

PARSHAS BEREISHIS - THE FIRST STIRRINGS OF CAPITALISM

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The First Stirrings of Capitalism¹

And Adah bore Yaval. He was the first of those who dwell in tents and raise cattle. The name of his brother was Yuval. He was the first of all who handle the harp and flute. And Tzilah, too, bore Tuval-Kayin, who sharpened all cutting implements of copper and iron.

To any but the most casual student of Chumash, the question "What's in a name?" borders on silliness. Names throughout Tanach are saturated with meaning. We have only to look at the names - and the reasons for their selection - that the first humans gave their sons to learn that names speak volumes about the mindset of parents, and the times in which they lived. The progressive change in mood in the names that Leah assigned to her sons adds powerfully to our sense that names are important[2]. We cannot help but note that with the birth of each son, Leah sees herself growing in her importance to her husband, and capturing more of the love she thought had been reserved for Rachel alone. With each birth, her attitude shifts from the desperation of affliction to proudly becoming the undisputed mother of the lion's share of the projected twelve shevatim.

Some names are more subtle. We would miss their significance if we didn't notice the words appear in slightly altered form elsewhere. In the march of the generations from Kayin, we find it easy to tune out, and treat the psukim as many variations on the theme of Ploni begat Almoni. Occasionally, we take note as one of them jogs our memory, and we realize that we have seen that word before someplace else. If we bothered to compare the names with those on the list of progeny of Shais, we might be shocked to see the enormous overlap in names - almost as if the Torah were describing an almost inexorable pattern of cultural and spiritual development[3], with each name indicating an important cultural change from the generation that preceded it.

In one set of psukim in our parshah, three generations all take essentially the same name, changing only grammatical construction. Three generations all take names based on the root Y-B-L. Thus we have Yaval, who fathers Yuval, and is followed by Tuval-Kayin. The root essentially means to bring, or bring in. Applied to a mostly agrarian society in the early days of mankind, Y-B-L can be assumed to have something to do with the produce that is brought in from the field to be used by people.

The appearance of three forms of the same name in succession is surely important. Significant as well is the fact that all three are credited with being originators of a new idea or practice, contributors of a new wrinkle in the growing cloth of human civilization.

It starts with Yaval, who becomes the "father of those who dwell in tents and breed cattle." We wonder what it was that he fathered! What was his innovation? Shepherds had been around since the time of Hevel. We can find a clue in the attitude that the Egyptians had to shepherds. On the one hand they utterly despised them; on the other, Pharaoh found putting Yosef's brothers in charge of the royal flocks an honorable position.

It is quite likely that the Egyptians did not find sheep abhorrent, nor those who tended to them. Rather, they looked down upon nomads - those people who possessed no land and no roots - the Roma of the ancient world - and therefore had to shepherd their sheep wherever they could find food for their animals. Yosef therefore introduced his brothers to Pharaoh as "roeh tzon," who had previously been "anshei mikneh.[4]" We can take this to mean that they appear at the moment, having just left their homeland, as common shepherds. Yosef excuses and justifies this impression. They may look like landless, nomadic shepherds, but they in fact are anshei mikneh - landed gentry, members of the group founded in our parshah by Yaval.

Yaval was not a shepherd. He managed a mikneh empire, while reclining in the shade and comfort of a tent. He was a sheep entrepreneur, reaping - bringing in - the profit from the raising of sheep without having to tend to them himself. In a sense, he industrialized the sheep business, expanding upon it, systematizing it enough that he could realize great profit by focusing on the commercial end of it, rather than fraternizing with the animals. This was indeed an innovation, and a trend in society that would in time apply to all other jobs and vocations. The successful capitalist would reap large profits, leaving the laborious work to others.

The next generation did not have to produce. It was heir to wealth, and had the luxury of not having to produce. In the case of Yaval, this did not mean a next generation of lazy souls involved in dissolute behavior. The consequence of an abundance of discretionary capital, as we call it today, is a generation that can look beyond simply providing the means for survival. With more time available for non-essentials, the generation after Yaval turned to music. Yuval became the father of those who would play harp and flute. He could only arise in a generation that had the means to support him.

In the days between Adam and Noach, with G-d consciousness waning, turning to culture was an important step for mankind. The line of Kayin, estranged from G-d, needed desperately to restore the inner equilibrium and harmony that comes from a person's relationship with HKBH. Nothing can begin to replace that relationship, but on a societal level, turning to culture is an important first step on the road back. Minimally, music and art suggest to Man that he is not the be-all and end-all of existence. There are concepts and ideas that Man - even Man estranged from G-d - can recognize as more important than his own being. Music and art appeal to Man's emotions without much effort; in time, he can learn of the more ethereal realm of the Idea, of truth and intellectual contemplation, and learn to appreciate these as well.

Tuval appears in the following generation. The word means "bringing," not in the active sense, but as

an abstraction. It is not about producing, but production itself. By fashioning the first cutting implements, Tuval enables production on a qualitatively and quantitatively different plane. Tuval introduces what, in time, would be called the "means of production." Implements would become machinery would become large factories. Those who owned them would reap much benefit from the labor of many.

Ironically, with the emergence of this generation, Kayin seems to have defeated his curse of forever roaming in constant exile. Owning land has now become much less important. Tuval's full name is Tuval-Kayin. Through Tuval, Kayin has regained all the land he lost, without owning an inch of it. By producing the tools that all others use to gather their produce, Tuval gains a share in everybody's production.

Kayin was once able to survey the world in front of him, and imagine himself possessor of much of it. He forfeited all of it when he murdered his brother. Generations later, his ingenuity and ambition have morphed into a Tuval-Kayin, needed no expanse of land to find security and wealth. His creative mind was a fertile enough field in which to nurture abundant produce. Kayin could have triumphed, were it not for the fact that a society in which G-d is moved to the periphery will have no permanence. The next generation after Tuval-Kayin is that of Lemech. He looks at the changes through the generation, as well as his own family, and is left with thoughts of foreboding and guilt.

After him will come the Flood.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 4:20-23
 2. See the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 29:32-35
 3. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, of course, uncovers precisely such patterns in his treatment of the two lines.
 4. Bereishis 46:32
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