

# SHIMON AND LEVI, BROTHERS OF DINAH

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

I

## "CURSED BE THEIR WRATH"

Chapter 34 of Sefer B'resheet records what is undoubtedly one of the most violent and morally troubling chapters in Biblical history. Here is a brief recap of the events which transpired in Sh'khem:

The family of Ya'akov enters the city of Sh'khem and Dinah, the one sister among eleven brothers, is forcibly taken by Sh'khem, the prince of the city-state after which he is named. Sh'khem rapes her and, through the august agency of his father, appeals to her brothers to allow her to become his proper wife. The brothers speak *\*b'Mirmah\** (deceitfully? cunningly?) with Sh'khem and Hamor, his father, and convince them that the only way for Dinah to marry Sh'khem is if the prince and all of his townsfolk become circumcised. The townsfolk are convinced to undergo this painful operation - evidently motivated by economic gain (vv. 21-24). On the third day, with all the males in pain, Shim'on and Levi kill all of the males in town, after which the brothers pillage the town and take their sister back to safety. Ya'akov chastises them for their actions, which they defend on grounds of concern for their sister's honor.

As mentioned, this narrative is troubling on many levels. To paraphrase a contemporary writer, whereas Ya'akov's children had a golden opportunity to begin to fulfill their mission of teaching the world "the way of Hashem, to do justice and judgment;" (B'resheet 18:19), they squandered this chance and sullied their reputation in the eyes of the neighboring peoples by acting both deceitfully and violently, destroying an entire city in response to a crime committed by one citizen - albeit the prince. Avraham's protests of "will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (ibid. v. 23) seem to have been inverted by his elect progeny. In addition, if we look further into the Torah, we see that rape of an unmarried woman is not considered a capital crime - rather it is a case of criminal assault (along with a fine, represented here by the word *\*Mohar\**). How could Shim'on and Levi act in this manner?

Conventional understanding holds that Ya'akov's chastisement was directed against all of their actions - the deceit, the polis-cide and the pillage of the town. We are even more confident that Ya'akov was violently opposed to their behavior when we read of his deathbed charge, given to them nearly fifty years later in Egypt:

Shim'on and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are their swords. O my soul, do not come into their council; to their assembly, let my honor not be united; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their wanton will they lamed an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Ya'akov, and scatter them in Yisra'el. (B'resheet 49:5-7)

If we look into the analyses of the Rishonim, we will find that a much more complex picture unfolds before us; indeed, a careful read of both texts (Chapters 34 and 49) provides us with ample reason to reexamine our assessment of the behavior of Shim'on and Levi in Sh'khem. Due to space limitations, we will limit our reassessment of "the tragedy in Sh'khem" to information which can be inferred from the text itself. Interested readers are encouraged to look at the comments of the Rishonim through Ch. 34 (notably the Ramban at 34:13; note his critique of Rambam's explanation).

## II

"HAKH'ZONAH...?"

There are several indications that Ya'akov was not opposed - in principle - to the decision (and its implementation) taken by Shim'on and Levi. In addition, we have several textual indications that the Torah itself gives their approach the stamp of approval.

First of all, let's look at Ya'akov's deathbed charge to these two brothers:

"... for in their anger they slew a man, and in their wanton will they lamed an ox..."

Although there are opinions in the Midrash which interpret this statement as a reference to Sh'khem, simple "P'shat" does not support this read. How could Ya'akov be referring to the death of dozens (or hundreds) of people as "they slew a man"? In addition, what is the reference to an "ox" here?

There is one statement in the Midrash which addresses this problem - but the solution offered there is hardly a critique of the brothers' behavior:

"Did they only slay one man? Doesn't Scripture state: 'they slew all the males'? Rather, they were only considered by haKadosh Barukh Hu as one person." (B'resheet Rabbah 99:6) In other words, if this is a reference to the slaying of the entire male population of Sh'khem, it isn't as grievous as all that, as their lives weren't worth much in the eyes of God (see the additional prooftexts brought in that selection).

Again, the straightforward reading is a reference to the killing of one man and an ox. We will soon discover who these might be.

"...Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel..."

Note that Ya'akov does not curse their actions - rather, he curses their anger (or so it seems - but see the first comment of Hizkuni to 49:7.). If he were morally opposed to their behavior in Sh'khem,

doesn't the actual slaying and pillage pale in significance next to their anger? Why mention that here?

[There is one other problem here, one which is beyond the scope of this shiur. Subsequent to Ya'akov's deathbed charge to his sons, the Torah states:

"All these are the twelve tribes of Israel; and this is it what their father spoke to them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them." (49:28) How can we understand Ya'akov's words to Shim'on and Levi - along with his harsh words for Re'uven - as part of a "blessing"? Perhaps we will take this up when we get to Parashat VaY'chi.]

Indeed, one comment in the Midrash Rabbah contrasts the violent act which earned them this curse (?) with their valor in Sh'khem!:

"...[Ya'akov] began calling out 'Shim'on and Levi are brothers...' you acted like brothers to Dinah, as it says: 'two of the sons of Jacob, Shim'on and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took each man his sword..' but you did not act like brothers to Yoseph when you sold him." (B. Rabbah 99:7 - this Midrash can be associated with the comment in Midrash Rabbati of R. Moshe haDarshan, to wit: the 'each man to his brother' mentioned in 37:19 at the sale of Yoseph refers to Shim'on and Levi; not coincidentally, Yoseph's abduction and sale took place in the Sh'khem region.)

Indeed, many Mefarshim maintain that the entire deathbed-charge of Ya'akov to Shim'on and Levi is only a reference to their role in the sale of Yoseph - who is also known as an "ox" (see D'varim 33:17).

BACK TO CHAPTER 34:

Now, let's look at Ya'akov's words when he confronted the brothers in the immediate aftermath of the events in Sh'khem:

And Ya'akov said to Shim'on and Levi, You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house. (v. 30)

Is there moral outrage here? Is there a challenge to their religious sensitivities? Ya'akov's response seems to be disapproval of their strategies, to wit: "As a result of your actions, I will now have problems with the locals. We will now be attacked by the surrounding K'na'ani and P'rizzi peoples."

Furthermore, the Torah seems to lend support to the brother's actions throughout the narrative, as follows:

Twice within the description of the brothers' interaction with the people of Sh'khem, the phrase \*asher timei/tim'u et Dinah ahotam\* is added to the objects of the verse. In verse 13:

And the sons of Ya'akov answered Sh'khem and Hamor his father deceitfully, and said, (\*asher timei et Dinah ahotam\* who had defiled Dinah their sister);

In verse 27:

The sons of Ya'akov came upon the slain, and plundered the city (\*asher tim'u et Dinah ahotam\*).

Why is the Torah twice repeating something which we already know?

In the second instance, we could argue that the text is anticipating a severe criticism of the brothers' behavior (addressed by nearly all Mefarshim): If Sh'khem was guilty for the rape of Dinah, why did all of the townsfolk have to die? By equating their culpability (\*asher tim'u\* - in the plural - v. 27) with his own (\*asher timei\* - in the singular - v. 13), we get one of two pictures of the participation of the citizens of Sh'khem in this heinous crime:

a) Either they all participated physically in the defilement of Dinah, either by a S'dom-like orgy or else by abetting the criminal prince, (see the comments of R. Hayyim Paltiel on v. 31);

b) Since they had the wherewithal to censure and/or punish him for his behavior - and failed to do so - it is considered their crime as well. (This seems to be the assumption underlying Rambam's approach, cited above). This seems to be borne out by the record of the plea of Sh'khem to his townspeople to accept the conditions of the sons of Ya'akov:

And Hamor and Sh'khem his son came to the gate of their city, and talked with the men of their city, saying, These men are peaceable with us; therefore let them live in the land, and trade in it; for the land, behold, is large enough for them; let us take their daughters to us for wives, and let us give them our daughters. Only thus will the men consent to live with us, to be one people; if every male among us is circumcised, as they are circumcised. Shall not their cattle and their wealth and every beast of theirs be ours? only let us consent to them, and they will live with us. And to Hamor and to Sh'khem his son listened all who went out from the gate of his city; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city. (vv. 20-24)

If Sh'khem was truly an oligarch, would he need the people's consent - and would he have to appeal to their mercenary sensibilities - to forge this agreement? (see the insightful read of Rashi on this point in the Mishnat haLevi, p 307).

Besides these two (seemingly superfluous) pejorative references to the citizens of Sh'khem, note how the dialogue between Ya'akov and his sons is presented in the Torah:

And Ya'akov said to Shim'on and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house."

And they said, "\*\*hakh'zonah ya'aseh et achoteinu?" ("Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?" - vv. 30-31)

The Torah gives the brothers the "last word" in their dispute with father Ya'akov. Furthermore, this "last word" is so terse and direct that it seems to leave Ya'akov "speechless" - indication that their

argument held sway. The Torah seems to be giving approval to their actions - an observation strengthened by comparing the gist of Ya'akov's opposition with the "facts on the ground" in the subsequent narrative:

Compare:

"You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house." (a pragmatic concern that the violent vengeance wreaked by the brothers will lead to a lynching of Ya'akov's family)

With:

And they journeyed; and the terror of God was upon the cities that were around them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Ya'akov. (35:5 - only 5 verses after the dispute).

The Torah is emphatically assuaging Ya'akov's fears - the local people did not rise up in anger against his family as a result of their actions in Sh'khem; rather, they stood in fear of them and did not even pursue them.

There is one more piece of support for the contention that Ya'akov was not morally opposed to the action taken by the brothers. Just before the deathbed "blessing" given in Egypt to the brothers, Ya'akov accepts both of Yoseph's sons as members of his own family (earning them each a full portion in the Land) and then declares to Yoseph:

"And I have given to you one \*Sh'khem\* above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow." (48:22)

This \*Sh'khem\* could mean portion, as Onkelos renders it. Alternatively, it may be a reference to the city of Sh'khem itself (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc.). If so, Ya'akov is not only accepting of the brothers' actions, he even "adopts" their war as his own. There are several Midrashim which indicate that Ya'akov himself participated in the war (see e.g. B. Rabbah 80:13). That would certainly take us very far from our original assumptions as presented at the beginning of this shiur.

I am indebted to Binyamin Malek for his fine research which was utilized extensively in preparing the foregoing sections of the shiur - his article can be found in Megadim 23:9-29]

III

\*AKHARTEM OTI\*

If Ya'akov was not morally opposed to the slaying and pillage of the citizens of Sh'khem, catalyzed by an act of deception, we are left with three questions:

a) Why didn't he himself lead the charge against the citizenry? As we pointed out in the recent two-

part shiur, Ya'akov was a master at knowing how to utilize deception when appropriate.

b) After the fact, why did he register opposition to their behavior - even if it was later dispelled?

c) Once we have put Ya'akov and his sons on the same side of this moral dilemma, how can we make sense of their conclusion? Why were Sh'khem, his father and all of the townsfolk liable for murder and pillage? (While we are assessing their behavior, it is instructive to reflect on the size of the population of Sh'khem. See Avrabanel's comments here - he notes that the population was small. Documents uncovered at recent digs at Tel al-Amarna suggest that there were under one hundred citizens - male and female- all told - \*vakma"l\*)

A crime for which the Torah mandates payment to the young woman's family should certainly not warrant this sort of treatment? In addition, as noted above, such behavior would seem to regress the cause of the Avrahamic tradition. How do we justify their behavior?

#### IV

#### YA'AKOV AND HIS SONS

We will first address the dispute between Ya'akov and his sons regarding the proper tactics in response to the rape of Dinah; resolving this question will provide us an approach to the other two.

Although a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this shiur, we have to approach any differences in attitude which surface between Ya'akov and his children against the backdrop of their substantially different backgrounds and experiential matrices.

Whereas Ya'akov grew up knowing grandfather Avraham (Yitzchak was 60 when Ya'akov was born; hence Avraham was 160 at the time; therefore Ya'akov was 15 when Avraham died) and, of course, knowing father Yitzhak (according to Seder Olam, Ya'akov was 63 when Yitzhak sent him away to Lavan). Conversely, Ya'akov's sons never knew great-grandfather Avraham - nor did they even meet Yitzhak until he was quite aged and, from all textual and Midrashic evidence, quite incapacitated (see, inter alia, Rashi at B'resheet 28:10).

Ya'akov grew up in Eretz K'na'an, but had to spend the last twenty years (at least - see BT Megillah 17a) "on the run". In addition, before his fleeing to Aram, his life seems to be one of isolation, save his relationship with mother Rivkah. Our story (Ch. 34) rests somewhere along the continuum from \*Galut\* (exile) to \*Shivah\* (return) - and therein lies the rub. Ya'akov's children, although born and raised in what proved to be an environment of enmity, had a full family support system, as well as being brought up as the children of a wealthy and powerful member of Lavan's household.

In sum, Ya'akov was an Eretz-Yisra'eli who had been in \*galut\* for a substantial time - and who had a clear and direct connection with Avraham and Yitzhak. His children were born in Aram and had never tasted the pain and loneliness of exile - and they had had no direct encounters with the first or

second generations of the clan.

As such, Ya'akov's response to the rape of Dinah has to be understood against this background. Both grandfather Avraham and father Yitzhak had experienced similar difficulties with local chieftains: Sarah was taken to Pharaoh's palace (Ch. 12) and to Avimelekh's rooms (Ch. 20). Rivkah, although never taken from Yitzhak, was presented as his sister out of the same fear of the local ruler and the general lack of morality (Ch. 26).

Here, Ya'akov, who had not yet encountered such a threat, was faced with a hauntingly familiar scenario - with some significant differences. Dinah was not falsely presented as a sister - she really was an unmarried sister! She was taken to the house of the local ruler, just as in the cases with Avraham - but here's where the similarities end. Whereas God had intervened on behalf of Avraham both in Egypt and in G'rar, the rape of Dinah was carried out with bestial success.

Ya'akov had every reason to consider as follows:

If father Avraham, for whom God was prepared to intervene to spare Sarah, and who was only wandering through that land, was prepared to "play the game" and not belligerently confront the locals - how much more so in this case. After all, God has not intervened to help us here; and these are my permanent neighbors, with whom I must be able to get along. If it was important to exercise restraint in galut - as I have with Lavan and, just now, with Esav - how much more so in the Land where I intend to establish my roots.

The brothers (note that Shim'on and Levi are only singled out in describing the slaying; all of the brothers participated in the cunning negotiations as well as the pillage of the city), coming from their critically distinct upbringing and experiences, viewed the situation and the appropriate response quite differently. The non-confrontational attitude which both Avraham and Yitzhak had adopted while traveling (see our analysis of the role of deception while traveling in the last two shiurim - available in the B'reshet archives at <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra>) was only appropriate for a land you intend to leave - ultimately, if the locals think you weak, it will have no deleterious effect on your own well-being. That is not the case, they argued, in a land which you intend to settle. If the local peoples think of our daughters as "fair game", we will never gain their respect - or fear. Our lives will be a long series of attacks and oppression. It is better, goes the argument, to make our stand here and now and let everyone know that we are not to be trifled with.

We now understand why Ya'akov did not originally take up arms - and why he was perturbed by their approach. It was not a moral opposition, rather a disapproval of their tactics which lay at the heart of his chastisement.

Both of their positions are easily in their respective arguments:

Ya'akov:

You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the

K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house.

The brothers:

Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?

When we are talking about an individual who violates a young woman, the Torah does not consider it a capital offense; it allows for recompense and amelioration of the situation with a large fine as appropriate for a case of criminal assault. When, on the other hand, we are dealing with an attack which challenges the dignity and honor of the people of Yisra'el, that is a different matter entirely.

The Torah not only provides support for the brothers' position in the description of the ensuing travels which were "trouble-free", the Halakhah itself seems to lend support to this position:

Rav Yehudah stated in the name of Rav: If foreigners besieged Israelite towns... with the intention of taking lives the people are permitted to sally forth against them with their weapons and to desecrate the Shabbat on their account. Where the attack, however, was made on a town that was close to a frontier, even though they did not come with any intention of taking lives but merely to plunder straw or stubble, the people are permitted to sally forth against them with their weapons and to desecrate the Shabbat on their account. (BT Eruvin 45a)

#### POSTSCRIPT

Much ink has been spilt over the analysis of the "double-identity" of Ya'akov/Yisra'el - perhaps we will, one day, add our own input to that discussion. In any case, it is curious to note that throughout this narrative, our patriarch is referred to by his "galut-name", Ya'akov. Yet, when he "adopts" the conquest of Sh'khem, he speaks as Yisra'el:

And Yisra'el said to Yoseph, "Behold, I die; but God shall be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. And I have given to you one \*Sh'khem\* above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow. (48:21-22)

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