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בס"ד

## Parashat Vezot Habberakha Part II

### 1. Regarding Reuben, Simeon and Judah

Moses blesses all the tribes except Simeon. One wonders if this exclusion was a result of that tribe's deep involvement in the Baal-peor apostasy (Num. 25), a backsliding that occurred well into the fortieth year, a short time before Moses bestowed his blessings. Undoubtedly, the tribe had repented from its transgression, for it is inconceivable that G-d would have proceeded to lead the nation to the promised land with an idolatrous element in its midst. And the tribe had apparently received great retribution – its population in the fortieth-year census was more than sixty percent less than it had been in the second-year census, a far greater reduction than that of any other tribe.

But the Torah does not explicitly comment on the extent of Simeon's culpability nor does it address the issue of its retribution. (The 24,000 who died in the plague associated with the Baal-peor transgression are unidentified.) We surmise our information about the tribe's guilt both from the fact that it was a Simeonite prince who flaunted the Midianite princess in front of his brethren before entering the tent with her and from the tremendous population decline. We do not know how far that tribe's guilt went or what its retribution entailed. However, there are additional considerations.

The Sifre explains Simeon's omission by pointing out that "for the tribe of Simeon, according to their families, their inheritance was in the midst of the inheritance of the tribe of Judah" (Josh. 19:1). Indeed, many of Simeon's cities mentioned in Joshua 19:1-9 are also considered cities of Judah in Joshua 15 (vv. 20-32), a circumstance that highlights Simeon's great dependence on Judah from the time of the entry to the land. Simeon's precipitous decline to 22,200 in the fortieth-year census (from 59,300 in the second-year census), which rendered its population the lowest of the tribes by a great margin, may have weakened it to

the extent that it could no longer maintain its standing as an independent tribe.

In any event, when the northern tribes split from Rehoboam, only Benjamin is mentioned as remaining attached to Judah (1 Kings 12:21-23), despite Simeon's proximity. It appears that at some early point Simeon lost its national standing and was mostly absorbed by Judah. Since Moses' blessings were directed to the tribes as they were to be at a particular future time, perhaps at the historical juncture that he was then focused on Simeon did not qualify as a full-fledged tribe.

Jacob's deathbed statement concerning Simeon and Levi, "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (Gen. 49:7), comes to mind; these tribes were not to have independent land portions like the other tribes.

Moses' begins blessing the individual tribes with Reuben, possibly due to his firstborn status. But since Jacob had essentially cancelled the honorific dimension and tangible benefits of that status (Gen. 49:3-4), it appears more likely that Moses began with Reuben because the tribes, then located in south Transjordan, were essentially stationed in Reubenite territory. After Reuben, Moses follows the geographic configuration the tribes eventually settled in, going from south to north.

His opening words are, "Reuben should live and not die" (v. 6). This may be a prayer that such a fate as befell Simeon not befall that tribe. The clause that follows – וְיִהְיֶינָה מְסַפְּרֵי ("though few be his numbers" [NJPS]) – may be the backdrop to the prayer. However, it appears more likely that it expresses a prayer parallel to the first segment of the verse and means, "Its members should be of sufficient number," that is, its population should maintain the necessary minimum to retain tribal viability. Being the

southernmost tribe on the Jordan's eastern bank, Reuben's position was continually vulnerable, much more than most, if not all, of the other tribes. When the tribe's leaders brought up their desire to take their inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan the issue of security was not raised; they were confident and optimistic. As it turned out, Reuben persevered on its land until the beginning of the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom in the late eighth century (1 Chron. 5:6).

How the blessings, prayers and prophecies of the Torah relate to the nation's history and to the books of the Prophets and the Writings are subjects of great profundity; they are especially difficult given that prophetic writing involves a significant degree of metaphor.

Moses' blessings to Judah are completely focused on that tribe's involvement in military campaigns, an aspect of Jacob's blessing to that tribe (Gen. 49:8-12). However, there is no reference to kingship or material prosperity as in Jacob's blessings.

## 2. Levi's Blessing

The blessing to Levi is extensive and detailed (Deut. 33:8-11). Comprising fifty-two words (excluding the two introductory words of וּלְלֵוִי אָמַר ["and to Levi he said"]) it far surpasses the word count of any other tribe except for that of Joseph, which also comprises fifty-two words.

Moses recounts to G-d some of Levi's praiseworthy characteristics, pointing out that the tribe has proven itself worthy of being in charge of religious service. He begins with תְּמִיךָ וְאֲוִרְיָךְ לְאִישׁ סִסְיָךְ ("Your Thummim and Urim [oracular artifacts that assist in gaining insight into G-d's will] should be with Your *hasid* [the one who does *hesed* in accordance with Your will, that is, the one devoted to Your will]"). Since the high priesthood had already been granted to Aaron and his descendants, some have translated this to mean, "should be successfully maintained" against anticipated contention.

The following words in the verse present a difficulty: אֲשֶׁר נִסִּיתוּ בְּמִסָּה תְּרִיבָהוּ עַל-מֵי מְרִיבָה ("whom You tested at Massah and strove with at the waters of Meribah" [v. 8]). However, Massah and Meribah were places where Israel tested and strove with G-d (Exod. 17:2,

7; Num. 20:13; Deut. 6:16). This statement may indicate that even when the nation complained and challenged G-d, the Levites, or at least the Levite leaders, remained faithful. With poetic license (using phrases that contain assonant poetic play: נִסִּיתוּ and מִסָּה; תְּרִיבָהוּ and מְרִיבָה), Moses makes a reversal. He speaks of those instances of Israel's complaints that resulted from material deprivation as G-d testing man, which of course they surely also were, even if that dimension had not been explicitly brought out in the relevant narratives. This is similar to the psalmist quoting G-d, "I tested you at the waters of Meribah" (Ps. 81:8). Although G-d castigated Moses and Aaron at the waters of Meribah for a shortcoming they manifested there (Num. 20:12), that matter was independent of the basic test, which they had passed. The sin of Moses and Aaron is here placed in clearer perspective.

Moses relates how Levi's commitment to G-d has been absolute, overriding all other considerations, including those of the closest family relationships. Many take this as a reference to the aftermath of the golden calf apostasy, when the tribe of Levi distinguished itself by heeding Moses' call to put all guilty parties to death regardless of personal relationships (Exod. 32:26-29). Up to this point Levi's blessing is in the singular form. (One wonders if the singular is intended to allude to a later individual whose overarching spiritual eminence stands for the tribe. Rabbi S. D. Sassoon thought the singular pointed to the prophet Jeremiah, a matter we will touch upon shortly.)

At this point (Deut. 33:9) Moses turns to the plural: "For they have observed Your precepts, Your Covenant they have guarded." He then requests from G-d that "they should teach Your ordinances to Jacob and Your instruction to Israel," they should perform the incense service and offer the sacrifices. In the final verse he reverts back to the singular and asks, "Hashem bless his substance and favor his undertakings." The term פֶּעַל גָּדוֹ appears to be particularly directed toward spiritual endeavors and productivity as the verse continues: "Smite the loins of those that rise against him and of those that hate him, that they not rise again" (33:11). Moses knew very well the threat to the authority of spiritual leaders; he had to contend with Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and others. Unfortunately, biblical history is

replete with instances of rebellions. The post-Mosaic individual from the tribe of Levi to whom these phrases seem aptly to apply is the priestly prophet Jeremiah.

In Jacob's deathbed prophecies he saw the future of the chastised Simeon and Levi tribes as subdued and distanced from leadership, and denied them his personal blessings for at least certain of their endeavors (Gen. 49:5-7). Here, Levi is seen to have risen to the highest level of prominence. The net effect of the two prophecies strengthens the notion that the destiny of a tribe (or a nation or individual) is not finally determined in advance and the proper exercise of free will may overcome any possible decree.

### 3. Benjamin and Joseph

Benjamin is termed "beloved of Hashem" (33:12). One wonders if Jacob's love for him plays a role in this. Perhaps a manifestation of this love is the fact that when Israel insisted on establishing a kingship, G-d selected Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, to be the king. Moses foresees G-d protecting the tribe (as with a canopy from above) and dwelling between the tribe's "shoulders." The latter imagery probably refers to the location of a portion of Jerusalem, which contained at least part of the temple, in Benjamin's territory (just north of Judah).

The blessing to Joseph, directed to the two tribes Manasseh and Ephraim that stemmed from him, contains the most elaborate description of material bounty and military prowess of all the tribes. Joseph is seen as a major leader of the nation, a provider and protector, consistent with the denouement of the Genesis narratives concerning him and his brothers.

The blessing begins with "Blessed of Hashem is his land" (Deut. 33:13), and clause after clause details and enriches it. Irrigation will come "from the bounty of heaven, the dew, and from the depths that lie beneath." This leads to [blessed] "From the bounty of the crops brought forth by the sun" and of those nurtured by the moons (v. 14). Then come the resources derived from "the top of the ancient mountains and the bounty of the everlasting hills" (v. 15), probably referring to wood and mineral wealth as well as to fruitful trees. ("Ancient" implies well established and reliable.) An all-encompassing

statement concludes the first phase of the blessing, "From the bounty of the land and its fullness" (v. 16a), followed by וְרִצּוֹן שְׂכָנֵי קִנְיָהּ ("and with the favor of Him who dwells in the bush" [v. 16b]). The latter statement refers to the divine presence that dwelled at Mount Sinai (see our preceding study on this *parashah*), which Moses encountered at the burning bush on the occasion of his initial prophetic communication that launched him on his mission.

Why did Moses cite this particular description of G-d at this juncture, the only time G-d is so described in Tanakh? Perhaps it indicates that Moses was recalling his own selection and G-d's extensive involvement with him, cajoling and enticing him to accept the responsibility to lead Israel into a covenantal relationship with Him. Upon contemplating the future of Joseph, especially Ephraim (the more successful of the two Joseph tribes as foreseen by Jacob in his private blessing to Joseph), he recognized the enormous potential for proper leadership. (The Joseph narratives in Genesis bring this out clearly.) But a glimpse into Ephraim's future would reveal the tremendous problems that eventually beset that tribe. So perhaps Moses prayed that G-d would again be extensively involved to encourage that tribe to accept its responsibility to the covenant.

Moses continued with, "They should come to the head of Joseph," and, in the parallel clause, וּלְקִדְקֵד גְּזִיר אֶהְיֶינָּהּ. The latter may mean "upon the brow of the [one who wears the] crown from among his brothers" (based on a well-attested meaning of גְּזִיר [Lev. 8:9; 2 Sam. 1:10; 2 Kings 11:12]) or "to the one set apart [distinguished] from his brothers" (related to the root from which *nazir* derives). In Jacob's blessing to Joseph he utters virtually the identical statement: תִּהְיוּיֵן לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף ("They should be to the head of Joseph") followed by וּלְקִדְקֵד גְּזִיר אֶהְיֶינָּהּ. Jacob's blessing of Joseph contains other similarities to that of Moses, particularly the invocation of the blessings of heavens and the depths lying beneath. The similarities in Jacob's and Moses' blessings of Joseph – greater than is the case with any other brother – seems to indicate the constancy of that tribe's potential.

In Moses' final verse regarding Joseph he employs the metaphor of a firstling bull, perhaps alluding to Joseph's having received firstborn rights (see 1 Chron.

5:1-2) and proceeds to prophesy about that tribe's military successes.

#### 4. The Other Tribes

Moses joins Issachar and Zebulun in the formulation of their blessing, the only tribes so combined, reflecting the close bond between them. They are seen as being prosperous and invite עַמִּים (“peoples” or “tribes”) to the mountain presumably to celebrate with them when they “offer sacrifices of righteousness” for thanksgiving to G-d. Jacob had placed Zebulun on the Mediterranean and Moses alludes to such a location by stating, “For they shall imbibe the opulence of the sea and valuables concealed in sand” (Deut. 33:19). Some commentators assume the latter refers to the murex snails, the source of the *tekhelet* dye (royal blue or purple) that was highly prized by the nobility of the ancient Near East.

Gad's blessing begins with “Blessed be He who enlarges Gad,” the only one of the blessings that includes a blessing of G-d. Gad as well as Dan, who receives the blessing that follows, are pictured as warriors, each compared to a lion of one type or other.

Naphtali is “sated with favor and filled with Hashem's blessing.” His estate is described as יַם וְנָהָר וְיַרְשֶׁהָ (“the west [or the sea] and south he took possession of”). As explained by *Targum Onqelos* – in accordance with the tribe's land portion as delineated in Joshua 19:32-39 – it includes the western and southern shores of Lake Tiberias, known to be extremely fertile land with adequate rainfall and springs.

Asher is described as “most blessed of the sons.” Moses adds that he should be the “favored of the brothers and should dip his foot in oil.” The latter clause apparently refers to the fact that olives grew in Asher's territory in abundance. They also were known to be the choicest. The Ramban explains that “most blessed of the sons” should be translated “most blessed from the sons” and “favored of the brothers” because the olive oil provisions he provided to the rest of the tribes were so loved.

Asher was on the northern border and thus in special need of security from powerful potential foes. Accordingly, Moses prays that “your bolts should be

iron and bronze and you should maintain your might all your days.”

We commented on the epilogue in our previous study.

#### 5. Number Symbolism in *Parashat Vezot Habberakhah*

The following is an application to our *parashah* of a system of number symbolism discovered to be present in biblical texts by Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon. For a brief introduction to his work on this subject and a discussion with many examples, see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*. An aspect of the subject particularly relevant here but also attested throughout the Torah and certain other books of Tanakh is the special prominence and meaning attached to the numbers eight and thirteen (often appearing in tandem), as well as to the number seven, and their multiples. Briefly, seven seems to represent the old order, eight the covenant, and thirteen, recognition of the one G-d. Most of the following is taken from Ronald Benun's extensive research in applying the insights taught by Rabbi Sassoon.

1. There are eight mentions of G-d's Tetragrammaton name, Y-H-V-H, in the blessings pericope.
2. The prologue and epilogue, which comprise four verses each, provide the blessings with an outer framework of eight verses. (The first verse of the chapter [33:1] is a superscription and does not enter into this count.)
3. Excluding the superscription (v. 1), the eighth verse (v. 9) begins with word number eighty from the beginning while the eighth verse from the end (v. 22) concludes with word number eighty counting from the end.
4. The eighth verse from the very beginning begins the blessing of Levi, carrier of the covenant and has thirteen words, the only verse in the chapter with thirteen words. The eighth verse from the end has eight words.
5. Not counting superscriptions (including the introductions to the various interior sections), the sections of Levi, Joseph and the epilogue contain exactly fifty-two words each (13 x 4), the section of Judah contains thirteen words and that of Gad has twenty-six words. The superscription at the beginning of the chapter (until Moses' first spoken

word, which is the second word in the second verse) consists of thirteen words. The first seven verses – superscription, prologue and the blessings to Reuben and Judah – comprise seventy-eight words (13 x 6). Overlapping patterns are often manifest in biblical passages.

6. Within the blessings proper (beginning from וְיָזְכֵר v. 6), there are sixty-five words (13 x 5) that precede the first use of the בִּרְכֵם (“bless”) root (v. 11) and sixty-five words following the last use of the בִּרְכֵם root (v. 24), providing a symmetrical outer framework to that key word.
7. The blessings proper, excluding all superscriptions including interior ones, contain 210 words (80 + 130).
8. Excluding all superscriptions, the blessings of Leah’s sons consist of ninety-one words (13 x 7), while those of Rachel’s sons consist of sixty-four words (8 x 8).
9. An apparent anomaly: The Leah-Zilpah group consists of 131 words while the Rachel- Bilhah group consists of seventy-nine words. Does this striking divergence (131 and 79 rather than 130 and 80 but nevertheless totaling 210) imply some level of mutual dependency?
10. The blessings to Zebulun and Issachar – the only tribes to be combined – with their superscription, contain twenty-one words (13 + 8).
11. Joseph’s five-verse blessing begins in the thirteenth verse from the beginning and concludes in the thirteenth verse from the end (v. 17).
12. Excluding superscription, the two words שְׁכֵנֵי סֹדֵה – referring to G-d as He who dwells at the burning bush or at Sinai, the location where the covenant was contracted – are the two central words of the blessing to Joseph. Word number twenty-six from the beginning of that blessing proper is שְׁכֵנֵי and סֹדֵה is word number twenty-six from its end. Excluding the verse 1 superscription, these two words are also the two central words of the chapter, שְׁכֵנֵי being number 162 from the beginning and סֹדֵה number 162 from the end.

## 6. Overview of Deuteronomy

As we have seen, Deuteronomy possesses an extraordinarily high degree of internal unity. Moses’ valedictory address constitutes virtually the entire book. Through it, in his selection of topics and in their order, he leads the Israelites to a ratification of the

G-d-Israel covenant while adhering to the general principles of suzerain-vassal covenant format of the ancient Near East. This point may be illuminated by viewing a brief sequential outline of topic headings of Deuteronomy (including some subheadings) and comparing it with a scholarly summary of suzerain-vassal covenant format of the ancient Near East.

### A. Outline of Topics in Deuteronomy:

1. Brief Historical Account (1–3) – Prologue to covenant ratification
2. Priming for Covenant Ratification (4)
3. Review of Original Covenant Enactment and Decalogue (5)
4. Stipulations (6:1–26:15) – Law Compendium
  - a. *Misvot* (6:1–11:28) – Covenant concept; derivatives of the first and second commandments; digression to relevant discussions; preliminary call for reaffirmation in promised land (11:29-32)
  - b. *Huqim* (12:1–16:17) – Derivatives of commandments two through five: uprooting idolatry; sanctuary centralization; human dignity and dietary laws; festivals. Regulations regarding the four national leadership groups (16:18–18:22) introduce the following section
  - c. *Mishpatim* (19:1–25:16) – Interpersonal and “natural” law
  - d. Concluding precepts – (25:17– 26:15)
5. Articulation of Covenant Relationship (26:16-19; 27:9-10)
6. Future Completion of Covenant Reaffirmation (27) – Sacrifices with ceremonial meal; *arur* declarations (27)
7. Blessings and Curses (28)
8. Enactment of Covenant Ratification (29–30) National assembly; warning; elaboration of opportunity for repentance
9. Technical Details Attendant to Covenant Completion (31) – Confirmation of succeeding leader; writing the Torah; transmittal to priests and elders; providing for periodic public reading; designating witnesses; arranging for deposit of Torah in sanctuary
10. The Song (32) – Further warning and providing hope
11. Moses’ Blessings (33)
12. Conclusion of Historical Record; Moses’ passing away (32:48-52; 34)

## **B. Summary of Ancient Near East Suzerain-Vassal Covenant Format**

The main elements of Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties (14th–13th centuries B.C.E.) are succinctly described in the Harper’s Bible Dictionary (1985), p. 190:

...identification of the treaty-maker (i.e., the great king); a historical introduction (prior beneficial acts done by the great power on behalf of the smaller one); the stipulations (the primary demand

is for loyalty); a list of divine witnesses; and blessings and curses. The treaty was recited, a ceremonial meal eaten, and the treaty deposited at the feet of the idol.

The correspondence with the book of Deuteronomy is clearly there. (See our study, *The G-d-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format.*)

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