

TORAH TZIVVAH LANU MOSHEH

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

This shiur, in honor of "Hatimat haTorah", is dedicated to my mother, Mrs. Miriam Wise, who celebrated her 90th birthday this past Pesach and is still going strong in her study of T'nakh. She has always been an ardent supporter of Torah study and of the Hebrew language. "Pihah Pat'chah b'Hokhmah v'Torah Hessed 'al L'shonah"; her mouth is filled with wisdom and the Torah of kindness is always on her lips.

May haKadosh Barukh Hu bless her with many long and happy years of learning - and teaching!

I. MOSHEH AND YAAKOV - PARALLEL B'RAKHOT?

We are accustomed to looking at Mosheh's blessing at the end of Sefer D'varim (Ch. 33) - just before his death - as a parallel to the blessing given to the tribes (brothers) by father Ya'akov on his deathbed (B'reshet 49). Just as Ya'akov "blessed" each of his sons (although some of them seem more disenfranchised than empowered by his words), so Mosheh blesses each of the tribes - followed by a general B'rakhah for the nation.

Let's take a look at the opening verses of the text:

- 1) This is the blessing with which Mosheh, the man of God (*Ish ha'Elohim*), blessed the B'nei Yisra'el before his death.
- 2) He said: "Hashem came from Sinai, He shone upon them from Se'ir, He appeared from Mount Par'an and approached from Riv'vot-Kodesh - lightning flashing at them from His right.
- 3) Lover, indeed, of the people, Your hallowed ones are all in Your hand, they followed in Your steps, accepting Your pronouncements.
- 4) Mosheh commanded us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Ya'akov.
- 5) Then He became King in Yeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Yisra'el together.

6) May Re'uven live and not die, though his numbers are few."

S'TUMAH (a scribal break in the text)

7) And this he said of Yehudah: "Hear, Hashem, the voice of Yehudah and restore him to his people. Make his hands strong for him, help him against his enemies."

(any translation of this type of Shirah will raise more problems than it solves; the above was taken from NJPS)

As is usually the case with such lofty Shirah (poetry), there are many possible translations; the "first model" presented above reflects, to a great degree, the thrust of most translations (hence, quotation marks and capitalizations, indicating a reference to God are based upon this understanding). Following this model, all of the words (beginning with the quote marks in v. 2) were spoken by Mosheh and, up until v. 5, comprise a sort of introduction to the detailed B'rakhot given to the individual tribes.

II

ANALYZING THE TEXT:

VV. 1-7

This "conventional" understanding raises some serious textual questions: [instead of listing them outright, the first seven verses will be re-quoted here, with the questions interspersed at the relevant place]

1) This is the blessing with which Mosheh, the man of God (*Ish ha'Elohim*), blessed the B'nei Yisra'el before his death.

Q1: We already know that Mosheh is about to die - why the emphasis *lif'nei moto* (before his death)?

Q2: If this is a blessing of "the B'nei Yisra'el", why are (most of) the tribes mentioned individually, with their own unique characteristics/trades/geographical settings explicated?

2) He said:

"Hashem came from Sinai, He shone upon them from Se'ir, He appeared from Mount Par'an and approached from Riv'vot-Kodesh - lightning flashing at them from His right.

Q3: The "Ta'amei haMikra" (traditional punctuation markings, known as "trope" signs) indicate that "Hashem" stands alone as a phrase and is not a piece with the phrase that follows; who (or Who) is the subject of this verse?

3) Lover, indeed, of the people, Your hallowed ones are all in Your hand, they followed in Your steps,

accepting Your pronouncements.

Q4: The translation here is truly confounding. The Hebrew of "Your hallowed are all in Your hand" is *kol k'doshav b'yadekha* - a quick switch of persons, literally translated as "All of his hallowed ones are in your hands" (I've deliberately left out the capitals here, as each pronoun can be read either way). Whose holy ones are mentioned and in whose hands are they? We would assume that God is the object of both (His holy ones and His hands) - but then why does the grammar switch from 3rd person to 2nd person within one word?

4) Mosheh commanded us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Ya'akov.

Q5: If Mosheh is the speaker - then how can he say this? Questions of humility aside (remember, Mosheh was the humblest man on the face of the earth - see Bamidbar 12) the phrase just doesn't make sense coming from his mouth. How can he say that Mosheh (himself) commanded "us"?

5) Then He became King in Yeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Yisra'el together.

Q6: Who is the king here? We assume, again, that Mosheh is speaking and that God is the King in question; but why is He only King "when the heads of the people assembled..."? In addition, the Midrash (Sh'mot Rabbah 2:6, 48:3) infers from this verse that Mosheh had the status of "Melekh" (king); such that it was willing to entertain the possibility that Mosheh is the subject of this verse. How could Mosheh be calling himself king?

6) May Re'uven live and not die, though his numbers are few."

Q7: This is not a very hearty endorsement of the Re'uvinites! If this verse is to be understood as Mosheh's B'rakhah for this tribe, one would have hoped for something a bit more enthusiastic. (more below the scribal break) In addition, why doesn't Re'uven's "B'rakhah" open with the "Vayomar" or "v'liR'uven amar" as do all of the others?

S'TUMAH (a scribal break in the text)

Q8: We understand the "Parashah break" before Yehudah; one appears before the unique section for each tribe (either a P'tuchah or S'tumah) - but why is there none before Re'uven's "B'rakhah"? Why is the "Re'uven-verse" attached to the introductory verses?

7) And this he said of Yehudah: "Hear, Hashem, the voice of Yehudah and restore him to his people. Make his hands strong for him, help him against his enemies."

Q9: Why does Yehudah's "B'rakhah" begin with "v'Zot liY'hudah" (evoking the opening word of our Parashah)?

Q10: Where is Shim'on? He isn't mentioned once, even though he is the second son of Ya'akov.

III BIRKAT MOSHEH - WHY?

In order to understand the nature of these opening verses and their function, we have to ask a broader question relating to Birkat Mosheh. What was the purpose of this blessing? Although [conventionally] interpersonal B'rakhot, beginning with the one legislated in the Torah (Birkat Kohanim - see Bamidbar 6) are "good wishes" (blessings of protection, prosperity, peace etc.), in the same spirit as those given by God to the B'nei Yisra'el (e.g. Vayyikra 26, D'varim 28), this is not generally the case with interpersonal B'rakhot we find in the narrative portions of Torah. When Yitzchak gave his blessings to Esav and Ya'akov (B'resheet 27), they were not merely conferrals of spiritual or material wealth, they were, rather, apportionments of particular legacies to be carried by that son - the sword, the power etc.

This is exactly the nature of Ya'akov's deathbed "blessing" - even a cursory look at B'resheet 49 reveals anything but "simple good wishes"; it includes detailed roles for each of the sons (Yehudah - royalty; Yoseph - financial leadership etc.). Some of the sons are elevated (Yehudah, Yoseph) while others are clearly "demoted" (Re'uven, Shim'on and Levi).

That being the case, it is hard to understand Birkat Mosheh as being a "parallel" of Birkat Ya'akov - for what could Mosheh do to alter the assignments given out by grandfather Ya'akov?

IV S'FORNO'S APPROACH:

T'FILLAH AND B'RAKHAH

Rabbenu Ovadiah S'forno, in various comments throughout Chapter 33, suggests a different understanding of the goal - and therefore, the structure - of Birkat Mosheh.

[Some of the presentation below is, I hope, a fair representation of the S'forno's approach here; admittedly, much of it exists between the lines of his comments. The curious reader is encouraged to look up the original - found in most traditional "Mikra'ot G'dolot" editions - and compare].

Beginning with the problem of the "trope" on God's Name (v. 2), S'forno understands that the entire section dealing with the individual tribes (and the preface to it) - vv. 2-24 - comprise a T'fillah, wherein Mosheh is beseeching God to bless the people. The text of that blessing is found in vv. 25 - 29:

25) Your bars are iron and bronze; and as your days, so is your strength.

26) There is none like God, O Yeshurun, riding through the heavens to help you, majestic through the skies.

27) The ancient God is a refuge, a support are the arms everlasting; he drove out the enemy before you, by His command: "Destroy"!

28) So Yisra'el lives in safety, untroubled is Ya'akov's abode in a land of grain and wine, where the heavens drop down dew.

29) Happy are you, O Yisra'el! Who is like you, a people delivered by Hashem, the Shield of your help, and the Sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come cringing before you, and you shall tread on their backs.

(again, based on NJPS; the translations vary as widely as do the commentaries here).

From the tone and focus of these "blessing-verses", we can adduce that the purpose of Birkat Mosheh was not a "general blessing" of the people, rather a charge to them regarding the upcoming and anticipated conquest of K'na'an. This helps us resolve another question: Mosheh was not assigning roles to the various tribes (already done by Ya'akov); rather, he was blessing them (=giving them strength and, perhaps, instruction) regarding

their upcoming battle. This answers our first question above:

Mosheh's death is highlighted as the event immediately following this blessing because it has everything to do with his death. Remember that the original Divine plan was for Mosheh to take the people out of Egypt, stop at Sinai to worship God (Sh'mot 3:12 - referring to both Mattan Torah and the construction of the Mishkan, as per the Sefer haHinukh) and then march directly into Eretz Yisra'el - under the leadership of Mosheh. Mosheh's death on the "other side" of the Jordan necessitated his blessing them - in lieu of leading them - into battle.

We can now look back at the first verse with (hopefully) a bit more insight:

1) This is the blessing with which Mosheh, *Ish ha'Elohim*, blessed the B'nei Yisra'el before his death.

The blessing didn't just "take place" before his death; it was his imminent demise that necessitated this particular B'rakhah.

V

WHY MENTION THE TRIBES AT ALL?

If, as S'forno suggests, the actual text of this blessing only begins on v. 25, what are we to make of the nearly 20 verses which focus on one or the other tribes? Why mention them at all?

Before proceeding, we must clarify a point regarding the (usually) dative "lamed" prefix. Although any noun preceded by a "lamed" usually becomes translated as "to X" (as in "l'Mosheh" - to Mosheh), that is not always the case. Sometimes the "lamed" prefix means "about", as in *V'amar Par'o liV'nei Yisra'el* (Sh'mot 14:3 - "and Par'o said, regarding the B'nei Yisra'el").

That is how S'forno understands the "lamed" which prefaces each tribe's name in its respective section (e.g. "v'liZ'vulun Amar..." - and regarding Z'vulun, he said..."; see vv. 8, 12, 13, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24).

In other words, Mosheh is not speaking TO the tribes, blessing them with strength (Yehudah), good land (Yoseph), a close with relationship with God (Binyamin) etc.; rather, he is speaking these words (most likely, in the presence of at least the heads of these tribes if not the entire nation) to God ABOUT them.

Why would he speak about them before invoking God's blessing over the people as a whole?

We might posit that the mention of the tribes serves as justification/merit for the blessing. In other words, his prayer to God is "look at how wonderful Your B'nei Yehudah are, see how committed Your Levi'im are etc.; are they not worthy of Your blessing?"

This answer would only suffice (and explain the omission of a tribe who (evidently) has nothing remarkable and unique to recommend them - Shim'on) if all of the tribes mentioned were "praised" in their respective sections.

This is not the case for every tribe. In the mention of Yehudah, for instance, the theme is more of a plea than a mention of merit:

"Hear, Hashem, the voice of Yehudah and restore him to his people. Make his hands strong for him, help him against his enemies."

We have to propose an alternate suggestion. Perhaps the mention of the tribes as a form of T'fillah is associated with the B'rakhah - not as justification for its invocation, rather as a particular detail relating to the general B'rakhah.

Keep in mind that the theme of the B'rakhah is the successful conquest of the Land; hence, it would stand to reason that those tribes who were destined to play uniquely dangerous roles in that conquest (and its aftermath - settlement) should be the objects of Mosheh's T'fillah in advance of his B'rakhah.

This "group" of tribes is, simply put, those who would form the backbone of national leadership.

Who were the "leaders", from a perspective of tribal roles?

Yehudah, as we know from Ya'akov's blessing/assignment, were to be the political and military rulers. Levi, as we have seen since the events surrounding the golden calf, were given the mantle of religious and educational leadership. Yoseph, as can be seen from the inclusion of his two sons among the tribes as regards inheritance, was to be the "minister of finance".

This explanation will not suffice by itself; however, if we combine the two, we can see that every tribe mentioned was either praised for one of its wonderful traits (thus serving as justification/merit for the blessing) or was one of the leadership tribes towards whom a special T'fillah is most

appropriate in this context.

As we look through the verses of "apparent tribal blessings" (vv. 7-24 - we will leave v. 6 until later), we can see that each of the tribes mentioned fits into one of our two explanations:

Yehudah (v. 7) - political/military leadership

Levi (vv. 8 - 11) - religious leadership (and praise)

Binyamin (v. 12) - praise for their close relationship with God (*Y'did Hashem* - a beloved or friend of God)

Yoseph (vv. 13- 17) - financial (and military) leadership

Z'vulun/Yissachar (v. 18-19) - praise for their partnership

Gad (vv. 20-21) - praise for their military might and for Mosheh's burial place within their borders

Dan (v. 22) - praise for their military might; this may also be a plea for protection when they go to war (see Rashi)

Naphtali (v. 23) - praise for their satisfaction with their lot (see Ramban)

Asher (v. 24) - praise for their warm acceptance on the part of their fellows (see Ramban)

SUMMARY

We have (hopefully) successfully responded to several of our questions:

(We answered the first question above)

Since the mention of the tribes is not part of the blessing per se, rather it serves one of two functions, we can answer our second question. We understand that the mention of certain geographical settings, tribal characteristics etc. are mentioned in order to properly "set up" the blessing of the people.

We also understand why Shim'on was left out; the tribe did not fit either of these categories. With this, we have responded to our final question.

The bulk of our questions will only be answered once we reexamine the introductory section - vv. 1-6.

VI TWO ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING THE OPENING VERSES

There are two basic assumptions upon which the conventional reading of this section rests - both of which can easily be challenged.

ASSUMPTION #1:

MOSHEH WAS DIRECTING THE ADDRESS TO THE B'NEI YISRA'EL

The first assumption is that the address was directed to the B'nei Yisra'el. This is difficult, as we saw, because of the "trope" marking on God's Name in v. 2, indicating that Mosheh was addressing God in T'fillah, as S'forno suggests.

We can quickly resolve the third and fourth questions (regarding the "trope" markings and the confusing grammar of *kol k'doshav b'yadekha*) with our understanding that Mosheh is addressing God, not the B'nei Yisra'el, in these first few verses. Note the "revised" translation, based on this understanding:

2) He said: "Hashem, he [B'nei Yisra'el] came from Sinai, shining from Se'ir, appearing from Mount Par'an and approaching from Riv'vot-Kodesh - a fiery-law at his right hand.

3) Lover, indeed, of the people, his hallowed ones are all in Your hand, they followed in Your steps, being elevated when they would say..."

Note that Mosheh is addressing God and praising the B'nei Yisra'el. They indeed came from Sinai, shone at Se'ir (where they accepted God's command to circumnavigate Esav/Edom and not engage them in war), appeared at Par'an (from where they sent the scouts) and approached from Riv'vot Kodesh (perhaps referring to some of the locations where they encamped, all known as Kadesh) - all the while carrying the "fiery law" (Torah) in their right hand (the Mishkan).

In verse 3, Mosheh continues his prayer with a slight variation on the theme: Even though You, God, love all nations, all of their holy ones (of the B'nei Yisra'el) are in Your hand, they have followed Your footsteps (compare Yirmiyah 2:2) and are elevated when they say (regarding Your pronouncements)...

ASSUMPTION #2:

MOSHEH IS DELIVERING A "MONOLOGUE"

The second assumption is that the entire blessing/T'fillah (with the exception of those phrases which belong to the narrative, such as v. 1 and the first word of v. 2) was said by Mosheh. This led to our difficulty with vv. 4-5, where Mosheh seems to be referring to himself - and then crowning himself as king!

This is not the only valid way to understand the text. The final word of v. 3 - *miDab'rotekha* - might be understood as a "leading" word, connected with the next verses. In other words, it may be understood that Mosheh was saying: "they are elevated when they say...(v. 4)". This is how S'forno understands the structure of these verses.

Following this thinking, we may posit that Mosheh was not declaring what the people say; rather, he

was invoking them to actually say it. To wit, the "blessing scene" was not enacted as a declaration on the part of Mosheh, rather it was performed as an antiphonal (call-and-response) process. This would not be difficult to fathom, considering that the one "blessing" procedure which Mosheh commanded the generation (D'varim 27) involved a call and response on the part of the Levi'im and the people. (See also D'varim 32:3 and BT B'rakhot 45a).

If so, we can now read the "script" as follows:

Mosheh: "Lover, indeed, of the people, his hallowed ones are all in Your hand, they followed in Your steps, being elevated when they would say..."

(*miDab'rotekha* is the B'nei Yisra'el's "cue")

B'nei Yisra'el: "Mosheh commanded us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Ya'akov. Then he became king in Yeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Yisra'el together."

The B'nei Yisra'el are responding to Mosheh's call by declaring their allegiance to God, to their teacher Mosheh and to the Torah which he commanded/taught them.

They then continue by declaring that Mosheh became king (hence the Midrashic inferences) in Yeshurun (Yisra'el) when the heads of the people assembled - an allusion to Sinai. It was at Sinai, when Mosheh assembled the people together and led them towards God and the Revelation, that he became their king.

By revamping our understanding of "who said what" in these verses, we can now respond to the fifth and sixth questions:

There is no lack of humility on Mosheh's part here, nor is there a confusing statement - because this verse (*Torah Tzivvah Lanu Mosheh* - v. 4) is being said by the people in response to Mosheh's invoking them to do so.

In addition, there is no lack of humility by stating that Mosheh is the king (v. 5) - since Mosheh is not the one making that statement!

VII RE'UVEN B'KHOR YISRA'EL & B'NI B'KHORI YISRA'EL

The one "piece of the pie" left is our problem with v. 6 (and, as a result, some problems with v. 7). Why is Re'uven's "blessing" so "lukewarm" (at best)? And why is it not marked off as a separate Parashah, or introduced with *Amar*?

If we look at the structure of the opening Parashah, in light of our new understanding, we can see

that the "Re'uven verse" is not a statement made by Mosheh - rather it is the continuation of the "response" of the B'nei Yisra'el.

The people had a concern regarding the tribe of Re'uven which was quite understandable. Re'uven was the "B'khor" of Ya'akov, his firstborn (see B'resheet 49:3) - yet he lost that standing due to his own failing (see Divrei haYamim I 5:1). The B'nei Yisra'el were legitimately concerned that, just as the B'khor of Ya'akov fell out of favor, so too, the nation - the "B'khor of God" (see Sh'mot 422), could fall out of favor. Therefore, when they sense that Mosheh was about to bless them (as did Ya'akov), they made their own plea that Re'uven not be utterly cut off and disenfranchised.

We can now revisit our seventh and eighth questions and respond.

We understand why Re'uven's "blessing" seems so uninspiring; it is not a blessing, as much as a plea that Re'uven not be totally cut off. We also understand why there is no "Amar" in front of it - nor a Parashah break - because these are not Mosheh's words, rather they belong to the B'nei Yisra'el.

And, with this, we can easily explain the *V'zot* which introduces the "Yehudah-verse" (v. 7); since Mosheh is now resuming his part of the T'fillah/blessing (and "correcting" a misunderstanding on the part of the people), the Torah reconnects us with the first verse - and Mosheh's blessing, by using the same word *V'zot* to introduce the resumption of Mosheh's part here.

SUMMARY (II)

By utilizing S'forno's novel approach to the significance of the tribes here - as an introduction to the "real" blessing, we were able to solve a few of the "milder" problems in the introductory verses.

By reconsidering the setting and style of these opening verses and by reorienting ourselves from seeing them as declaration to understanding them as antiphonal reading, we were able to solve most of the "weightier" problems in our text.

By noting the "identification" of the B'nei Yisra'el with the tribe of Re'uven, we were able to explain the unusual nuances of v. 6 - and the emphasized resumption in v. 7.

HAZAK HAZAK V'NIT'HAZEK

Hag Sameach v'Shabbat Shalom

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