

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYECHI: Eternal Blessings, Enduring Responsibility

Personal Leadership

Parshat Vayechi is generally associated with Yaakov's final blessings to his children, and indeed, the verse explicitly says that 'he blessed them' (49:28). The Ibn Ezra (d.1167) maintains, however, that Yaakov's statements to each of the Shevatim (tribes) individually – some of which are quite harsh and critical – cannot be blessings, but are actually prophetic messages to the Shevet as a whole. Yaakov was pointing to what he felt to be the underlying characteristics of each of his sons and foretelling how this would model the collective nature of each Shevet.

In this light, the Ohr HaChaim's explanation of Yehudah's message is noteworthy. Unlike his brothers, Yehudah, according to the Ohr HaChaim (d.1743), received not only a prophecy about his Shevet– '*Yadcha b'oref oyevecha*, Your hands will be at the necks of your enemies' (49:8) – but also a personal message: '*Atah yoducha achecha*, You – your brothers will admit to you'. Yehudah had already shown that he was a courageous leader, and this would be reflected in his descendants, who, from David onwards, would hold the mantle of sovereignty over the Jewish people. But more than that, he had himself gone through his own process of change. Yaakov's message to the other Shevatim was that they had a potential future that they would have the responsibility to realise, but his message to Yehudah was that he had already shown himself to be a leader among his brothers.

To The Last Man

Fascinatingly, in his message to Dan, Yaakov gives an unexpected comparison: '*Dan ya-din amo k'achad Shivtei Yisrael* – Dan will

judge his people as does the supreme of the Tribes of Israel' (49:16). Two interpretations are given here by the commentators. Rashi explains that Shimshon, who was one of Dan's most prominent descendants, would be considered a ruler as authoritative in his generation as King David, from the Tribe of Yehudah, was in his generation. According to the Rashbam (d.1158), a grandson of Rashi, on the other hand, the reference here is to Dan's role in the travels through the Wilderness, and the comparison between Dan and Yehudah focuses not on two specific individuals but on the Shevet as a whole. Just as Yehudah was always the first to travel, Dan was always the last; Dan was the rearguard of the Jewish encampment, ensuring that no one strayed and even the weak ones among the nation remained within the fold.

Either way, maintains the Kli Yakar (d.1619), whether Dan's message foretold Shimshon's story or whether it spoke of the role of the whole Shevet, the underlying theme is the same. If Yehudah was the one who led from the front, Dan's position, while seemingly less prestigious, was equally critical. Dan would be the one who would lead the people from behind, because in Jewish thought, leadership isn't only about showing the way forward; leadership also means bringing along those who might otherwise be left behind. Today, this idea is brought home poignantly yet tragically as we see the entire Jewish nation following the fate of Ran Gvili, the one slain hostage who remains in Gaza, following the homecoming of all the others. Embedded within the collective psyche of the Jewish people is not only the need for a Yehudah at the front, but also a Dan at the rear.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Dan's message ends with a prayer that is used to this day in the weekday Amidah: '*Lishua'tcha kiviti Hashem* – For Your salvation I await, O God! (49:18). Ramban, following Rashi's interpretation of the passage, explains that Yaakov uttered this prayer when he foresaw Shimshon's tragic end. Captured by the Philistines and placed as an object of public ridicule in their temple, Shimshon prayed for his strength to be returned one last time. Hashem granted his request, and he was able to push over the supporting pillars of the temple, crushing hundreds of the enemies of the Jews, but causing his own death as well. With this terrible episode, the era of the Judges came to an end, and Yaakov, prophesying this, was moved to cry out, 'For Your salvation I await!' In the Wilderness, Dan took their position at the rear of the encampment, and chronologically too, Dan provided the last of the Judges. At the core of Dan's message, therefore, lies the essence of Jewish leadership: our success lies not in our own strength, which is certain to expire, but in our eternal reliance on Hashem's salvation.

The Lone Wolf

In Parshat Vayigash, Binyamin was described by Yehudah as '*vayivater hu levado* – he alone remains' (44:20). Indeed, Binyamin is very much the 'lone Shevet', born at a different period from the rest of his family, orphaned of his mother from infancy and torn apart from his brother. Fascinatingly, Binyamin's key descendants are Shaul, the first king of Israel, who stood alone inasmuch as his line of kingship did not continue, and Esther, who had to enter the throne room of Achashveirosh alone in order to plead for mercy for her people.

Thus, Yaakov's message to Binyamin is that '*baboker yochal ad v'laerev yechalek shalal*' (49:27), he will endure from the *boker*, the dawn of Jewish sovereignty, until the *erev*, the very end.

The Midrash comments on the verse in Megillat Esther that describes Esther's entry into Achashveirosh's throne room. The verse relates how Esther adorned herself majestically, but instead of saying that she donned clothes of royalty, the verse says that '*vatilbash Esther malchut*' (Esther 5:1), literally, she dressed with royalty itself. According to the Midrash, this means that Esther, bravely putting herself alone into danger for the sake of her people, took up the mantle of her ancestor, Shaul. Hundreds of years earlier, Shaul had been charged with the obliteration of Amalek but had failed to do this properly, and in this much later narrative in Scripture, Esther takes upon herself the responsibility to complete this task.

While Yehudah leads from the front and Dan from behind, Binyamin represents a third type of person. Binyamin is the one who stands alone and, even when all seems lost, is able to take personal responsibility and share his achievements with the rest of the nation.

Next Week - SHEMOT: The Sound, Silence and Strength of Exile

TIMELESS TORAH RESUMES IN PERSON
ON WEDNESDAY 7TH JANUARY AT 8.00pm