, *Chazal* teach: "The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moshe...

each generation with its teachers, each generation with its judges" (*Bamidbar Rabba* 23:4). In other words, God showed him not just the geography of the land, but also its (future) history: "Do not read, 'to the utmost sea (*yam*),' but rather: to the utmost day (*yom*)" (Sifrei, *Vezot Haberakha*, 357).

And to Yosef, he said: Blessed of God is his land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and for the deep which crouches underneath.

And for the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious things put forth by the moon

And for the chief things of the ancient mountains, and for the precious things of the primordial hills.

And for the precious things of the earth, and its fullness,

And for the good will of he who dwelled in the bush, Let the blessing come upon the head of Yosef, and upon the crown of the head of he who was separated from his brothers.

The firstling of his herd, grandeur is his, and his horns are like the horns of a wild ox;

With them he shall push the peoples altogether to the ends of the earth

And they are the ten thousands of Efrayim, And they are the thousands of Menashe.

Blessed of God is his land – the word blessing repeats itself, in different forms, throughout Moshe's words to Yosef. The lengthy blessings (to Yehuda and Yosef, in the case of Ya'akov; to Levi and Yosef, in the case of Moshe), overflowing with valor and abundance, indicate the leader tribes. Yosef receives such a blessing from both Ya'akov and Moshe, and there is considerable similarity between the two blessings, but at the same time this fact serves to highlight the differences between them. For the sake of comparison, let us consider Ya'akov's blessing to Yosef, from *Bereishit* 49:

Yosef is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall.

The archers fiercely attacked him, and shot at him, and hated him, [Yosef's brothers hated him, fought with him, and made his life bitter]

But his bow abode in strength [allusion to Pharaoh], **the arms of whose hands were made gold** [in the manner of drawings of the Egyptian Pharaohs, whose powerful, golden arms grasp the bow. And all of this came about] **from the mighty God of Ya'akov, from the shepherd, the Stone of Yisrael, from the God of your father, Who shall help you, and by the Almighty, Who shall bless you** [the God of the forefathers, he is also referred to as God Who is my Shepherd, and is also called *avir* (the head shepherd)]. **With blessings of heaven above** (*me-a*)... – the word above also suggests *Elyon*, Supreme, which joins the long list of names and appellations of God.

In Moshe's blessing to Yosef, in contrast, no mention is made of any name or appellation for God other than the Tetragrammaton – for it was the will of God, Who revealed His Presence to Moshe from the Burning Bush (Him that dwelled in the bush), that He be known only by His Name – God is One and His Name One. Therefore Moshe makes no mention of any other appellations for God in the blessings of fertility, as was customary among the Canaanites, as evident in their figurines. This is especially important in his words to Yosef, where mistakes might occur with regard to the Unity of God (as indeed happened with the calves created by King Yeravam).

On the other hand, Moshe speaks of the sweetness of the fruits and the abundance of produce of the land and its fullness, which did not exist at the time of the forefathers: the crops and fruits that grow and ripen from the sun in the proper

season, and the vegetables that ripen from the waxing and waning of the moon (see Rashi; I have heard this confirmed by farmers who grow the vegetables in question: squash, watermelons, cucumbers, gourds).

The blessings of your father are potent above the blessings of my ancestors, to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills; they shall be upon the head of Yosef, and on the crown of the head of he who was separated from his brothers – the blessings given by Ya'akov, father of Yosef, stand powerfully upon [in accumulation with] the blessings of Avraham and Yitzchak, and they spread to the ends of the land.

From the parallel between the two blessings it is clear that the **ancient mountains**, as invoked by Moshe, are the forefathers; the blessings that he now gives have their source in the blessings of the forefathers, and they will be manifest in the abundance of Yosef's portion. The expressions **head of Yosef** and **crown of he who was separated from his brothers** are used by both Ya'akov and Moshe in reference to Yosef's leadership.

Here Moshe adds a blessing concerning Yosef's strength in the wars of conquest of the land – the power and grandeur of an ox. **The horns of a wild ox** with which the tribes of Yosef (Efrayim and Menashe) will go out to war, by virtue of Ya'akov's blessing to them, will bring them victory in their thousands (for instance, the war of Gidon, from the tribe of Menashe) and their tens of thousands (referring to the major battles of Yehoshua, who was the envoy of the tribe of Efrayim).

Moshe continues, following the geographical order of the portions, from those of Efrayim and Menashe to those of Zevulun and Yissakhar; eastward to the portion of Gad, in the Gilad, to the east of the portions of Menashe and Yissakhar; and then to the tribes of the north, in accordance with the geographical order at the end of the period of the judges (at which point Dan had already settled in the north, and in Moshe's prophecy, as follows:) from east to west: Dan – Naftali – Asher. Owing to the weakness and distance of these tribes they needed extra blessing, and it is for this reason (according to Rashi) that the names of these six tribes appear within their blessings (and not only in the introduction to each).

And to Zevulun he said: Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out; and Yissakhar, in your tents – Zevulun was a warrior tribe, as depicted in Devora's song ("Zevulun is a people that risked itself to the death," *Shoftim* 5:18), living in its fortified portion in the mountains of the lower Galilee (between Nazareth and Sapphoris). At the same time, this tribe had received a blessing from Ya'akov concerning natural resources on the coast to the north of the Carmel: fishing rights, glass to be made from sea sand, and the *tekhelet* and *argaman* dyes produced from the *chilazon* mollusk (see *Megilla* 6a). These commercial spheres had traditionally been associated with the Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon, who were not happy to share them with the Israelites. Moshe blessed the tribe of Zevulun that they would set off joyfully and full of strength to work with these natural resources, and would merit to bring offerings "of the abundance of the seas and the treasures hidden in the sand."

In practice, the Phoenicians were powerful and forced the tribe of Zevulun into enclaves (*Shoftim* 1:31-32). In this context, *Chazal* teach (*Megilla* 6a) that Zevulun was unhappy with God's allocation of his portion, since he was unable to realize his inheritance. In any event, *Chazal* conclude that the fundamental rights over the natural resources of the northern coast were always maintained by Zevulun.

Yissakhar settled in the Yizre'el Valley and eastward, up to the Beit She'an region. This portion, situated in the valley between the mountains of Gilboa and Mount Tavor, had no natural protection, and therefore Yissakhar was positioned, in Ya'akov's words, **crouching between the sheepfolds** (the high mountains); **he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant to tribute** – in other words, he was dominated by the powerful Canaanite cities (*Shoftim* 1:27). When these cities were weakened, following the war led by Devora and Barak, the Midianites invaded the valley and the portion of Yissakhar. In Gidon's war against the Midianites (*Shoftim* 6-7), Zevulun and Naftali fought, along with Asher (*Shoftim* 6:35) from the north, and Menashe (and later also Efrayim) from the south. Only the tribe of Yissakhar did not take part, because it was not capable of waging war. For this reason Moshe linked Yissakhar's blessing to that of Zevulun, who, in their going out, could protect Yissakhar, who dwelled in tents with no means of defense.

They shall call the peoples to the mountain, there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness, for they shall suck of the abundance of the seas and the treasures hidden in the sand – the peoples here are the other tribes: the portions of the tribes in the Galilee meet at Mount Tavor (*Yehoshua* 19:12, 22, 34), which is considered a hallowed border between tribes, like Shekhem for the tribes of Yosef, or Beit El between Binyamin and Efrayim, or Jerusalem between Binyamin and Yehuda, or Beer Sheva between Yehuda and Shimon. It was for this reason that during the period when *bamot* were permitted (starting from the period of Moshe, "every man according to what is right in his eyes," *Devarim* 12:8; as well as later on, when the people would offer sacrifices on *bamot* out of habit), the tribes of the Galilee would go up to Mount Tavor to offer sacrifices of righteousness from the abundance of their portions, and for this Moshe praises them. From the point when *bamot* were forbidden, the expression "they shall call... to the mountain" came to refer to Mount Moriah (in accordance with the Midrash, Rashi and other commentators on this verse), but the plain meaning refers to Mount Tavor, on the border of the portions of Zevulun and Yissakhar (as well as Naftali and, possibly, Asher).

And to Gad, he said: Blessed is He Who enlarges Gad; he dwells as a lion and tears the arm with the crown of the head. And he provided the first part for himself – as noted above, Gad was the dominant tribe in the inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan (as Ibn Ezra shows). With regard to Reuven, Moshe prayed that he should not die, and that his men should be of sizeable number; he speaks of Gad as a devouring lion that strikes the arm (enemy fighters) alone with the crown of the head (officers and commanders).

A review of the cities built by Gad and Reuven (*Bamidbar* 32:34-38) shows that the cities of Gad surround those of Reuven in a protective ring. This indicates that Gad took the initiative in the settlement on the eastern side of the Jordan, drawing Reuven along (compare the order in *Bamidbar* 32, between v. 1 and v. 2, and further on; see also Ramban). With this in mind, Moshe says, "He provided the first part for himself."

In the time of Shaul, the first king, the children of Reuven and Gad fought the Hagri'im, Ishmaelite tribes, and expanded their inheritance eastward ("And they dwelled in their tents throughout all the east land of Gilad," *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 5:10, 19). From this source in *Divrei Ha-yamim* it would appear that the battle and the expansion concerned mainly Reuven, but Moshe's blessing hints to the fact that the expansion of the inheritance would come by virtue of Gad's superior force: "Blessed is He Who enlarges Gad" (in accordance with Rashi).

For there the portion of a lawgiver was reserved, and he came with the heads of the people, he executed the justice of God, and his judgments with Yisrael – this is the most difficult verse in *VeZot Haberakha*. What is the connection between Gad's portion and the portion of a lawgiver? Who executed the justice of God and his judgments with Yisrael: Gad or the lawgiver? Most of the commentators maintain that the portion of a lawgiver refers to the grave of Moshe, the lawgiver, who himself executed the justice of God and His judgments with Yisrael. Thus, Moshe prophesizes here about his own gravesite. However, we might question this, since the Torah testifies that Moshe was buried in the valley, over against Beit Peor, which is in the portion of Reuven, and not in the portion of Gad. It also seems strange that Moshe, who was very humble, more than any man (*Bamidbar* 12:3), would speak in this way about himself.

Therefore, Ibn Ezra hews more closely to the plain meaning of the text: the tribe of Gad saw the palaces of the lawgivers (i.e., rulers) of the kingdom of Sichon, the Emorite, and wished to inherit land in that region. He therefore came to the heads of Yisrael and promised to pass over armed before the nation in the conquest of the land on the western side of the Jordan, thereby executing the justice of God and His judgments with Yisrael (such that the entire verse speaks of the tribe of Gad, in accordance with Rashi's first interpretation).

And to Dan he said: Dan is a lion's whelp, which leaps from Bashan – Moshe envisions Dan's portion in the north. This may have been the original blueprint (prior to the casting of the lot that positioned Dan to the west of Binyamin, *Yehoshua* 18-19), owing to the natural connection with the tribes of Naftali and Asher (which also belonged to the banner-camp of Dan in the wilderness, *Bamidbar* 2:25-31); or because Moshe had a prophetic vision of Dan's move northward (*Shoftim* 18) after unsuccessful attempts to realize his inheritance in the central part of the land, in the same manner that he describes a prophetic vision of the tribe of Levi in between Yehuda and Binyamin, in the place of the Divine Presence.

There is some logic behind the depiction of Dan as a lion conquering the city (*Yehoshua* 19:47, *Shoftim* 18) (*leshem* = *layish* = lion), but it seems to make no sense to depict the lion as leaping onto Tel Dan from the Bashan: the children of Dan did not charge the city from the Bashan, nor did the tribe of Dan settle there in the wake of the wars fought by Menashe in Bashan. Therefore it would seem that, as Rashi and Onkelos explain, the second part of the verse is not meant as a continuation of the description of the lion, but rather a new clause: the wadi (one of the sources of the Jordan) that flows in the Dan region bursts forth from the Bashan. Thus, there is a verse in the Torah describing the impressive waterfalls in the western Bashan (known today as the Golan Heights, recalling the city of Golan in the Bashan of Menashe, *Devarim* 4:43).

And to Naftali he said, O Naftali, satisfied with favor, and full with the blessing of God; possess the sea and the south. *Chazal* teach (*Bava Kama* 81b, Rashi interprets accordingly) that the sea here refers to the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret), which lies in Naftali's portion, and that the south refers to the sea's southern beach, where Naftali had *melo chevel cherem*, the area necessary for fishing boats and the spreading of nets (*charamim*).

However, the plain meaning of the text would seem to be a reference to the abundance of water in the Kinneret Valley and the heat when the sun shines from the south. This combination of sun and water ripens a tremendous abundance of fruits and crops in the portion of Naftali, blessed by God. (A similar comment is offered by Chizkuni.)

And to Asher he said: Let Asher be blessed from sons; let him be acceptable to his brethren, and let him dip his foot in oil. The tribe of Asher is blessed from the mouths of the children, by virtue of the olive oil that is produced especially in this portion, in the western Galilee, which is used and needed by all (Chizkuni).

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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