

HEARING THE CALL

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Parshas Vayechi

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By Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

Prior to Yaakov's demise he summoned his sons to him to offer each a personal message. For most of his sons the message was a blessing, a focus on the unique strengths and positive attributes each son had utilized to grow spiritually, and should continue to exploit after the Patriarch's death. The notable exception to this structure was the message Yaakov left with his sons Shimon and Levi, "Shimon and Levi are comrades, their weaponry is a stolen craft. Into their conspiracy, may my soul not enter! With their congregation, do not join, O my honor!" (Beraishis/Genesis 49:5-7)

By calling them "comrades" Yaakov indicated that neither one of them was more of an instigator or follower than the other. It is, therefore, peculiar that the results of the rebuke which they both received equally were completely different for each of them. Levi became the progenitor of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam, our greatest leaders. His descendants stood up for the will of G-d following the Sin of the Golden Calf and earned the right to represent the entire nation serving G-d in the Bais Hamikdash.

Shimon's progeny, however, were not nearly as admirable. His most famous descendant was Zimri ben Sallu who caused 24,000 of his fellow tribesmen to sin with Midianite women and die in a plague (which was stopped by Pinchas, a descendant of Levi).

Rabbi Shimon Schwab (1) explains that the radical differences in their descendants are rooted in the way Shimon and Levi reacted to Yaakov's rebuke. Levi used the rebuke to spark a deeper level of repentance. He did not merely regret his previous misdeeds; he took several positive steps to change and improve. Thus, his descendants who followed suit became our greatest leaders.

Greatness of character is not exclusively the result of natural abilities and ideal circumstances. Rather, it is significantly the result of harkening the wake-up calls - from our mentors as well as the ones Heaven sent - and capitalizing on the opportunities that present themselves.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) 1908-1995; student of the great Mirrer Yeshiva and Rabbi of congregations in pre-war Germany and Baltimore, he is renowned for his leadership of the German-Jewish community in Washington Heights, Manhattan from 1958 through the end of the 20th century

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