

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

PARASHAT VAYECHI

Yaakov's Blessing

By Rabbi Dr. Tamir Granot

Introduction

At the center of this week's *parasha* we find the blessings that Yaakov bestows - first upon Ephraim and Menasheh, and then on the rest of his children, followed immediately by the description of Yaakov's death and burial.

We may view Yaakov's blessing as a sort of epilogue, in which he summarizes and also looks to the future of his children and the tribes that will descend from them.

The Torah refers to Yaakov's speeches here as "blessings": "This is what their father told them, and he blessed them – each according to his blessing, he blessed them," and they do indeed give the impression of being blessings. But the concept of "blessing" is itself somewhat opaque; the question is, what exactly is the status of Yaakov's blessings, and what was Yaakov's intention in blessing his children?

A blessing can be a wish or prayer. On the other hand, it may also be a sort of division of inheritance or roles. Another possibility is to perceive Yaakov's words here as a sort of prophecy or Divinely-inspired vision. Indeed, at the outset Yaakov says: "Gather yourselves and I shall tell you what will befall you at the end of days."

In this *shiur* I would like to examine some aspects of the content of Yaakov's blessings. Our review may then allow us to express an opinion as to the question of their status and intention.

Part 1

Yaakov's first blessings are to Ephraim and Menasheh. These are apparently meant to be regarded as part of the blessings to the tribes. It should be remembered that Yaakov later also blesses Yosef. The blessing to Ephraim and Menasheh here is not a replacement for, or at the

expense of, a blessing to their father. The crux of their blessing is meant, in today's terms, to "upgrade" their status to that of the tribes: "Ephraim and Menasheh shall be unto me like Reuven and Shimon." Here, Yosef's sons attain equal status to that of Yaakov's sons. As Yaakov qualifies, this status does not apply to Yosef's children that will be born later on: "Your descendants that shall be born of you after them, shall be yours; they shall be called after the name of their brothers in their inheritance." The *de-facto* significance of this decision by Yaakov is a double-portion in the inheritance for Yosef. This leads many commentators to conclude that Yosef receives here the inheritance of a first-born, since the law of the firstborn is that he receives a double inheritance: "To give him double of all that is in his possession, for he represents the beginning of his strength..." If this explanation is correct, then Yosef is in fact being indirectly "appointed" as firstborn by Yaakov. If Yosef is indeed chosen as the firstborn, we must inquire as to the status of the other brothers – including those should receive the birthright on the basis of the order of their birth and others who may be considered worthy of the birthright by virtue of their abilities.

We may also conclude from this excerpt that Yaakov relates, in his blessing, to the matter of inheritance, and the division of the inheritance.

Part 2

Let us now move on to the blessing to the tribes. We may point to a few different types of blessings, upon a first reading:

- (1) "Yaakov called to his children and said: Gather yourselves together that I may tell you what will befall you in the end of days.
- (2) Assemble yourselves and hear, sons of Yaakov; hear Israel, your father:
- (3) Reuven, you are my firstborn; my might and the beginning of my strength – great dignity and great power.
- (4) Unstable as water, you shall not excel, for you ascended upon your father's bed, then defiled it; he went up to my couch.
- (5) Shimon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are their swords.
- (6) Let my soul not enter their counsel; let my honor not join in their assembly. For in their anger they slaughtered a man, and willfully lamed an ox.
- (7) Cursed is their anger, for it is strong, and their fury – for it is fierce; I shall scatter them among Yaakov and disperse them throughout Israel.
- (8) Yehuda – it is you whom your brothers will praise; your hand shall be upon the neck of your enemies; your father's children shall bow down before you.
- (9) Yehuda is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you arise; he bent down, crouched like a lion, and as a lioness – who shall raise him up?
- (10) The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor a ruler from between his feet, until the coming of Shilo, and the peoples shall obey him.
- (11) Binding his foal to the vine and the foal of his ass to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine; his clothes in the blood of wine.

(12) His eyes are red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.

(13) Zevulun shall dwell at the sea shore; he shall be a haven for ships and his border shall be at Tzidon.

(14) Yissakhar is a strong ass, crouching between the sheepfolds.

(15) He saw that rest is good, and that the land was pleasant; he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant to tribute.

(16) Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel.

(17) Dan shall be a serpent on the road, an adder on the path, biting the horse's heels, that its rider may fall backwards.

(18) For Your salvation I wait, God.

(19) Gad shall be raided by marauders, but he shall overcome the last of them.

(20) Out of Asher his bread shall be fat, and he shall produce royal dainties.

(21) Naftali is a hind let loose, offering choice words.

(22) Yosef is a fruitful bough; a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches climb over the wall.

(23) The archers attacked him and shot at him and hated him.

(24) But his bow retained its strength, and the hands of his arms were made supple by the hands of the Mighty One of Yaakov – from there the shepherd, the stone of Israel.

(25) By the God of your father, Who will help you, and the Almighty, Who will bless you, with blessings of the heavens above and of the deeps crouching below; blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

(26) The blessings of your father have prevailed over the blessings of my ancestors, to the uttermost bounds of the everlasting hills; they shall be upon the head of Yosef and upon the crown of the head of him who was separated from his brothers.

(27) Binyamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and in the evening he shall divide the spoils."

The key to the highlighting of the blessings above is as follows:

Red: rejected tribes

Blue: chosen tribes

Yellow: material abundance

Green: military might

In the middle: "For Your salvation I wait, God"

The first tribes, in order of their birth, are not blessed, but rather, actually, reproached – even cursed. Therefore we may regard the first blessing as that bestowed upon Yehuda. If we place Yehuda on one side and Yosef on the other, both "chosen," according to their blessings, we see that the blessings are in fact arranged in chiasmic, pyramidal form. The essence of this structure may be summarized as follows:

A

B

C

D – pinnacle

C1

B1

A1

In this format, the "arms" of this unit are arranged facing each other in symmetrical form: outer framework reflecting outer framework; internal facing internal, etc. In the center we find the climax, the pinnacle. Yaakov's blessings, as we may see, are built around this structure:

Framework: the two chosen tribes – Yehuda and Yosef

Next layer inwards from the framework: blessings to the tribes that are promised material abundance – i.e., a blessed inheritance. These are Yissakhar and Zevulun, on one side, and Naftali and Asher on the other.

Further inward: blessings to the tribes that are promised military valor – Dan and Gad.

And in the middle: Yaakov's prayer for the deliverance of Israel and for God's salvation.

On the outskirts of this structure we find, as mentioned, the introduction – addressing the tribes that are rejected, and at the end Yaakov's words to Binyamin, who is also described as possessing military prowess, but is not part of the framework.

It seems that Binaymin's removal and exclusion from the complex pyramidal structure is of significance, for at least two possible reasons:

- The tribe of Binyamin, during the period of the Judges, was cast out by the tribes of Israel, and almost lost any hope of continuity (episode of the concubine in Giv'a). It is possible that Binyamin's removal from the structure of the blessings hints at his future removal from the nation of Israel.
- During a later period, Binyamin became absorbed or annexed into the Tribe of Yehuda, and its independent tribal status was no longer recognizable.

It is possibly for these two reasons that Binyamin's blessing is mentioned as an addendum to the main body of blessings rather than as part of them.

With regard to the reproached, disqualified tribes:

Reuven is Yaakov's biological firstborn son. His rejection for this status arises from his sin with Bilha. The next sons in line are Shimon and Levi, but they, too, are rejected – because of their sin involving Shekhem. This rejection is not presented by Yaakov only as punishment, but also as the result of their unsuitability for the leadership entailed by the birthright, as evidenced by their sin. Reuven is "great dignity and great power; unstable as water...." Due to this trait he is unworthy of leadership. Shimon and Levi have instruments of cruelty for swords; their anger is strong and their fury fierce; hence they, too, are unworthy. The obvious answer is to move on to Yehuda, and we shall expand on this below.

As we have demonstrated, there are tribes that are blessed with abundance in their inheritance, while others are blessed with military success. The blessings match what we know about the development and history of the tribes of Israel: Yissakhar, Zevulun, Naftali, and Asher received blessed portions in the Valley region, the Galilee, the coastal plain and the fertile valley of the North. Dan and Gad settled the border towns and were required to protect the borders of Israel. The future indeed bore out Yaakov's blessings.

Note also: the blessings are arranged in mirror form, emphasizing the parallels between them. Yissakhar and Zevulun, sons of Leah, are blessed with abundance and, correspondingly, so are Naftali and Asher – a son of Bilha and a son of Zilpa.

Gad, son of Zilpa, is blessed with military success, and so is Dan – son of Bilha. Thus, the blessings of material abundance and military power are divided equally between the sons of the maidservants, one each, and two correspondingly for each couple. The rest of the blessings of abundance are given to the two remaining sons of Leah. Here we would expect to find a symmetric balance with the sons of Rachel, but we know that Rachel has only two sons, and Binyamin is rejected (or at least left out). We do admittedly find a blessing of abundance being given to Yosef, who – as discussed – is blessed as two tribes, Ephraim and Menasheh, and he indeed receives two portions. The Blessing of abundance comes through prominently in the words, "blessings of the heavens above; blessings of the deep crouching below; blessings of the breasts and of the womb...."

Thus, the symmetrical chiasmic structure creates a parallel that is not only structural but also symbolizes the logic of the division of blessings, which are equally distributed among the tribes, the children of the matriarchs and the children of the maidservants. The reason for this division will be addressed below.

Finally, recognizing the structure of the blessings allows us to understand Yaakov's call/prayer. When we read the blessings in a continuous, linear way, the prayer, "For Your salvation I wait, God" follows immediately after the blessing to Dan, and it is somewhat difficult to understand its purpose. Many commentators have proposed that since Yaakov envisioned Dan engaged in war, he called for his salvation. This hypothesis may be correct, but we may add to it.

First of all, the prayer for salvation is located in between the two blessings dealing with war, and is linked to both – the blessing to Gad and the blessing to Dan. In addition, since this verse represents the center and pinnacle of the entire chapter, we may say that it belongs to the chapter as a whole and is directed towards the blessings of all the tribes. At the same time, by virtue of its central location, it creates the symmetry and parallel between the various blessings [1].

Part 3

Let us now move on to the most critical aspect of the blessings: the selection of leadership. What makes it so difficult to understand Yaakov's intentions in this regard is that it appears, in fact, that he chooses twice – i.e., he does not decide. Expressions of chosenness are found in the blessings of both Yehuda and Yosef:

Yehuda: "It is you whom your brothers shall praise," "Your father's children shall bow down before you," "The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor a lawmaker from between his feet"...

Yosef: "From the hand of the Mighty One of Yaakov, from there the shepherd, the stone of Israel," "The crown of the head of he who was separated from his brothers."

On the basis of the general pattern it seems that this represents a deliberate continuation of the idea we mentioned previously: Yaakov intends to scatter the centers of power. We shall return to this answer, but first let us examine some others.

We know that *Chazal* and our tradition speak of two ideal models of leadership: "Mashiach ben Yosef" and "Mashiach ben David." There are two models of leadership because Mashiach, after all, is a king – i.e., a leader – and there are two classic forms of such leadership. "Mashiach ben Yosef" deals with the material problems, while "Mashiach ben David" is responsible for spiritual leadership. In other words, *Chazal* noted that Yosef and Yehuda represent two forms of leadership, which will find expression in lofty manifestations of humanity. Is there a hint of this idea to be found in Yaakov's blessing?

Let us first examine the question on the basis of different representations in *Tanakh* itself.

The first source is from *Tehillim*, end of Chapter 78:

(54) "He brought them to His holy border; to this mountain, acquired by his right hand.

(55) He drove out nations before them and apportioned them an inheritance by line, and caused the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents.

(56) But they tested and rebelled against the Supreme God, and did not observe His statutes.

(57) They regressed and were unfaithful, like their fathers; they turned aside like a deceitful bow.

(58) They made Him angry with their high places, and made Him jealous with their idols.

(59) God heard and was very angry, and greatly abhorred Israel.

(60) So He abandoned the Tabernacle of Shilo, the tent where He dwelled among men.

(61) He gave His strength into captivity, and His glory into the enemy's hand.

(62) He delivered His people to the sword, and was very angry with His inheritance.

(63) His young men were consumed by fire; their virgins were not sung to.

- (64) His kohanim fell by the sword, and their widows did not weep.
 (65) Then God awoke as from sleep, as a mighty man shouting because of wine.
 (66) He smote His enemies backwards; he left them as an eternal reproach.
 (67) He abhorred the tent of Yosef, and did not choose the tribe of Ephraim.
 (68) He chose the tribe of Yehuda; the mountain of Tzion, which He loved.
 (69) And He built His Sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth which He established forever.
 (70) And He choose David, His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds.
 (71) From following the ewes, He brought him to shepherd Yaakov, His people, and Israel – His inheritance.
 (72) So he led them according to the integrity of his heart and led them by the wisdom of his hands."

This chapter is a sort of historical review with a religious-moral message; we shall focus here on its presentation of God's relationship with the chosen tribes. The psalmist draws a parallel between the process whereby Shilo was abandoned and Tzion chosen, and the process of rejecting Yosef and choosing Yehuda. The significance is far-reaching: just as the selection of Shilo was temporary and came to an end, so the choice of Yosef is temporary and transient. And just as we have here a clear historical trend moving from the earlier Shilo to the later Temple, so the selection of Yosef is chronologically earlier, and he is then rejected in the face of the selection of Yehuda. According to this insight offered by *Sefer Tehillim*, then, the choice is indeed double: there is a period in history where Yosef is chosen, and afterwards Yehuda is chosen.

The next source is from I *Divrei Ha-yamim*, Chapter 5:

- (1) "And the children of Reuven – the firstborn of Israel, for he was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father's couch his birthright was given to the children of Yosef, son of Israel, but the firstborn status was not attributed to him.
 (2) For Yehuda arose over his brothers, and the ruler came from him, although the birthright belonged to Yosef."

These verses give a precise clarification as to the division of roles and status:

Reuven is the firstborn according to natural right. By defiling his father's bed (exactly the same expression used by Yaakov) he causes his birthright to be given to the sons of Yosef. Here, too, there is an explicit reference to Yaakov's words: "Like Reuven and Shimon they shall be for me." Now the verse goes on to clarify the division of roles between Yehuda and Yosef. Yehuda "arises" or "prevails" over his brothers ("Your father's children shall bow down before you"), and "The ruler came from him" (strength and power of his reign) – but the birthright belongs to Yosef. We can easily understand this description on the basis of the Ibn Ezra, who explains that only Yosef was still worthy of the birthright, for only he was actually a "peter rechem" – the actual firstborn of a womb (Rachel's). Therefore the birthright is given to him when it is taken from Reuven. The formal expression of the birthright is a double portion – and indeed, Yosef receives a double portion instead of Reuven. The leadership, in the sense of power and kingship, is given to Yehuda. These verses in *Divrei Ha-yamim* display attention to the problem of

understanding Yaakov's choice, and they provide a precise solution: a distinction must be drawn between the birthright which carries rights (given to Yosef) and the legacy of leadership (given to Yehuda).

I will propose another idea, continuing in the direction of the verses from *Divrei Hayamim*, and based on a comparison between the blessing that Yaakov gives and the one that he received from Yitzchak. We have addressed in the past the three sets of blessings that Yaakov receives, and noted that only the second and the third were meant to express his chosenness over Eisav. Here there is a clear distinction between the intentions of Yitzchak and those of Yaakov. Yitzchak, in his second blessing, establishes that the "blessing of Avraham" – i.e., the Divine choice, with its obligations and privileges – will belong to Yaakov alone. Yaakov is chosen; Eisav is rejected. Yaakov, on the other hand, blesses his children with the desire that all will be part of the Divine choice, and the blessing is distributed between all of them. The strategy of dividing up the blessings among the tribes is meant to preserve all of them within the Divine blessing and promise. Each receives a part of it, according to what he deserves.

We cannot say whether Yaakov understood this from the start; it is certainly not clear that the brothers did. I believe that the great conflict between Yosef and his brothers arose from the fear that whoever would not be chosen, would be rejected. Perhaps Yaakov's preference and special love for Yosef was interpreted by the brothers as a threat to their very existence as part of the family or the nation chosen by God. They certainly did not know what we, with the benefit of hindsight, do: that the family as a whole became the founding structure for *Am Yisrael* – the nation of Israel – for all the children of Yaakov were chosen, but not all the children of Avraham or of Yitzchak, his forefathers.

If the brothers contemplated their family experience, they saw the fate of Yishmael and of Eisav, and feared that the same would happen to them. It seems that Yaakov understood the secret of the establishment of the nation, which is the sum total of all the various elements within the family with no rejection. Only his action for the sake of the unity of the family – as expressed also in the division of the blessing – facilitated the co-existence of all the tribes as part of the promise to *Am Yisrael*.

The most difficult question concerns the choice of leadership. The division of assets does not necessarily create the impression of preference or rejection. But leadership that is given to one of the children may be interpreted by the others as a sign of their rejection. How did Yaakov counteract this impression? What did he do so that his decision concerning the leadership would not cause problems in the family relations?

It seems that the answer can be found by looking at the blessings given to Yehuda and Yosef and comparing them to Yitzchak's blessings to Yaakov. As explained, we refer here only to the blessing given to Yaakov disguised as Eisav – a blessing meant to bestow the birthright, but not containing any decision as to the choice of leadership (as explained in the *shiur* on *Parashat Toldot*).

	Material abundance	Rulership
Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov	May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth; and much corn and wine.	May peoples serve you and nations bow down to you; may you rule over your brethren, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Blessing to Yehuda	Binding his foal to the vine and his ass's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes.	Yehuda – your brothers shall praise you, your hand shall be upon the neck of your enemies, your father's children will bow down to you; "the peoples shall obey him"
Blessing to Yosef	By the God of your father, Who will help you, and by the Almighty, Who will bless you – blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father prevail over the blessings of my ancestors...	

I believe that this parallel offers us a better understanding of Yaakov's intentions. Yaakov is conveying the blessing that was given to him, as the firstborn, to his children. This blessing, once again, does not reflect any desire to reject any of them. Yaakov is faced with two firstborn sons: the firstborn of Leah, and the firstborn of Rachel. Leah's firstborn is Yehuda – since Reuven, Shimon, and Levi are all disqualified; Rachel's firstborn is Yosef. The unity of the family depends on a division of the blessing such that all receive something and all are dependent upon each other. There is no advantage to having power to reign if there is no economic abundance, and the fruits of abundance cannot be enjoyed and utilized properly without a strong and wise leadership.

But, as we saw above, Yaakov does not make the division arbitrarily, just to maintain fairness and unity. The division of the blessing is directed towards the prominent traits and talents of the sons themselves. Each receives a blessing in the sphere in which he has proved himself to be particularly capable. Yehuda, who has proved his leadership with respect to the brothers and towards Yosef, in presenting them and standing before him, receives the gift of leadership. And indeed, the kingship of Israel is the eternal dynasty of David. Yosef, who has proved his abilities on the material level, in his economic organizational ability, receives the blessing of material abundance. Indeed, the portions of Ephraim and Menasheh are large and fertile, while the majority of the portion of Yehuda is desert, its principal yield being wine (the region of the mountains of Yehuda is full of vineyards.) And even when Yosef attained royalty, it was temporary and generally unsuccessful.

This leads us to the distinction drawn by *Chazal*, as borne out by later generations, between "Mashiach ben Yosef," whose responsibility extends to the material dimension, and "Mashiach ben David," whose kingdom is one of Divine justice – an eternal kingship.

In summary:

Clearly, Yaakov's blessing contains an element of prophecy – for the inheritances that the tribes received and their future ultimately bore out Yaakov's words – at least so far as we are familiar with the history. Indeed, at the "end of days" – in later times – the tribes of Israel experienced what Yaakov predicted or prophesied for them. But according to our interpretation, the immense importance of Yaakov's blessing lies in the distribution of the various elements of blessing among the tribes so as to preserve the unity of the family: to award each and every tribe some special quality, while preserving the balance between the different forces. Thanks to Yaakov's blessing, the tribes all remained "the tribes of God" – the nation of Israel.

Another stage in the creation of internal unity, from within which Israel became a nation, took place after Yaakov's death, when the brothers proved to each other that what would prevail among them would not be competition and rejection, but rather mutual concern and responsibility, in the tradition established by their father:

Chapter 50

(15) "Yosef's brothers saw that their father had died, and they said: What if Yosef will hate us and repay us for all the evil that we caused to him?"

(16) So they sent urgently to Yosef, saying: Your father commanded before his death, saying:

(17) So shall you say to Yosef: Please forgive the sin of your brothers, and their iniquity, for they caused you evil. And now, please forgive the sin of the servants of the God of your father. And Yosef wept when they spoke to him.

(18) Then his brothers even fell down before him, and said: Behold, we are your servants.

(19) And Yosef said to them: Do not fear, for am I in place of God?

(20) Although you planned evil against me, God planned it for the good – in order to bring it about today that many people would be saved alive.

(21) And now, do not fear: I shall sustain you and your children. And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."

Notes:

[1] This was pointed out to me some years ago by my friend and colleague, Rav Yoni Grossman.

Translated by Kaeren Fish