

Parashat Vayechi 5777, 2017:

Birkat Ya'akov and Kiddush Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Birkat Ya'akov, the Blessing of Jacob, is the most celebrated narrative of our *parasha*. It contains Jacob's hope-filled and prophetically inspired blessing to ten of his sons. In stark contrast, Simeon and Levi receive one of the greatest admonishments in the entire Torah:

Simeon and Levi are brothers; stolen instruments are their weapons. Let my soul not enter their counsel; my honor, you shall not join their assembly, for in their wrath they killed a man, and with their will they hamstrung a bull. Cursed be their wrath for it is mighty, and their anger because it is harsh. I will separate them throughout Jacob, and I will scatter them throughout Israel. (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:5-7, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

There are many exegetical challenges in our passage. The first *pasuk* (verse), in particular, is quite difficult to understand. This is the case, since a straightforward reading of the phrase, "Simeon and Levi are brothers," suggests that it is superfluous, for after all, the Torah has already taught us regarding Leah:

... she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, "Since the L-rd has heard that I am hated, He gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, for I have borne him three sons; therefore, He [Hashem via an angel] named him Levi." (*Sefer Bereishit* 29:33-34)

Clearly, then, "Simeon and Levi are brothers" cannot be understood in its simple sense; both classic and modern *meforshim* (commentators) have, therefore, grappled with this problem.

Rashi (1040-1105) suggests: “[They were] of one [accord in their] plot against Shechem and against Joseph. [Therefore, the Torah states:] ‘And they said one man to his brother ... So now, let us go forth and kill him [Joseph].’” (37:19-20) Rabbi Isaac Karo (1458-1535), the uncle and rebbe of Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488-1575, *Shulchan Aruch*), focuses upon the juxtaposition of our expression to the phrase “stolen instruments are their weapons,” and interprets “Simeon and Levi are brothers” as referring to their consistent actions as comrades in arms, rather than as a reference to their familial relationship. (*Toldot Yitzchak, Sefer Bereishit* 49:5-7)

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, offers one of the most extended treatments of “Simeon and Levi are brothers” and in so doing, underscores the rationale as to why Jacob declared, “Cursed be their wrath for it is mighty, and their anger because it is harsh.”

And in my estimation, the proper explanation of the statement, “Simeon and Levi are brothers,” is that they were thoroughly brothers in the sense that they emulated one another and acted in filial fashion toward each other in both their strategic planning and actions.

At this juncture, the Ramban begins his analysis of Jacob’s highly critical perception of Simeon and Levi’s behavior:

Moreover, I have already explained (34:13) that Jacob was furious with Simeon and Levi when they killed the men of the city [Shechem] because they acted with gratuitous violence. This was the case, since the men of Shechem [except for Shechem, himself,] did not sin against the brothers in any manner – instead, they entered into a covenant of peace with them and were willingly circumcised. As such, they performed an act of *teshuvah* (repentance) and thereby returned to Hashem. As a result, the men of Shechem became members of the House of Abraham, and were included in those about whom the Torah states, “the souls that they [Abraham and Sarah] had made in Haran.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 12:5)

The Ramban now suggests an additional, and in some ways, more holistic reason as to why Jacob maintained his furious stance with Simeon and Levi:

Another reason why Jacob was incensed was in order to ensure that the people of his time would not think that the matter [of Shechem] was a result of his advice. [If this had been their perception,] there would have been a profanation of the Divine name (*chilul Hashem*) – i.e. if a prophet such as he would have advised his sons to act as brigands and demonstrate this degree of violence. This, then, is precisely the reason why Jacob avowed, “let my soul not enter their counsel” - it was his declaration that he was not part of their [Simeon and Levi’s] plan which resulted in the treacherous mistreatment of them [the men of Shechem]... (Translations, underlining and brackets my own)

The Ramban’s focus upon the avoidance of *chilul Hashem* as one of the driving factors underscoring Jacob’s wrath against Simeon and Levi is congruent with a crucial passage found in Maimonides’ (Rambam, 1135-1204) *Mishneh Torah*:

In addition, there are deeds which are also included in [the category of] the desecration of [G-d's] name, if performed by a person of great Torah stature who is renowned for his piety - i.e., deeds which, although they are not transgressions, [will cause] people to speak disparagingly of him. This also constitutes the desecration of [G-d's] name... Everything depends on the stature of the sage. [The extent to which] he must be careful with himself and go beyond the measure of the law [depends on the level of his Torah stature.] (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, V:11, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, underlining my own)

When viewed in tandem, the analyses of the Rambam and the Ramban enable us to understand Jacob’s fury and contempt for Simeon and Levi’s violent behavior. Jacob, like his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, was a consummate knight of faith. As such, he passionately sought to guard Hashem’s honor and glory, and strongly opposed anyone, including his own children, who could potentially defame the Almighty’s name in this world. Therefore, he roundly censured Simeon and Levi’s actions in Shechem in his final verbal will and testament.

With Hashem’s help, may we, like *Ya’akov Avinu* (our father Jacob), reject every manner of *chilul Hashem*. Moreover, as the Rambam writes, may we be counted among those “...who refrain from committing a sin or perform a *mitzvah* for no ulterior motive, neither out of fear or

dread, nor to seek honor, but for the sake of the Creator, blessed be He.” (V:10) In this way, may we may sanctify His great and holy name. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther*, may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.