

Vayechi: Ma'ase Avot; Based on a shiur by Rav Yoseph Dov Soloveitchik, zt"l

- Based on a Shiur by the Rav.

The unity of the Twelve Sons although they were different individuals with different traits. The direct causal relationship between the history of our forefathers and our own history. The hard early history, and the difficulty of realizing our destiny.

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Yaakov blessed his 12 sons prior to his death. It was not ordinary blessing, but rather a blessing that projected and defined each of the brothers' roles in the great historic destiny of the Jewish people. Why did Hashem arrange KLAL YISRAEL as a nation consisting of twelve tribes? Does it not create a national tendency for strife and separateness as each tribe strives to become the most powerful, etc., as in TANACH where one tribe clashed with another?

The answer is that the unit of each individual tribe brought out the unique qualities and greatness that each of the original 12 members of Yaakov's family represent. Just as in an individual family the father and mother give out roles for their children as individuals, so too in the larger community and nation of the Jewish people each tribe represents a unique mission and role in the historical destiny of the Jewish people, which corresponds to its historical greatness....

These can be traced back to the personalities and history of each of the twelve sons. Maase avot siman lebanim. This is true on a simple level. Parents are role models for children, and children depend on the way parents bring them up, for children have a special perception of a parent's behavior. In this fashion our forefathers are role models for all our people.

On a deeper level there is a direct causal relationship between the forefathers and the history of the Jewish people. Hashem took the thousands of years of Jewish history and condensed it. Thus, we see a parallel between Abraham's struggle with four kings and the Jewish struggle for survival against the four global empires that have dominated world history. So, too, Jacob's exiles to Aram Naharayim and later to Egypt are symbolic of the two great exiles of the Jewish people into bondage.

We may ask why was this necessary? What is the significance and relevance for us? The answer is that it has had a profound influence on the destiny of the Jewish people. Hashem has not prepared an easy destiny for our people. We have had to withstand the challenges of assimilation, of persecution, mustering all our courage and faith. An outside objective observer might be astounded, wondering at our secret formula for survival. The answer to this historical riddle is the very words of our teachers, maase avot siman lebanim: actions of patriarch are signs for children. We can overcome because our great patriarchs have already set an example for us. We can overcome because they have already been there. Rav Soloveitchik pointed out: How did mothers and fathers who saw children snatched from them by Nazis, yimach shemam, manage,

in many cases to hold on to their faith and trust? And the answer is because Abraham already had set the precedent.

Consider the experience of the akeda. When we learn about Abraham in elementary schools, we don't teach an episode long past. He visits us in each and every classroom. "Make no mistake", Rav Soloveitchik explains, "the akeda was not a false alarm, but rather very real and tangible. It was not the physical death that was the sacrifice, but rather the emotional struggle to be able to bring the child on the alter knowing that there will be a tragic outcome". We are not required to be the creators of faith. We have only to follow the example of our forefathers. So Yaakov, in his final blessing, is reviewing to his sons their historic mission, their own actions to pave the way and show the example for the children. Perhaps this is how we can explain a strange episode, where Yoseph pretended not to know them and in fact accused them of being spies.

Meraglim atem. Why did he subject his brothers to this great ordeal in which they had to leave Shimon in captivity and then resort to all kinds of pressures on Yaakov to bring Binyamin to Yoseph, and then afterwards accused Binyamin of stealing the cup? Why was all this necessary? After all in final episode he did reveal his identity to them. The reason is because maase avot siman lebanim. Yoseph was telling his brothers they would soon be coming down to Egypt, but this visit was a precedent of all the future exiles that our people would have to suffer, and what is the character of all our stay in exile; is it not full of false accusations?

Meraglim atem!! Is it not what Pharaoh told his court about the Jews, Hava nitchakma.... Let us trap them into a slow process that would cost them dignity and eventually identity as Jewish people. The pattern has continued through history, over and over again.

VAYEHI: THE BRACHOT

YAAKOV in his appraisal of the 12 shevatim does not have praise for all of them. Reuven – pahaz kamayim... Yet when the brothers tried to kill Yoseph, Reuven intervened and tried to save him. He told the brothers to throw him into the pit, because he had intention to return and to save Yoseph. He left, and in the meantime the brothers sold him...

Rashi raises the question, where did Reuven go during this lapse of time? Apparently he was away. The Torah tells us that Reuven returned to the bor and to his shock and horror he found Joseph gone. Rashi quotes Hazal that Reuven was immersed besako vetaanito doing teshuva for his sin, having removed Yaakov's bed from Bilha's tent to the tent of mother Leah...

The question is: "Why now?" It is a critical time, with Joseph in danger. Why choose this moment for teshuva? Reuven knew the seriousness and danger! Why did he find it necessary just at this time to leave to fast and repent?

An answer from Rav Soloveitchik zt"l is that when Reuven observed what the brothers are planning to do to Yoseph, he realized that this conspiracy was the result of the total breakdown of the authority of their father Yaakov. So whatever justification they may have found to punish

Yoseph, nevertheless how could they act in this way when they saw how it would affect Yaakov? The brothers could surely have surmised the effect on Yaakov! They need only consider how close their father was to Yoseph! As we find subsequently, that he refused to be comforted. Nevertheless, the brothers seemed not to care. Surely if their father Yaakov had been respected by the brothers, they could not have acted in this way.

Reuven understood that this breakdown in authority could only happen with gradual erosion, which began when he Reuven, the oldest, looked up to by his brothers, committed an act of disrespect. Reuven now realizing to what his sin had led, removed himself to do teshuva. So great was his contrition that he could not bear to stay at the site where his brothers had acted this way to Yoseph. That is why Moshe Rabbenu in his final beracha declares, Yehi Reuven veal yamos, because Moshe Rabbenu realized that Reuven had achieved repentance and therefore deserved to be accepted in the heart of the Jewish people.

Yaakov then went on to rebuke Shimon and Levi. He declares, Shimon veLevi ahim.... referring to the act of vengeance on the people of Shechem. A literal translation would imply that he considers Shimon and Levi completely guilty.

Ramban, however, takes note of the two words ahim hem, and considers them words of praise. Yes, they were wrong. Revenge, retaliation upon a neighboring people, is wrong. Nevertheless, they showed brotherhood, not just brothers to each other, but to all the others! They were true brothers to Dina as well. True, their action was wrong, but they deserve praise for their spirit of loyalty...

It is interesting to note that while Yaakov lumped Shimon and Levi into one basket, rebuking both of them, Moshe Rabenu omits any direct reference to Shimon, but projects a glorious future and role for Levi. Yoru mishpatecha leYaakov, veTorascha leYisrael... What accounts for Moshe's departure from the path of Jacob in this matter?

Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky shelit"va answered that Shimon and Levi both displayed the character trait of kanaut, zealotry in their action towards Shechem. Zealotry displays an intolerance of evil. And zealotry displays an impatience to allow time to take its normal time in judicial action to correct the evil. It is the taking of the law in one's hands that was the essence of zealotry.

Does the Torah approve this? The answer is that it depends on the particular situation and how it is exercised. We find that Pinchas reacted with zealotry and was rewarded with the covenant of peace. Many miracles occurred during his great act of courage when he killed Zimri. The law restricts the zealot as to what he is permitted to do and how he should carry out his act. It is only permitted when normal judicial judgment cannot be carried out, only when the actual crime is being committed, and only if the intentions are pure and totally sincere. So the trait of zealousness has to be carefully channeled, limited, and controlled. There is to be no permanent zealot. It is a trait only for a momentary situation of crisis where there is no other alternative.

Shimon and Levi both displayed zealotry with Shechem. Yaakov rebuked them both. There would be reprisals, there is a tarnished image, there is a hilul Hashem...

Levi channeled this towards service of God, resisted egl worship, faithfully complied with Moshe's command to kill even their own brethren who were guilty in the service of the Golden calf. Thus, Pinchas of Shevet Levi, rises in a moment of crisis to challenge the person of Zimri, leader of Shevet Shimon, and slays him.

What did Pinchas return to? – The covenant of peace. Torah, praise of God, worship, ki sifse kohen yishmeru daas... What is the symbolic mission of Aharon? Ohev shalom verodef shalom.

Shimon allowed his zealotness to exceed its limit and became involved in creating the spirit of dissention instead of peace and harmony, manifested by the leadership of Zimri, who took his entire shevet to rebel against the leadership of Moshe Rabbenu. Thus, Moshe Rabbenu distinguishes between Levi and Shimon. Levi is praised, Shimon left out and omitted from the praise of Moshe Rabbenu.

Submitted by Nisson Shulman