

PARSHAS VAYIGASH - DAUGHTERS OF A DIFFERENT KIND

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Daughters of a Different Kind¹

The news was heard in Paroh's house, saying, "Yosef's brothers have come." The matter was pleasing in the eyes of Paroh and in the eyes of his servants.

The Torah gives us no hint as to why the arrival of the shevatim should have been cause for Egyptian celebration. It is likely that Paroh's court assumed that Yosef's brothers would be as intellectually gifted as he was. If so, they would be a great asset to Egypt, just as Yosef was.

We can demonstrate that Chazal took this approach. We will endeavor to show how and why.

A medrash^[2] applies the verse "Daughters/ banos saw her and extolled her^[3]" to Yosef's brothers. The Medrash points to our pasuk as the proof-text that demonstrates that the "her" referred to is none other than the shevatim. They are the ones extolled by these "daughters." It is not at all clear, however, why Paroh's court should be termed "daughters."

The words ben/ son and binyan/ building are related. A son is a building out from a father. Through sons, a father builds his family. Bas/ daughter is really a form of the same word - a shortened form of b-n-s^[4]. (The elided "n" shows up in the plural of bas, which is banos.) A daughter also participates in the process of building, albeit in a lesser manner. (The function of the "s" added on to the b-n of the male is to make it ancillary and subsidiary. The daughter's role in building the family edifice is not as central as that of the son, but it cannot be dispensed with.)

Tevunah/ understanding shares the same root of b-n. A wise and understanding person is also a builder, in the sense of taking ideas that appear unrelated to less discerning people, and joining them together into meaningful structures. Thus, a secondary meaning of b-n is "wise one." The books of Mishlei and Koheles often use the word "beni" in this manner. (The yud that follows the b-n turns it into an abstraction, i.e. not a particular person standing opposite the speaker, but the wise person in general.)

Yechezkel uses the word "ben" similarly. He prophesies a great sword that has been sharpened and burnished^[5]. The coming destruction of Yerushalayim has been readied. Is there room left for any rejoicing, in the face of what is to come upon them? He then adds, "The staff [that beats] beni scorns

every wood[6]." The question about rejoicing is usually taken as rhetorical. There is indeed no room for happiness. A terrible sword of destruction hovers, while a staff of brutal dominion hovers over the head of beni, "my son," the Jewish people[7].

If we take beni here not as "my son," but as "wise one" we gain a completely different understanding of his words. The reference to rejoicing is not rhetorical at all. As the Babylonians began the process of exiling our people with the removal of King Yehoyachin, the noblemen, officers and "the artisans and gatekeepers...all of them mighty men, warriors" were deported as well[8]. Chazal[9] tell us that these were talmidei chachamim, adept in fighting the battles of Torah study. Years before the devastation of Yerushalayim, Nevuchadnetzar squirreled away in Bavel a cadre of leaders of the next generation. To be sure, this was not his intention. He harbored no special love for Torah scholars. It is in the nature of Torah itself, however, to protect its most accomplished students. Without any reason that we can detect, a vanguard of the Jewish nation established roots in Bavel prior to the arrival of the main body of the people. That group included great talmidei chachamim whose sword of Torah proved superior to that wielded by the Babylonian troops. Looking back at this, there is reason to find rejoicing within the tragedy of the churban. Torah protects its own.

We've almost arrived at our destination. Having shown that ben can mean a person wise in the study of Torah, we can easily see what bas connotes. Torah is the all-important wisdom responsible for the binyan/ structure of the universe. Lesser branches of wisdom, however, also contribute to the way Torah imposes its pattern upon Creation. Those branches of wisdom - essentially, all of secular knowledge - work in concert with Torah wisdom. These branches are not banim, not sons, but banos - daughters.

These daughters make an appearance in Tehilim. "Daughters of kings honor you. The queen stands erect at your right in the golden jewelry of Ophir[10]." The gemara[11] interprets this in regard to those who study Torah with a fierce love, and because of it merit golden jewelry. The "daughters" are the other branches of wisdom, usually the province of the non-Jewish kings of the world. The Torah of those who truly toil in its acquisition and understanding helps them in acquiring other kinds of wisdom. The "daughter" disciplines become the property of the talmid chacham[12], who uses them to better comprehend certain topics within Torah's purview. These daughters bring honor to the talmid chacham who masters great amounts of wisdom. As a result, both he and the Torah he stands for are looked up to and honored.

Yosef's brothers were all seasoned talmidei chachamim. When they spoke, they projected wisdom not only of Torah, but of the cognate disciplines that would be appreciated even by others. Paroh's advisors, accomplished in various fields of non-Torah knowledge (making them daughters, rather than sons), immediately sensed the gifts that the shevatim possessed. "Daughters saw her and extolled her."

1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Bereishis 45:16
 2. Bereishis Rabbah 90:1
 3. Shir ha-Shirim 6:9
 4. In Arabic, which is a closely related language, "son of" is bin, while "daughter of" is bint.
 5. Yechezkel 21:14
 6. Yechezkel 21:15
 7. See Rashi and Radak
 8. Melachim2 24:16
 9. Sifri, Devarim 321
 10. Tehilim 45:10
 11. Rosh Hashanah 4A
 12. It is reported that secular scholars who visited the Netziv marveled at how proficient he was in areas of interest to them.
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