



מלחמת הקיום The War for Existence

■ “Like Reuven and Shimon”

After the Patriarch Yaakov moves to Egypt and resides there with his sons for 17 years, he asks to bless them before he dies. For his first blessing, he lays his hands upon Yosef’s two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, and says:

הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֵל אֹתִי מִכָּל רָע יְבָרֵךְ אֶת הַנְּעָרִים
וַיִּקְרָא בָהֶם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתִי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק...

*May the angel who redeemed me from all evil bless these youths,
and let my name, and the name of my fathers Avraham and
Yitzchak, be called upon them...* (B’reshit 48,16)

What did Yaakov mean when he said that his name should “*be called upon them*”? He meant, as we saw in a previous lesson, that they should be raised up one step in the generational ladder; instead of being the sons of Yosef, Menashe and Ephraim shall from now on be called Yaakov’s sons, and he is to be called their father:

וְעַתָּה שְׁנֵי בָנֶיךָ הַנוֹלָדִים לְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַד בָּאִי אֵלַיךְ מִצְרַיִם
לִי הֵם, אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה כְּרֹאשׁוֹן וְשִׁמְעוֹן יִהְיוּ לִי.

*And now, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came
to you here, they are mine; Ephraim and Menashe will be
to me like Reuven and Shimon.* (verse 5)

This change is critical, for we know that the division of the Nation of Israel into 12 tribes is very significant. Twelve is the number of signs of the zodiac, and the number of diagonals on a cube – symbol of the dimension of “volume,” or the materialistic aspect of the world. It is also the number of months in a year, which results from the 12 revolutions the moon makes around the Earth each year, while at the same time the Earth is making nearly one complete revolution around the sun.

It would seem that the addition of Ephraim and Menashe, in place of Yosef, to the ranks of the Tribes of Israel changes this important number. How are we to understand this?

Adding Ephraim and Menashe to his descendants is a very momentous occasion in Yaakov Avinu's life. It is the "finishing touch" on the historic prophecy in his father Yitzchak's blessing to him: *"And may the L-rd Shad-dai bless you, multiply you and make you great and you will become a congregation of nations."* (28,3)

In terms of the desert encampment of Israel, the addition of Ephraim and Menashe in place of Yosef increases the number of tribes to 13 – which then decreases again to 12 when the Tribe of Levi relocates to the center of the encampment and is thus "counted out." Together with the Tent of Meeting over which they guard, the Levites are surrounded on each side by three tribes.

In terms of the months, the number 13 represents a leap year, in which the leap-month of Adar II is added. The purpose of increasing the number of months from 12 to 13 is to help synchronize the lunar year, based on the moon's revolutions around the Earth, with the solar year, i.e., the duration of a revolution by the Earth around the sun. We add the leap-month seven times over the course of 19 years, to counteract the lunar calendar's "loss" of seven months to the solar years during this period.

The division of Yosef into two tribes, giving us 13 tribes instead of 12, sets the pattern for the parallel correlation of the lunar and solar years.

This also explains Yosef's second dream, in which he saw the sun, moon and 11 stars bowing down to him. It cannot be that the moon refers to Yosef's mother Rachel, as Yaakov seemed to think, because she was not living at the time! The sun and the moon, alongside the stars, are rather an allusion to the fact that Yosef himself was to merit two sons among the Tribes of Israel – once again, an indication of the integration of the solar and lunar calendars.

When Yaakov arrived in the Land of Israel after his 20 years with Lavan in Aram Naharayim, G-d appeared to him once again and promised him the fulfillment of his father Yitzchak's blessing to him: *"I am the Lord Shad-dai... Be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a congregation of nations shall come from you."* (35,11)

This blessing was uttered after Yaakov already had 11 sons. Since it was expressed in the future tense, we must ask: Which other children is he still expecting? The answer is Binyamin, Ephraim and Menashe: “*A nation*” refers to Binyamin, his youngest son, and “*a congregation of nations*” refers to Yosef’s sons Ephraim and Menashe. And here in Vay’chi, in reference to Ephraim and Menashe, Yaakov uses these same words when he tells Yosef of the Divine blessings he received:

אֶל שְׂדֵי נְרָאָה אֵלַי בָּלוֹז בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתִי.
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי הַנְּנִי מִפְּרֹד וְהִרְבֵּיתֶךָ וַנִּתְתֶּיךָ לְקַהֵל עַמִּים...

The L-rd Shad-dai appeared to me in Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, and said to me: “I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a congregation of nations...” (48,3-4)

By including Yosef’s two sons among the 12 Tribes, Yaakov is sharing with him the secret of the parameters of Israel’s place among the nations, as the Torah states: “*He established the borders of the nations, according to the number of the children of Israel*” (D’varim 32,8). How so? With Menashe and Ephraim increasing the number of Tribes of Israel from 12 to 13, they pave the way for the Nation of Israel to take on its unique character – that which integrates the lunar and solar years via a combination of 12- and 13-month years. This places Israel precisely between the peoples of Esav (the Roman/Christian world, which uses the solar year system) and the sons of Yishmael (the Moslems, who count years solely according to the moon).

The Ramban points out a most interesting phenomenon. In his Torah commentary to Moshe’s final blessing to Israel (D’varim 33,6), he says that 12 is the permanent number that always accompanies every count of the Tribes. Therefore, every time Ephraim and Menashe are mentioned instead of Yosef, the name of one of the other Tribes is missing – ensuring that they always number exactly 12. The Ramban explains that this is why Shimon’s name is missing from the list of Tribes blessed by Moshe; it is because Ephraim and Menashe appear there.

And this is the reason why, after Yaakov’s blessing to his sons in Vay’chi, the Torah sums up and emphasizes the number of Tribes of Israel: “*All these are the tribes of Israel – twelve.*” (B’reshit 49,28)

■ “Shimon and Levi - Brothers”

Using this principle laid down by the Ramban, we can better understand the tensions between the brothers. Yaakov blessed Shimon and Levi together,

calling them *brothers* (B'reshit 49,5). They in fact acted together in many ways. For instance, when Yosef arrived in Shechem to relay their father's greetings, we read:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו הִנֵּה בָּעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הִלְזָה בָּא, וְעַתָּה לָכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ...

And they said, one to his brother,

"Here comes the dreamer; let us now kill him..." (37,19)

Though the verse does not name these two anonymous "brothers" who wanted to kill Yosef, we know they are Shimon and Levi. They sensed and feared that he – represented by his two sons – would inherit one of them, who would then disappear from the map of the 12 Tribes. Their war against Yosef was actually a war for their very existence as founders of the most spiritual and significant nation in the history of the world.

It is astonishing to see that their fears were not unwarranted. Throughout the Torah, whenever Ephraim and Menashe are mentioned in a list of all the Tribes, the name of either Levi or Shimon is missing, ensuring that the total remains 12. For instance, when the tribes are listed at the Dedication of the Altar (Bamidbar 7), Levi's name is missing. In addition, when Moshe blessed the tribes in his parting speech, as noted above, Shimon is not mentioned. In both cases, of course, Menashe and Ephraim are listed.

The disappearance of these two tribes is not just symbolic or semantic, but is rather weighted with practical significance. When the Nation of Israel settled in the Holy Land, it was divided up according to Tribes – and neither Levi nor Shimon received a defined expanse of land. Shimon's lot was spread out within the Tribe of Judah, while the Levites received the six Cities of Refuge, plus a "donation" from their brothers of 42 cities across the land. G-d told Moshe, *"Charge the Children of Israel and have them give the Levites from their inheritance, cities in which they will dwell."* (Bamidbar 35,2)

In short: Menashe and Ephraim merited clearly-delineated estates, while Shimon and Levi did not.

■ "She Called Him Yosef"

We know there was a strong competition between the two sister-wives of Yaakov - Rachel and Leah - as to how many of the 12 Tribes each one would have. Ideally, each of the wives, including Bilhah and Zilpah, would have had three each. But in actuality, Leah bore Yaakov six sons, while each of the others had two.

When Leah had her third son, she was happy that she had fulfilled her “quota.” Upon giving him the name Levi, she was able to say, “*Now my husband will be attached – yilaveh – to me*” (B'reshit 29,34). Her fourth son was an added “bonus,” and so she called him Yehuda, declaring, “*This time I will thank – odeh – G-d.*” (verse 35)

After Bilhah and Zilpah gave birth to two sons each, Leah had two more sons herself – Yisachar and Zevulun – thus completing the unfulfilled quotas of the two handmaidens.

When Rachel gave birth to Yosef, she prayed: **Yosef Hashem li ben acher** – “*May G-d add for me another son*” (30,24). We see that, in her hope for three sons, she is now asking for two more: **ben** (son) and **acher** (another). **Ben** refers to Binyamin, to whom she gave birth later. But who is the **acher**, the “other,” third son for whom she was asking?

Yaakov used the same language in his prayer when he sent Binyamin down to Egypt with his brothers:

וְאֵל־שׁ־דִּי יִתֵּן לָכֶם רַחֲמִים לְפָנֵי הָאִישׁ
וְשִׁלַּח לָכֶם אֶת אֲחִיכֶם אַחֵר וְאֶת בְּנִימִין...

“*May G-d grant you mercy before the ruler [Yosef],
and have him send you your other brother*

[lit., **your brother other**] *and Binyamin.*” (B'reshit 43,14)

Yaakov is clearly referring to Shimon, whom Yosef had kept in Egypt – but, again: Why does he employ a double reference, saying both *your brother*, and **acher**, “other”? To whom is this hidden reference in both Rachel and Yaakov’s words?

The use of this word **acher** in both these verses is a profound allusion to the division of the Tribe of Yosef into two – Menashe and Ephraim. Yaakov hinted at it in his blessing, and Rachel foresaw that with Yosef’s two sons, together with Binyamin, she would reach the goal of having three sons.

When Rachel named Yosef and said, “*May Hashem add for me another son,*” she was actually assigning him a life mission [as we have explained elsewhere in this work]: He was to fill out the number of her sons with his own, and thus provide the “extra” tribe.

According to the Ramban’s calculation, given that Rachel now has three sons, giving a total of 13, it would appear that one of Leah’s sons has to “disappear.” Who will it be? Yisachar and Zevulun do not appear to be candidates, since,

as we said above, they were the supplements for the quotas of Bilhah and Zilpah. Which of Leah's first four sons must leave the stage?

Let us note that these four brothers – Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda – were the dominant players in the sale of Yosef as a slave. Reuven and Yehuda were mentioned by name, while Shimon and Levi were not; Reuven and Yehuda saved Yosef from death, while Shimon and Levi tried to harm him. Moshe Rabbeinu in fact praised Reuven and Yehuda when he blessed the Tribes, saying, *“May Reuven live and not die”* and *“Hear, G-d, Yehuda's voice, and bring him to his people.”* (D'varim 33,6-7)

Either Shimon or Levi will have to give way.

■ Divided Among Yaakov, Scattered Among Israel

Levi and Shimon both sensed that Yosef was trying to push one of them out. But for Levi, this was a tragic mistake. He did not realize that the Divine Plan was not to have him pushed *out*, but to have him pulled even deeper *in*.

Levi did not realize that his “disappearance” from the scene was actually G-d's way of uplifting him to the status of Spiritual Center of all the Tribes of Israel. This is as we said above: When the Tribes camped in the desert, there were three tribes on each side – with the Levites in the center, encompassing the Mishkan (Tabernacle). True, the Tribe of Levi did not receive an inheritance in the Land of Israel – but he will receive ample compensation: *“He will not have an inheritance amidst his brothers; Hashem will be his inheritance.”* (D'varim 18,2)

For the Nation of Israel, the Levites were like the soul within a body. As we saw after the Sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe raised the call: *“He who is for Hashem, [come] to me!”* And who came to him? *“All the sons of the [Tribe of] Levi gathered to him”* (Sh'mot 32,26). The phrase *“to me,” eilai*, is reminiscent of that which Leah said when she named Levi: *“...my husband will come to me,” eilai*.

Let us note the spelling of Levi's name: The middle letter, *vuv*, represents the letter *vuv* in G-d's name, while the other two letters, *lamed* and *yud*, spell *li*, meaning “to me.” The name Levi thus means “G-d to me”, as in, *“He who is for Hashem, to me!”*

If Levi would have known all this – that he was being brought in, not out – he would never have wanted to harm Yosef. On the contrary, he would have embraced and uplifted him.

Shimon and Levi had great strengths; employed together, these forces became terrifically dangerous. The entire city of Shechem was wiped out as a result of their joining together. And if Reuven and Yehuda had not intervened in time, Yosef would have been killed instead of being sold into slavery. Yaakov knew of this dangerous combination, and therefore wanted them split up. In his blessings to them on his deathbed, Yaakov said,

אַחֲלֵקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאַפְיִצֵּם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

I will divide them among Yaakov and scatter them among Israel. (49,7)

The two brothers will not be permitted to act together, but will rather be dispersed among all of Israel. How? The Tribe of Levi, the Cohanim, will reach every home throughout the Land to teach Torah and receive the Priestly gifts and tithes. And the Tribe of Shimon, our Sages teach, was to similarly reach every house by becoming teachers of little children and, as scribes, writing Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot.

Also noteworthy is that, in addition to the six specified Cities of Refuge for accidental killers, the 42 cities assigned to the Tribe of Levi around the country served the same purpose. This is a form of rectification for what Shimon and Levi did in Shechem.

■ The Correct Combinations

The entire progression of events in the story of Yosef and his brothers, so fascinating but tragic, was the result of misguided combinations of the brothers. It was these that created the tensions and fissures. Let us track the changing permutations of the four main brothers in the story: Yosef, Yehuda, Shimon and Levi. The first combination, and the worst of all, was that of Shimon and Levi against Yosef; as we have seen, it was the two of them who hatched the plan to kill him. (37,19)

In an attempt to correct the tragic results of that duo, Yosef arranged the brothers differently: He kept Shimon in Egypt, and sent the other brothers back home.

וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲתָם אֶת שִׁמְעוֹן וַיַּאֲסֹר אוֹתוֹ לְעֵינֵיהֶם.

He took Shimon from them and bound him before their eyes. (42,24)

Clearly, the combination of Yosef and Shimon was also unsuccessful; it brought only imprisonment.

The third attempt to arrange the brothers was the dramatic encounter

between Yehuda and Yosef, at the beginning of Parashat Vayigash, a pre-enactment of the future meeting between them at the End of Days. The Medrash tells of the near-explosion that occurred when these two pivotal forces of Israel confronted each other. True, the Yehuda-Yosef combination will lead to positive results – but only after their End of Days encounter. The Haftarah of Vayigash, from the Book of Yechezkel, describes that occasion, in which the trees of Yosef and Yehuda are united into one tree and one nation.

The explosive This-World encounter between the two in Egypt did lead to a desirable result: Yosef's revelation to his brothers. But the great tensions between Yehuda and Yosef lasted for many generations afterwards.

The correct combinations for that time should actually have been Yosef and Levi together, and Shimon and Yehuda together. Moshe Rabbeinu, a Levite, knew this secret, and therefore he was the one to take Yosef's bones with him to the Land of Israel so many years later, as we read in the story of the Exodus (Sh'mot 13,19). Here we see the advantages of the Yosef-Levi combination in action: A leader of the Tribe of Levi, designated to disseminate the light of Torah and spirituality among Israel, brings with him the power of leadership and accomplishment of the Tribe of Yosef!

On the other hand, Yehuda has Shimon join up with him when Eretz Yisrael is apportioned to the various tribes:

מִחֶבֶל בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה נַחֲלַת בְּנֵי שִׁמְעוֹן,

כִּי הָיָה חֶלֶק בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה רַב מֵהֶם וַיִּנְחָלוּ בְּנֵי שִׁמְעוֹן בְּתוֹךְ נַחֲלָתָם.

From the portion of the sons of Yehuda came the inheritance of the sons of Shimon, for that of the sons of Yehuda was too much for them, and so the sons of Shimon inherited within [Yehuda's] lot. (Yehoshua 19,9)

Yehuda, the militant force, takes with him the scribes and teachers of Shimon – a combination that truly personifies the ideals of *saфра v'saifa*, “the book and the sword” [see Medrash Sifri, D'varim 11,12].

■ Purifying the Zealousness

Shimon and Levi responded zealously to the plight of their sister Dina, who had been abducted by Shechem ben Hamor, and they went out to war. Their propensity to zealousness gradually crystallized, dividing into sacred aspects and secular aspects. The Tribe of Levi grew in spirituality. As we

saw, it was the Levites who responded to Moshe's call after the Sin of the Golden Calf of *"Whoever is for G-d, come to me!"* When they came, Moshe told them in G-d's name:

שִׁימוּ אִישׁ חֶרְבוֹ עַל יָרְכוֹ עֲבְרוּ וְשׁוּבוּ מִשְׁעֵר לְשַׁעַר בַּמַּחֲנֶה...
*"Every man shall place his sword on his thigh, and go to and fro,
 from gate to gate in the camp, and slay..."* (Sh'mot 32,27)

This zealousness was shown to be of a holy source, and this is why Levi, the tribe of priests, was later called upon to serve Hashem in the Tabernacle and Temple.

The Tribe of Shimon, on the other hand, took the opposite course, stooping to the lowest of the low. It happened when the entire tribe defended its prince, Zimri ben Salu, who had taken the Midianite maiden Kozbi to his tent in an ugly and depraved manner before the entire nation. The Shimonites here showed the same qualities of zeal that Shimon showed regarding Dina – but in quite the opposite manner.

Following that incident, Levi and Shimon were not only separate, but actually fought against each other. Pinchas ben Elazar, a Levite, was the one who confronted Shimon's prince Zimri ben Salu and killed him – halting the lethal plague that had come over Israel.

The Tribe of Levi thus merited that the decree of dispersion Yaakov imposed upon it became a blessing. This occurred when Moshe Rabbeinu blessed Israel and said about the Levites, *"They shall teach Yaakov Your judgments, and Your Torah to Israel"* (D'varim 33,10). As the Cohanim and Levites go from house to house receiving the Priestly gifts, they also use the opportunity to fulfill their mission of teaching Torah and fear of G-d. Their visits to Jewish homes around the land uplift the citizens' spirituality, and they in turn bestow material gifts on the Priests who teach them.

Shimon, too, turns his hatred into great love: The Shimonites who lovingly teach children Torah and good character have a great and beneficial influence wherever they go.

The above analysis shows us that a deep understanding and recognition of the special powers and properties that Hashem grants each of us, is actually the source of great blessing and uplifting for the entire world.

