**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT VAYECHI**

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Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of

Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**Yaakov's Blessings to His Sons**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

On the day of his death, Yaakov calls upon all of his sons to gather together so that he may tell them what will happen to them in the future.

And Yaakov called unto his sons, and said: “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days.” (*Bereishit* 49:1)

It is not clear why it is important that they should know this, and according to the Sages, the vision of the end is concealed from him:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: "And Yaakov called unto his sons, and said: ‘Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you [that which shall befall you in the end of days].’" Yaakov wished to reveal to his sons “the end of the days," whereupon the *Shekhina* departed from him. (*Pesachim* 56a)

In the end, Yaakov tells them other things. What is the nature of what he says to them, and why does he say these things to them? According to the simple understanding, he wishes to divide up the Land of Israel between his sons, and with his parables and riddles he establishes their respective tribal territories. We will consider some of them.

### Reuven

Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength; the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. (*Bereishit* 49:3)

Elsewhere, in a discussion concerning Yaakov's love for Yosef, we noted the similarity between this verse and that which is stated in the section dealing with inheritance, that a father is forbidden to deny the firstborn inheritance from his firstborn son born to a wife whom he hates. The words "the firstfruits of his strength" connect the section of the inheritance of a firstborn to Yaakov's words to Reuven:

But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the hated, by giving him a double portion of all that he has; for he is the firstfruits of his strength, the right of the firstborn is his. (*Devarim* 21:17)

The Torah's concern in the section dealing with the inheritance of a firstborn is that the father will say about a different son that he is his firstborn, because the son who claims to be his firstborn is actually not his son, but rather was born to his hated wife through an adulterous relationship with another man. Yaakov, however, admits that Reuven is his son and the firstfruits of his strength. It is because of Reuven’s sin with Bilha that he will not receive the inheritance of a firstborn, not because he is the son of the hated wife.

"The excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power" — the birthright should bestow greater dignity (the priesthood) and greater power (the monarchy), but these gifts will not be his. Thus, the verse records:

And the sons of Reuven, the firstborn of Yisrael, for he was the firstborn; but forasmuch as he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given unto the sons of Yosef the son of Yisrael, yet not so that he was to be reckoned in the genealogy as firstborn. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 5:1)

### Shimon and Levi

According to the simple understanding, Shimon and Levi are punished "for in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they houghed oxen" (*Bereishit* 49:6) — when they killed the people of Shechem. We dealt with this issue at length elsewhere. (According to Rashi, however, the second clause is an allusion to the plot against Yosef, Shimon and Levi being the chief architects of that plan.) Their punishment appears to be similar to that of Kayin, about whom it is stated: "When you till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto you her strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shall you be in the earth" (*Bereishit* 4:12). They too will not receive a tribal territory, and, according to the simple understanding, it seems that it is decreed that they will be wandering shepherds among the tribes of Israel, divided into families.

Is this what actually happens? Yaakov's words may be fulfilled with the tribe of Shimon, as Shimon takes part of the territory of Yehuda and a large part of the Negev, areas that are more appropriate for raising flocks than for growing agricultural products. Thus it is stated about the descendants of Shimon:

And they went to the entrance of Gedor, even unto the east side of the valley, to seek pasture for their flocks. And they found fat pasture and good, and the land was wide, and quiet, and peaceable; for they that dwelt there aforetime were of Cham.

And these written by name came in the days of Yechizkiyahu king of Yehuda, and smote their tents, and the Meunim that were found there, and destroyed them utterly, unto this day, and dwelt in their stead; because there was pasture there for their flocks. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 4:39-41)

However, for the descendants of Levi, Yaakov's curse turns into a blessing, as God becomes their inheritance. We learn from Levi that even one who is destined to become a shepherd can change himself into a man of Torah and holiness, for whom God is his inheritance. Something similar happens to Yaakov himself, who begins his journey as one who "dwells in tents" (*Bereishit* 25:27), which according to the plain sense of the text refers to a shepherd, but turns into a man for whom God is his inheritance. Something similar also happens to Moshe, who turns from a shepherd into a prophet of God; and the same is true of David, a shepherd who becomes the king of Israel.

### Yehuda

Yehuda's blessing is long and detailed. We will focus on several different points.

Yehuda, your brothers shall praise [**or** concede to] you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies. (*Bereishit* 49:8)

The brothers' confirmation of Yehuda's selection alludes to his leadership, as it reveals itself both in sin (the sale of Yosef) and in its repair (the struggle to secure Binyamin's freedom).

One of the most difficult of Israel's enemies, perhaps the most difficult of all, is Amalek. In addition to their attack on Israel at Refidim (*Shemot* 17), it is they who block the Mapilim*,* who want to go up from Kadesh Barnea to the Negev highlands (*Bamidbar* 14:45). According to *Chazal*, it is they who block, in the fortieth year of Israel's sojourning in the wilderness, the ascent by way of Arad to the Chevron Mountains at Chorma; they force Israel to embark on a long journey south and east, and to enter the land of Israel through the east bank of the Jordan.

After Israel conquers the land of Canaan and Yehuda settles in the Chevron Mountains, Yehuda can attack the Amalekite settlements in the Negev from an advantageous point, from the heights of the Chevron Mountains to the north. Indeed, David defeats them over and over again together with his victories over the rest of the desert marauders, until he conquers the Negev highlands from them. In other words, Israel does not succeed in its battle with the Amalekites when it comes against them from the southwest. However, when Yehuda attacks them from behind, from the northeast, he succeeds in defeating them. Perhaps, this is the meaning of: "Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies."

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The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to Shilo; and unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be. (*Bereishit* 49:10)

There are many interpretations of this difficult verse. We will mention only our own proposal: Yehuda's leadership over his brothers will find expression only until the *Shekhina* arrives at Shilo. Once it becomes permanently attached to God's Chosen House, the *Mishkan* in Shilo, God will rule as king over all of the tribes equally, showing no preference for Yehuda's leadership, as many prophets speak about that day in the future when God will rule as king, and there will be no need for a king of flesh and blood. It is Shilo that Yaakov sees as the end of days in his prophecy, and he assigns it to Efrayim, whom he selects among the sons of his chosen son Yosef. Yaakov does not see in his prophecy Jerusalem and the development of the monarchy of Israel in its wake. Perhaps this is the vision of the end that is concealed from him, alluded to at the beginning of this *shiur.* Therefore, he makes everything dependent upon Shilo.

As stated, history unfolds in a manner different from the partial end that is revealed to Yaakov. However, the order established by the Rambam for the monarchy in Israel is expressed in the words of Yaakov. First he says: "Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies," which, as we explained, refers to the war waged against Amalek; then he says: "The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda," referring to the appointment of a king; and last he talks of the Temple, which according to Yaakov will be in Shilo. This is the sequence described by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1):

Israel is commanded to fulfill three *mitzvot* upon entering the Land of Israel:

1. To choose a king, as it is stated (*Devarim* 17:15): "Appoint a king over yourselves."
2. To wipe out the descendants of Amalek, as is it stated (*Devarim* 25:19): "Erase the memory of Amalek."
3. To build God's Chosen House, as it is stated (*Devarim* 12:5): "Seek out His Presence and go there."

As stated, Yaakov chooses to give Shilo to Efrayim. Elsewhere, we have suggested that it is there that he has the dream of the ladder, and it is there that he vows to build the house of God. However, as we said, the vision of the end is concealed from him. Perhaps because of his excessive love, which to a certain degree spoils his judgment, God chooses Jerusalem, straddling the border of the territories of Yehuda to the south and Binyamin to the north. This reflects the covenant made between Yehuda and Binyamin when Yehuda fearlessly defends Binyamin against Yosef, agreeing to become a slave in his place. This is also a covenant between the tribes of Leia and the tribes of Rachel.

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His eyes shall be blue with wine, and his teeth white with milk. (*Bereishit* 49:12)

Apart from the colors of blue and white that are so dear to us, this blessing can be understood as describing the watershed line that runs the length of the Chevron hills. The land on the western side of that line is blessed with vineyards along the entire length of the territory of Yehuda. To the east of that line there is a small amount of rainfall, and until we reach the wilderness in the east, the land is full of wild bushes, making it suitable for the grazing of goats. Thus the eyes are blue (purple) from wine, and the teeth are white from milk.

The watershed line in the territory of Yehuda is also the place where the orphaned girl who tends the vineyards in *Shir Ha-shirim* encounters the shepherd, when she casts her eyes eastward to the elevated ridge, and sees him looking at her:

My mother's sons were incensed against me, they made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept. Tell me, O you whom my soul loves, where you feed, where you make your flock to rest at noon; for why should I be as one that veils herself beside the flocks of your companions? (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:6-7)

This encounter between the purple-blue in the vineyards of the orphaned keeper of the vineyards and the white milk of the shepherd's goats is the encounter between the people of Israel and their beloved, God. This is another direction of thought for the wonderful fusion of colors between the blue and the white in the *tzitzit*, and also in the Israeli flag.

### Yissakhar[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yissakhar is a large-boned ass, couching down between the fences (*mishpetayim*). 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* 49:14-15)

*Mishpetayim* are fences, like the fences of the vineyards. The ass's path passes between the vineyard fences, and the ass that is described here, "a large-boned ass," crouches down and blocks the path to the passersby. The ass described here is reminiscent of Bilam's she-ass, which stubbornly crouches down in the path of the vineyards, and even its master's rod cannot make it get up. The male ass is also a quiet, patient creature, but stubborn — and woe to him who angers it! Its bite and kick are severe and painful.

Yissakhar settles in the Jezreel Valley, which is sort of a wide "saddle" — a flat valley located between the Menasheh Mountains and the Gilboa Mountains to its south, and the mountains of the Lower Galilee to its north. The Jezreel Valley is a good, pleasant and fertile area, and its strategic importance on the West Bank of the Jordan is exceedingly great. Through it runs the most important crossroad, connecting the King's Highway which passed through the Gilead on the East Bank of the Jordan and connected Mesopotamia to the Sea of Suf, and the Coastal Highway, which connected the coastal cities to Egypt. These two north-south highways were connected by several east-west roads, the most important among them running through the Jezreel Valley.

For this reason, some of the most important wars in the biblical world are waged in this valley. *Tanakh* itself mentions, among others, the wars fought by Devora and Barak against King Yavin of Chatzor and his general Sisera and by Gidon against Midyan, which are waged in the Jezreel Valley; and also Shaul's last war against the Pelishtim.

Let us consider as an example the war waged by Devora and Barak. Barak mobilizes the tribes of the north, Naftali and Zevulun (*Shofetim* 4:10), but Yissakhar is already found in the valley, overrun by Sisera’s forces. When the war breaks out with the entry of Naftali and Zevulun into the fighting, Yissakhar rises up in its place, and decisively contributes to Israel's victory:

And the princes of Yissakhar were with Devora; as was Yissakhar, so was Barak; into the valley they rushed forth at his feet. (*Shofetim* 5:15)

Yissakhar's role, then, is to crouch like an ass on the national crossroad in the Jezreel Valley, and not allow strangers to pass through. Its land is good and pleasant, but at times Yissakhar suffers as a result and becomes overrun by foreign armies who wish to take control of this vital valley and national crossroad. However, his very presence keeps the valley in the hands of the people of Israel even when he is subjugated to foreign rulers.

### Dan

Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Yisrael. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path that bites the horse's heels, so that his rider falls backward. I wait for Your salvation, O Lord. (*Bereishit* 49:16-18)

Dan merits two territories. One, the first given to him, is in the plains of the land of the Pelishtim, what we call today Gush Dan; another, after Dan fails to take possession of the territory in the land of the Pelishtim, is in the northeast, near Tel Dan and Kibbutz Dan. It would appear that Yaakov speaks about the first territory, in Gush Dan, whereas Moshe, in his blessings, refers to the northern territory, in the Bashan:

And of Dan he said: Dan is a lion's whelp, that leaps forth from Bashan. (*Devarim* 33:22)

There is a striking difference between Yaakov and Moshe in relation to Dan, for Yaakov likens Dan to a serpent, whereas Moshe likens him to a lion's whelp.

Yaakov designates for Dan an important part of the plain of Peleshet, but with the means available to the people of Israel, how is Dan to take possession of his territory? For the Pelishtim have iron chariots that travel well along the plains, and the Israelites lack the necessary tools to deal with them. Even the tribe of Yehuda, the strongest of the tribes, does not deal well with the iron chariots of the Pelishtim, failing to conquer its part of the coastal plain:

And the Lord was with Yehuda; and he drove out the inhabitants of the hill-country; for he could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron. (*Shofetim* 1:19)

Nevertheless, Yehuda conquers the mountainous region, the Negev, and the Judean Desert, and he has a place in which to settle. On the other hand, the tribe of Dan, which receives only a portion of the coastal plain — where are they to settle?

And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the hill-country; for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley. But the Amorites were resolved to dwell in Har Cheres, in Ayalon, and in Sha’alvim. (*Shofetim* 1:34-35)

The people of Dan are pressed toward the mountains, but this is not their territory, and so they remain as refugees in Tzora and Eshtaol in the territory of Yehuda. This is what the verse says about Shimshon from the tribe of Dan:

And the spirit of the Lord began to move him in Machaneh Dan, between Tzora and Eshtaol. (*Shofetim* 13:25)

The people of Dan live in a temporary camp (*machaneh*) in the territory of Yehuda, or as we would call it, in a refugee camp.

It is further stated there:

In those days there was no king in Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in; for unto that day there had nothing been allotted unto them among the tribes of Israel for an inheritance. (*Shofetim* 18:1)

The path that Yaakov outlines for Dan in his territory involves acting like a serpent. A snake, which is usually a small and weak creature, can bite the heels of a horse, and thus cause its rider to fall backwards. Thus, Dan has a way to confront the horse-drawn chariots of the Pelishtim. He must show great courage, and despite the fact that he is weak, he must take the risk of being trampled, secretly and with cunning crawl toward his goal, find the horse's weak spot, and take it by surprise. This is the secret of guerilla warfare, by way of which the weak can overcome the strong. This is not an easy path, and as mentioned, it is fraught with danger, and requires great personal sacrifice. Yaakov concludes his blessing with a prayer: "I wait for Your salvation, O Lord."

Shimshon the Danite embodies this approach. The words "Dan shall judge his people" bring to mind what is stated in the song of *Ha'azinu*: "For the Lord shall judge His people, and repent Himself for His servants" (*Devarim* 32:26). There the reference is to God's revenge against the enemies of Israel. Shimshon goes out against the Pelishtim on a campaign of revenge. He takes revenge against Ashkelon for the revelation of the solution to the riddle on the part of his Timnite wife; he takes revenge by way of the three hundred foxes for his wife being given over to another man; and he takes revenge for her burning by smiting the Pelishtim hip and thigh. He concludes his vengeance campaign with revenge for the blinding of his two eyes by destroying the temple of Dagon in Aza. He acts as a daring, lone warrior.

Let us consider another warrior, not from the tribe of Dan, who still acts like a snake. Yehonatan, son of Shaul, acts in a similar way with his young man against a mighty camp of the Pelishtim with "thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude" (I *Shemuel* 13:5).Together with his young man, he penetrates the Pelishti camp, crawling secretly and with cunning like a serpent, suddenly charging at the first twenty soldiers that he encounters and overcoming them. What follows is panic in the Pelishti camp, with the soldiers killing each other, and the flight of the whole camp before Shaul's small army. Yehonatan conducts himself like a serpent, and with God's help, decisively defeats an army equipped with a great number of horses and chariots.

The people of Dan who migrated to the far north conduct themselves differently than does Shimshon. They raid the city of Layish (another word for lion), engaging in open, face-to-face combat, and emerge victorious. They leap like a lion, who is capable of lashing out at its adversaries with open force, rather than secretly and with cunning.

Gad, the firstborn son of Zilpa, receives blessings that parallel those received by Dan, the firstborn of Bilha. Yaakov blesses him, immediately after Dan: "But he shall troop upon their heel" (*Bereishit* 49:19), that is to say, like a snake that bites the heels of a horse. Moshe, on the other hand, blessed him: "He dwells as a lioness, and tears the arm, yea, the crown of the head" (*Devarim* 33:20), that is to say, like a lion, and like his brother Dan. We know only of Gad's territory on the East Bank of the Jordan, but perhaps Yaakov means to give him as well territory in the land of the Pelishtim; or perhaps in the north, in the shadow of the chariots of the king of Chatzor; or some similar place.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. The core of my explanation of the territory of Yissakhar I heard many years ago from my revered teacher, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)