**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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**Parashat Vayechi:**

**Yissakhar and Zevulun**

**Introduction**

Yissakhar and Zevulun are, from birth, a pair, the last two of the six sons Leah bears to Yaakov. These tribes are coupled throughout Scripture, and most of their appearances are one alongside the other: their birth, their history, the blessings that they receive (from Yaakov in *Parashat Vayechi* and from Moshe in *Parashat Vezot Haberakha*), their places in the camp, the sacrifices that their princes offer, and their tribal territories.

The partnership of Yissakhar and Zevulun is a concept in the Jewish world: two Jews form a partnership, as one sits studying Torah while the other goes out and engages in commerce. The businessman receives reward for the scholar’s Torah study, and the Torah scholar’s material needs are provided for. We will follow the development of this idea of the partnership of Yissakhar and Zevulun across the literature of *Chazal*, in search of answers to the following questions: what is the spiritual character of each one of these tribes, and what is the inner dynamic between the two?

**The Uniqueness of Yissakhar and Zevulun**

Let us begin with a Tannaitic *midrash* on Moshe’s blessing. The biblical text reads:

And of Zevulun he said: Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out, and Yissakhar, in your tents. They shall call peoples to the mountain; there shall they offer sacrifices of righteousness; for they shall suck the abundance of the seas, and the hidden treasures of the sands. (*Devarim* 33:18-19)

The Midrash expounds:

"Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out."

This teaches that Zevulun was a middleman for his brothers. He would buy from his brothers and sell to the nations, and [he would buy] from the nations and sell to his brothers.

"And Yissakhar, in your tents."

This teaches that the tribe of Yissakhar prided itself on Torah, as it is stated: "And of the children of Yissakhar, those that had understanding of the times" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 12:33).

And similarly we find that his father praised him (for this): "For he saw a resting-place that it was good" (*Bereishit* 49:15).

Another explanation: "And Yissakhar, in your tents."

This teaches that it would have been fitting for the Temple to be built in Yissakhar's portion.

"They shall call peoples to the mountain." From where do you say this?

For the nations and kingdoms assembled and came to [see] the affairs of Eretz Israel.

They said: Since we troubled ourselves to come here, let us go and see the affairs of the Jews — what is their nature?

Immediately, they went up to Jerusalem and saw Israel worshipping one God and eating one food.

For the nations, this one's god is not that one's god, and this one's food is not that one's food.

And they said: It is appropriate to cling only to this nation.

From where do you say that they did not move from there until they converted and brought sacrifices and burnt-offerings?

The verse states: "There they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness." (*Sifrei*, *Devarim*, 354, ed. Horowitz, pp. 415-416)

The first section of this passage in the *Sifrei* clearly defines the occupation of each of these tribes: Zevulun develops commercial connections with foreign merchants, buys and sells, imports and exports; while Yissakhar is regularly found in the *beit midrash*. These areas are an expression and illustration of the verse being expounded: "And of Zevulun he said, Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out, and Yissakhar, in your tents.”

The verses cited as proof to Yissakhar's occupation in Torah are, respectively: "And of the children of Yissakhar, those that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; the heads of them were two hundred; and all their brethren were at their commandment;” and "For he saw a resting-place that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant under task-work.”

The first verse is found in the list of those who join David from all the tribes while he is in Tziklag, and the phrase "those that had understanding of the times" is expounded as referring to Torah study or knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-1) The second verse is found in Yaakov's blessing of Yissakhar. The exposition of the word, "good" as referring to the Torah is found in Tractate *Avot* 6:3: "'And the perfect shall inherit good' (*Mishlei* 28:10). And 'good' means nothing but Torah, as it is stated: 'For I give you good doctrine; forsake you not My Torah' (*Mishlei* 4:2)."

Yaakov, in his blessing of Zevulun, prophesizes about the location of his territory in Eretz Israel: "Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a shore for ships, and his flank shall be upon Tzidon" (*Bereishit* 49:13). Zevulun's territory is in the region known today for Haifa, Yokneam and the Jezreel Valley,[[2]](#footnote-2) and his proximity to waterways enables him to be a conduit of economic abundance by way of imports to and exports from Eretz Israel.

The second section of the *Sifrei* passage expands upon the cultural encounter that takes place in the wake of international trade, and its significance. The connections that are made with other nations result in their coming to Eretz Israel and showing interest in the commercial norms of its residents: "Since we troubled ourselves to come here, let us go and see the affairs of the Jews — what is their nature?"[[3]](#footnote-3)

Their natural curiosity, or perhaps their keen business sense, leads them to the nerve center of Jewish life, namely, Jerusalem, where they discover its uniqueness and advantages, and convert.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, the *Sifrei* presents the tribe of Zevulun as a conduit that joins the normative life of the nations of the world and the nation of Israel, in both the economic and the religious spheres. However, in contrast to the economic field, in which the movement is two-way, from Israel to the nations and from the nations to Israel, the movement in the religious field is described as one-way, from the nations to Israel. It should be emphasized that the process advances on its own, as a natural process. The nations are fascinated by Jewish life, without Zevulun’s consciously working to make this happen. From his dealings in the material realm, a messianic reality is created.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The source cited above from the *Sifrei* ends with a reference to another sea-related occupation, namely, the production of the blue dye known as *tekheilet* from the marine creature called *chilazon*:

"The hidden treasures of the sands (*sefunei temunei chol*)" (*Devarim* 33:19).

*Sefunei —* this is *chilazon*; *temunei —* this is *tarit* (preserved fish); *chol* — this is glass.

For the tribe of Zevulun expressed dissatisfaction before God and said to Him:

Master of the universe, to my brothers You gave lands, but to me You gave seas.

To my brothers you gave fields and vineyards, but to me you gave the *chilazon*.

He said to him: In the end, I will cause them to need you for this *chilazon*… (ibid., p. 417)

The *tekheilet* dye is needed for the fulfillment of the mitzvaof *tzitzit*, the fringes affixed to one's four-cornered garments, and therefore all of the tribes turn to the tribe of Zevulun, and the people of Zevulun may support themselves. The role of the *tekheilet* in *tzitzit* is described by the Tanna Rabbi Meir as a visual demonstration of God's presence:

Rabbi Meir said:

It does not say: "that you may look upon them," but rather: "that you may look upon it (or Him)" (*Bamidbar* 15:39).

Scripture teaches that whoever fulfills the mitzva of *tzitzit* is considered to have received the countenance of the *Shekhina*.

For *tekheilet* is similar to the sea, and the sea is similar to the sky, and the sky is similar to the Throne of Glory. (*Sifrei,* *Bamidbar* 115)

According to what is stated here, Zevulun's livelihood creates connections between the mundane and the holy, between the people of Israel and the nations of the world, between the land of Israel and the rest of the world, between humanity and the religion of Israel, and between sensory vision and Divine reality.[[6]](#footnote-6) The substrate for this is the sea, which allows man to cross boundaries and come into contact with new physical and conscious expanses.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As presented in the *Sifrei*, the activities of Yissakhar and Zevulun stand in opposition to each other — outside versus inside, going out into the world versus going into one's house and tent.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both of them, however, create connections to the holy: Zevulun, by way of processes that take place in the wake of his economic pursuits, and Yissakhar by way of his Torah study.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**The Partnership Between Yissakhar and Zevulun**

We will now consider the words of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel appearing in *Bereishit Rabba* concerning the blessings that Yaakov gives to Yissakhar and Zevulun. The biblical text reads:

Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a shore for ships, and his flank shall be upon Tzidon.

Yissakhar is a large-boned donkey, couching down between the sheep-folds. For he saw a resting-place that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant under task-work. (*Bereishit* 49:13-15)

The Midrash expounds:

"Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea."

Rabbi Yehuda bar Nachman and Rabbi Levi each took two sela to preach before Rabbi Yochanan's congregation.

Rabbi Levi went in and said: This Yona was from (the tribe of) Zevulun.

This is what is stated: "And the third lot came up for the children of Zevulun according to their families… And from there it passed eastward to Gat Chefer” (*Yehoshua* 19:10, 13). And it is written: "According to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Yona, the son of Amitai, the prophet, who was of Gat Chefer" (II *Melakhim* 14:25). This is (the city of) Govevta of Tzippori.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Rabbi Yochanan went in and expounded: This Yona was from (the tribe of) Asher.

This is what is stated: "Asher drove not out the inhabitants of Akko, nor the inhabitants of Tzidon" (*Shoftim* 1:31).

And it is written: "Arise, get you to Tzorfat, which belongs to Tzidon" (I *Melakhim* 17:9).

Rabbi Levi said to Rabbi Yehuda bar Nachman: Even though it is your Shabbat (and it is your turn to preach), take two sela and allow me to go in and expound.

Rabbi Levi went in and said: Even though Rabbi Yochanan taught us last Shabbat that this Yona was from (the tribe of) Asher, his father was from Zevulun, and his mother was from Asher.

"And his flank shall be upon Tzidon" — the flank that went out from her was from Tzidon.

He (Rabbi Yochanan) said to him: You said this standing (like one of the students); you shall merit to say this sitting (as a teacher).

And he served as a *darshan* for twenty-two years. (*Bereishit Rabba*, MS Vienna 99, 11-12, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 1261-1262).

We will relate here to the content of the *derashot* appearing here concerning the essence and nature of the tribe of Zevulun, and not to the story serving as the frame. The Midrash opens with an anecdote involving Amoraim from Eretz Israel, Rabbi Yochanan and two *darshanim* in his *beit midrash*, Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yehuda bar Nachmani.[[11]](#footnote-11) According to all the speakers, the prophet Yona's father is from the tribe of Zevulun.[[12]](#footnote-12) Locating the origins of the prophet who was sent to Nineveh in the tribe of Zevulun continues the line of thought of the *Sifrei*, which sees the essence of the tribe of Zevulun in making connections with the outside. The centrality of the sea in the story of Yona — aboard the boat and in the depths of the waters — also parallels the characteristics of Zevulun involving maritime trade and *tekheilet* production.

The Midrash continues with a *derasha* concerning the verses relating to the tribe of Yissakhar and expounds them as referring to three different matters. Let us consider the first matter:

"Yissakhar is a large-boned donkey" — just as a donkey, its bones are clear, so Yissakhar's study was clear to him.

"Couching down between the sheep-folds" — these are the two rows of Torah scholars that sat before them.

"For he saw a resting-place that it was good" — this is the Torah, as it is stated: "For I give you good doctrine; forsake you not My Torah" (*Mishlei* 4:2).

"And the land (*ha-aretz*) that it was pleasant" — this is the Torah, "The measure thereof is longer than the earth (*mei-eretz*)" (*Iyov* 11:9).[[13]](#footnote-13)

"And he bowed his shoulder to bear” — the yoke of Torah.

"And became a servant under task-work" — these are the two hundred heads of the courts who were from the tribe of Yissakhar.

This is: "And of the children of Yissakhar, those that had understanding of the times" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 12:33).

What is "of the times"?

Rabbi Tanchuma said: For [understanding of[ the seasons.

Rabbi Yosei bar Kitzrei said: For intercalations (*ibburim*).[[14]](#footnote-14)

"The heads of them were two hundred" (ibid.).

That they harmonized the Halakha based on them, and he set the law for them as a law given to Moshe at Sinai.

And all this praise, from where did Yissakhar get it? From Zevulun who was occupied with his trading, and would support Yissakhar who studied Torah.

This is: "Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea" (*Bereishit* 49:13).

And when Moshe came to bless the tribes, he blessed Zevulun before blessing Yissakhar.

This is: "Rejoice, Zevulun, in going out" (*Devarim* 33:18).

Don't read it this way, but rather: Rejoice, Zevulun in your going out, from that Yissakhar is in your tent.

And some say: Yissakhar is in the tents of Zevulun.[[15]](#footnote-15) (*Bereishit Rabba*, MS Vienna 99, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 1262-1263)

This *derasha* expands what is brought in the *Sifrei*, interpreting each phrase in Yaakov's blessing separately in connection with Yissakhar's toiling in Torah. It is not clear whether these *derashot* are Amoraic, or whether they are earlier *derashot* later used by the compiler of *Bereishit Rabba*. Whereas the image of a donkey and the term "task-work" are related to the infinite investment that is required for the study and acquisition of Torah, the "rest" and the "good" and the "pleasant" are expounded in reference to the Torah's beauty and perfection.

The verse from *Divrei ha-Yamim* which is also brought by the *Sifrei* is expounded with respect to the spiritual authority of the tribe of Yissakhar among the people. The great novelty in this *derasha* is in the second part, where the partnership between Yissakhar and Zevulun is presented: "And all this praise, from where did Yissakhar get it? From Zevulun who was occupied with his trading, and would support Yissakhar who studied Torah." The *Sifrei* does not speak of a relationship between the two tribes, but rather describes the uniqueness and role of each tribe among the people of Israel. The Amoraic *derasha* joins the two tribes into a single unit, each part of which gives life to the other.

The end of the *derasha* focuses on the content of the partnership. The first reading relates to the merits of Zevulun, supporter of Yissakhar, whose tent is the tent of Torah. According to the second reading, "in your tents" are the tents of Zevulun in which Yissakhar sits. Yissakhar has no tent of his own in this world, and Zevulun provides all of his material needs in order that he be able to devote himself entirely to disseminating Torah among the people of Israel. This reading emphasizes the organic connection between them. The fact that the *derasha* adduces proof from Moshe's blessing, "Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out, and Yissakhar, in your tent," which is expounded by the *Sifrei* as referring to the unique connection between the two tribes, proves that this is a *derasha* introduced by the Amoraim.

**Harmony of Matter and Spirit**

What is the meaning of the partnership between Yissakhar and Zevulun? Is there significance to the fact that it is created by the Amoraim of Eretz Israel?

Over the course of this *shiur*, we have discussed Zevulun's unique role as a conduit for making acquaintance and establishing connections between the world at large and the people of Israel. In order to succeed at this, Zevulun must be securely tied to the holiness within. The partnership with Yissakhar provides the depth and breadth of a spiritual anchor for Zevulun’s material-economic activities with members of different cultures, and also makes him into an emissary, who goes out into the world in order to support his brother who sits in the *beit midrash*.

Later in the *midrash*, the blessing that Yaakov gives to Yissakhar is expounded also in reference to the territory he has to receive in Eretz Israel and the produce it will yield:

Another explanation. "Yissakhar is a large-boned donkey" — a wilderness in his land. Just as a donkey is low on this side and low on the other side and high in the middle, so (Yissakhar's territory has) a valley on this side and a valley on the other side and a mountain in the middle.

"Couching down between the sheep-folds" — these are the two valleys, the Iksal Valley and the Jezreel Valley…

"And he bowed his shoulder to bear" — the yoke of Eretz Israel.

"And became a servant under task-work" **—** Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman.

Rabbi Elazar said: All the tribes left remnants of the conquered nations, but the tribe of Yissakhar did not leave remnants of the conquered nations.

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman said: Even the tribe of Yissakhar left remnants of the conquered nations, but they paid levies.

Rabbi Assi said: If they paid levies, it is as if they were subjugated.

Another explanation: "Yissakhar is a large-boned donkey."

The fruits of Yissakhar were large, and the tribe of Zevulun would take of them and sail to sea.

And the nations of the world would see them and be astonished by them.

And (the people of) Israel would say to them: About these you are astonished?

Had you seen their owners occupy themselves in Torah study, you would rightly be astonished by them.

And many of them would come and convert.

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon said in the name of Rabbi Acha: "Yissakhar is a large-boned (*garem*)donkey" — Yissakhar is a donkey for converts (*gerim*). (*Bereishit Rabba*, MS Vienna 99, 11-12, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1263)

The second *derasha* focuses on the special connection of the tribe of Yissakhar to its territory, which finds expression in their settling the land without leaving pockets of Canaanite population (“they did not leave remnants of the conquered nations") and in their readiness to attach themselves strongly to the land even when it is difficult.

The end of the Amoraic *derasha* in *Bereishit Rabba* returns to the motifs of trade and conversion that we saw in the *Sifrei*, but in a different garb. It is not the expression of the Jewish religious world in its harmonious social order — that they eat as one — that stirs the nations, but rather the beauty of the fruit from the territory of Yissakhar.

The people of Israel have recognized and adopted one dimension of Yissakhar and Zevulun's partnership: Zevulun's activity on behalf of Yissakhar in this world, and Zevulun's meriting Yissakhar's part in the World to Come. Their partnership, however, is richer than that. According to the Midrash of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel, it allows the nations of the world to see people living in complete harmony of matter and spirit. They are captivated by the magic of heaven on earth, and convert to Judaism.

The Amoraim of Eretz Israel lived in the regions of Yissakhar and Zevulun — in Tzippori, in Beit She'arim, in Haifa and in Peki'in. Were those who bore the yoke of Torah in the Lower Galilee in the third and fourth centuries speaking about themselves? Were there among them also those who served in the role of Zevulun? Eretz Israel in their day was the home of many foreigners, and many Jews lived in mixed cities. It was no longer necessary to sail out to sea in order to acquaint the nations of the world with the Jewish people. Are the masters of the Midrash imparting additional layers of meaning to the living conditions of their audiences?

Yissakhar and Zevulun's partnership in the extended meaning given to it by the Amoraim of Eretz Israel is relevant for us as residents of Eretz Israel in our renewed Jewish state. May it be God's will that we merit broadening our vision in light of the world of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel in the Midrash.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Another Tannaitic source describes the understanding of the descendants of Yissakhar as a reward for the initiative taken by their tribal prince when the princes offer sacrifices in the wilderness. The tribe of Yissakhar is characterized there as a tribe of Torah scholars based on the exposition of different verses. See *Sifrei, Naso* 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Yehoshua* 19:10-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Rabbinic Hebrew, the root *tzadi-ayin-reish* bears the meaning of sorrow or effort. The word *nitzta'arnu* ("we troubled ourselves") here should be understood in the sense of effort, rather than sorrow. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The reference to Jerusalem in the *Sifrei* as a metropolis hosting vibrant Jewish life in many areas — religious, social and culinary — and the mention of the offering of sacrifices are liable to be understood as indicating that this *derasha* was formulated before the destruction of the Temple. It is interesting to note that what "grabs" the foreign visitors are the "folkloristic" traits of Jewish life — what is being eaten, how and why — as befits visitors in all places and at all times. However, the social unity revealed before their own eyes makes a great impression upon them — to the point of their conversion to Judaism. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The *Sifrei* continues here with stories about the Sages relating to treasures in the sea that are set aside as a reward for the righteous in the future. Here, too, these treasures emerge from the economic reality of this world: the contents of ships which sink and whose cargo is lost. Like Zevulun, who transfers material goods from place to place and from person to person, so too the sea constitutes a conduit, from time to time and from reality to reality. It should be noted that the term "in the future" (*le-atid la-vo*)in Rabbinic literature often refers to the messianic age and not to the World to Come. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare *Midrash Tannaim* to *Devarim* 33:18: "Another explanation: 'Rejoice, Zevulun’… when he goes out to war. This teaches that the tribe of Zevulun is always victorious and returns from battle with joy." War too involves an encounter and contention with other nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Kabbalistic literature, those who immerse themselves in Divine mysteries are known as *nunei de-yama*, "fish of the sea." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These two elements echo the actions of Leah that lead to the birth of these tribes: after securing the mandrakes, we are told "And Leah went out" (*Bereishit* 30:16), drawing him into her tent. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to the "other explanation" in the *Sifrei*, Yissakhar's encounter is with God in the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The *Yefat To'ar* and the *Mattenot Kehuna*, ad loc., explain"Govevta of Tzippori" not as a place name, but as a geographical feature in the Tzippori area; the first as ponds (*gevim*) of water, the second as the hills (*geva'ot*) of Tzippori. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This story finely illustrates that the *derashot* that appear in the Midrashic literature of Eretz Israel are *derashot* that were delivered before a congregation. For further discussion, see Yosef Heinemann, *Derashot Be-tzibur Bi-tkufat Ha-Talmud* (Jerusalem: 1982), pp. 7-28. It should be noted that in the parallel to this *derasha* in *Yerushalmi Sukka*, Chapter 5, the *derashot* are reversed: Rabbi Yochanan expounds that Yona comes from Zevulun, and Rabbi Levi expounds that he comes from Asher. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The *Mattenot Kehuna* and Maharzav, ad loc., see the verse brought in the *derasha* about the prophet Eliyahu going to the woman from Tzorfat as a reflection of a well-known ancient tradition that her son was the prophet Yona ben Amitai. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The root *nun-ayin-mem* is one of the roots that denote beauty in Scripture. Height is a hallmark of beauty in both the Bible and Rabbinic literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Theterm *ibburim* means intercalation. The phrase *"kerisin ve-ibburim*" is explained by the *Mattenot Kehuda* as "times and seasons." The term *kerisin* is challenging, but this is not forum to elaborate on it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The same is true with regard to the birth of Yissakhar. See *Bereishit Rabba*, 72, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)