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FINDING MEANING IN THE BIRCHOT HASHEVATIM

by *Rabbi Ezra Wiener*

In Shishi of this week's Parashah, Ya'akov Avinu blesses Binyamin and describes him as a "Ze'eiv Yitraf; BaBoker Yochal Ad, VeLaErev Yechaleik Shalal," "A wolf that ravens; in the morning he devours prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil" (49:27). This blessing follows the pattern that the Torah uses for some of the other blessings bestowed by Ya'akov upon his sons: the Shevet is compared to an animal, and then the Torah describes the characteristics of the animal that are expressed as qualities of the Shevet in the past or future. For example, "Yissachar Chamor Garem Roveitz Bein HaMishpetayim," "Yissachar is a large-boned donkey couching down between the sheepfolds" (49:14); "Yehi Dan Nachash Alei Derech," "Dan shall be a serpent in the path" (49:17); and "Naftali Ayala Sheluchah," "Naftali is a hart let loose" (49:21). It is in a similar vein that the Torah writes "Binyamin Ze'eiv Yitraf; BaBoker Yochal Ad, VeLaErev Yechaleik Shalal," "Binyamin is a wolf that ravens; in the morning he devours prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil" (49:27).

In what way is this a fitting description of Shevet Binyamin? Rashi (49:27 s.v. Binyamin Ze'eiv Yitraf) explains that it is a reference to the civil war between Shevet Binyamin and the rest of Bnei Yisrael that followed the disastrous incident of Pilegsh BeGiv'ah, discussed at the end of Sefer Shofetim. The war claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Bnei Yisrael, and Shevet Binyamin killed 40,000 soldiers of the other Shevatim. This future event earned Binyamin the appellation of a ferocious, devouring wolf. Rashi (op. cit.), Radak (s.v. BaBoker Yochal Ad), and Rashbam (s.v.

Binyamin Ze'eiv Yitraf) also mention the fierce battles of Shaul, a Binyami, against the nations of Moav, Edom, and Amaleik, as described in Sefer Shmuel. Shaul played the role of the ravenous wolf who conquered and devoured his enemies.

Rav Hirsch notes that a careful reading of this Pasuk reveals that an alternate syntax is used for Binyamin's blessing than is used for the similarly animal-themed blessings of the previous Shevatim. While Yissachar's blessing is commenting on an innate attribute of the animal, such as "Yissachar Chamor Garem," "Yissachar is a large-boned donkey," Binyamin's blessing is not "Binyamin Ze'eiv Toreif," "Binyamin is a ravenous wolf," but rather "Binyamin Ze'eiv Yitraf," where Binyamin is the object of "Yitraf" – "Binyamin will raven the wolf." The identity of the wolf may be extracted from a recurring theme in Sefer BeReishit. By identifying the wolf's prey, we may identify the wolf; the wolf typically devours the sheep, and Bnei Yisrael is commonly compared to sheep led by a shepherd (for example, in Shir HaShirim). It is conceivable that the wolf is a reference to Ya'akov Avinu's past that he is recalling as he blesses Binyamin. For many long years in Padan Aram, Ya'akov had to fear both actual wolves, as Lavan's devoted shepherd, and metaphorical wolves: his deceiving employer and father-in-law and his brother, Eisav. However, throughout all the years that Ya'akov spent at Padan Aram, Ya'akov never let the wolves get to him. While proving his record of faithful service, Ya'akov assures Lavan "Tereifa Lo Heiveiti Eilecha," "I have never brought you a sheep torn up by beasts" (31:39), which includes the same grammatical root as we find by "Binyamin Ze'eiv Yitraf." Ya'akov afforded the same protection to his family, the sheep of his personal pasture, and from the "wolves," Lavan and Eisav. Therefore, as Ya'akov takes one last look at his children, the future of Bnei Yisrael, he, the shepherd of the flock, with the spirit of prophecy, promises them with the utmost confidence that at the end of days, Binyamin, who is the youngest, the one whom about Ya'akov Avinu was concerned, "Pen Yikra'enu Ason," "Lest disaster befall him" (42:7), the most

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feeble, delicate of his children, the one whom Ya'akov had to call "Ben Oni," "Son of my strength" (35:18) in order that Binyamin be strong and not be discouraged as the youngest of all the tribes, he will lead the remaining Shevatim against the enemies of Bnei Yisrael, in defeating the wolf that seeks to consume and devour Hashem's precious sheep.

Indeed, we have a tradition that Bnei Yisrael's archenemy Amaleik will not be overcome by the tribe of Yehudah but rather by that of Binyamin, as the Pasuk says in Yirmiyahu, "Yischavum Tze'irei HaTzon," "The youngest of the flock [Binyamin] will indeed drag them off" (49:20).

We yearn and hope for those days to arrive, if they have not already. It must be noted, however, that the ensuing phrases in the Pasuk (49:27) do caution those of us who possess an exceedingly intense pre-messianic fervor to be ever so patient: "BaBoker Yochal Ad," "In the morning he consumes the foe" – it is true that in the morning, when we finally see the light of day after years of suffering, we will possess the might to devour those who desire to annihilate the Jewish people, but "VeLaErev Yechaleik Shalal," "At evening-time he will divide the spoils" – it will be only by "evening-time", i.e. a long process, until we will be able to sit in peace and tranquility in our land and restore to our people what is rightfully theirs.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN YEHUDAH AND SHLOMO

by Hillel Koslowe ('17)

Both the Parashah of VaYechi and the Haftarah of VaYechi end with two of Bnei Yisrael's leaders bestowing Berachot upon their children. Before Ya'akov Avinu dies, he blesses all his children. His Berachah to Yehudah is that "MiTeref Beni Alitah... Lo Yasur Sheivet MiYhudah..." "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself... The scepter shall not depart from Yehudah" (BeReishit 49:9-10). Before David HaMelech dies, he commands Shlomo HaMelech, "VeHineih Imecha Shim'i Ben Geira... Al Tinakahu Ki Ish Chacham Atah," "Behold! With you is Shim'i the son of Geira... You are not to hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man" (Kings I 2:8-9). We thus see a similarity between Ya'akov and David: both, soon before they die, tell their children to fulfill their life goals.

Ya'akov encountered many difficulties throughout his life that took time to overcome. He wanted to marry Rachel, and worked for seven years for her. At the wedding, his father-in-law, Lavan, secretly swapped Rachel for Lei'ah, causing Ya'akov to marry Lei'ah while thinking he was marrying Rachel. He was thus forced to work another seven years in order for Lavan to grant him permission to marry Rachel. According to the Gemara, Ya'akov had ambitions to lead Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael and build the Beit HaMikdash, but due to many struggles throughout his life, he was unable to fulfill his goal.

David faced many difficulties maintaining peace throughout all of Israel. Although he wanted to build the Beit HaMikdash, as he tells Shlomo, "Ani Hayah Im Levavi LiVnot Bayit LeSheim Hashem Elokay," "As for me, it was in my heart to build a House in the name of Hasem my God" (Divrei HaYamim I 22:7), he couldn't, because he had to focus on securing peace throughout all of Israel. He was unable to build the Beit HaMikdash because of the lack of peace during his time.

Ya'akov Avinu and David HaMelech were both unable to complete their goals, and yet managed to complete them through their children. Ya'akov tells Yehudah that he will be king throughout Israel. Not only does the first king of Israel emerge from the tribe of Yehudah, but Yehudah was the person who put Bnei Yisrael in the position to control all of Eretz Yisrael. Yehudah was the first of the brothers to suggest to them that they spare Yosef's life. He gave Bnei Yisrael the chance to enter Eretz Yisrael as a united people by working to eliminate the Sin'at Chinam of the brothers. Similarly, Shlomo removed Sin'at Chinam by killing Shimi ben Geira. Just as Yehudah diminished the hatred throughout the brothers in order to take control of Eretz Yisrael, so too, Shlomo eliminated the Sin'at Chinam throughout Bnei Yisrael that was needed in order to merit the building of the Beit HaMikdash (Sanhedrin 97a). Although their fathers weren't able to conquer Eretz Yisrael and build the Beit HaMikdash, both Yehudah and Shlomo were able to fulfill their fathers' goals.

Regarding Shlomo HaMelech's building the Beit HaMikdash, the Navi records: "VaYehi BeShemonim Shanah VeArba Mei'ot Shanah LaTzeit Bnei Yisrael MeiEretz Mitzrayim... VaYiven HaBayit LaShem," "And it was four hundred and eighty years from the departure of Bnei Yisrael from Mitzrayim... and he [Shlomo] built the house

[Beit HaMikdash] for Hashem" (Melachim I 6:1). Why does this Pasuk state the number of years since Bnei Yisrael left Egypt? The answer is that the Beit HaMikdash's being built began by leaving Mitzrayim and getting Eretz Yisrael, which was caused by Yehudah's removing the hatred towards Yosef. The Beit HaMikdash was built by ensuring peace throughout Bnei Yisrael, which was caused by Shlomo HaMelech's eradicating Sin'at Chinam from Bnei Yisrael.

As Sefer BeReishit comes to an end, Bnei Yisrael descend to Mitzrayim. In order to remain resolute and leave Mitzrayim and subsequently enter Eretz Yisrael as one, there cannot be any hatred amongst our people. Ya'akov Avinu's final message to his children is that they must stay united and respect one another. The fact that their final messages to their children are that there cannot be Sin'at Chinam amongst Bnei Yisrael teaches us that we must emphasize and prioritize Ahavat Yisrael to stay united as a nation.

WHERE did THE YEARS GO?

by Rabbi Yaakov Blau

Often in Tanach, a large amount of time passes over the course of just a few Pesukim. One can easily miss the passage of time, since the reader tends to perceive events that are described either one after the other or shortly thereafter in Tanach as having actually happened in immediate succession. As an example, nearly forty years pass between the story of the Meraglim in Shelach and Miryam dying at the beginning of Chukat, two Parashiyot later (and there's a Machloket Ibn Ezra and Ramban if the Korach story happened in between, as portrayed in the Chumash, or was actually before the Meraglim story), but when learning that section, one could easily think of the events as happening at relatively the same time.

In Parashat Shemot, there is a similar phenomenon. Moshe runs away from Egypt shortly after becoming an adult and does not return until he is 80 years old (Shemot 7:7). Ramban (2:23) assumes that he was no more than 20 upon his escape from Egypt. Now, it is unclear how much of that time was spent in Midyan, the only location mentioned in Chumash as to where Moshe went after Egypt. Ramban posits that Moshe first arrived in Midyan towards the end of the approximately 60 years, since he is described as having only one child before being chosen at the Seneh (Shemot

2:22), yet he has a second son in the beginning of Parashat Yitro (this second son is very likely the same son who receives a Berit during the obscure hotel story towards the end of Shemot Perek 4). If Ramban is correct, that leaves many years unaccounted for. There is a story recorded in the Divrei Hayamim DeMoshe, describing how Moshe became the king of Kush during that time. However, this story is not found in any authoritative Midrash and the Ibn Ezra (Peirush HaAruch 2:22) is very disparaging about its authenticity. Interestingly, Rashbam (BeMidbar 12:2) accepts the story as true and uses it to explain who the Kushi women was that Moshe is described as having married. Ramban theorizes that Moshe was a fugitive for the bulk of his years away from Egypt, never staying in one place for very long. Only towards the end of the 60 year period did he settle in Midyan. Ramban employs a methodology that he often uses in Tanach to explain why the Chumash does not report on those years. He believes that when nothing of great significance happens over a period of time, the Tanach simply skips that period in its narrative.

Regardless of which approach one takes to account for the "missing" years, I believe that a significant lesson emerges from the time gap. The lesson is particularly relevant to our society of instant gratification, and that is that things often unfold slowly. Moshe spent decades wondering if he would ever return to Egypt, yet ultimately, it was all part of Hashem's master plan for the Jews' redemption. We should often take a longer view in evaluating how events develop in our own lives as well.

AVDUT MITZRAYIM AND EVED IVRI

by Yehuda Koslowe

In a sudden change of fortunes in the beginning of Sefer Shemot, Bnei Yisrael are demoted from their position of power in Mitzrayim, and they become Pharoh's victims. At the end of Sefer BeReishit, Bnei Yisrael are represented by Yosef, the second-in-command, and they live comfortably in Goshen. Suddenly, about only ten Pesukim into Sefer Shemot, the new Phar'oh conspires against Bnei Yisrael and subjugates them to difficult work described as "Parech"

(Shemot 1:13). This unfortunate series of events – enacted against the Jews as a result of Phar'oh's concerns lest Bnei Yisrael become too numerous and conspire with an Egyptian ally to wage a war against Egypt (1:10) – is the beginning of Bnei Yisrael's 210 years of Egyptian slavery.

In what might be perceived as an ironic series of events, after Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Egypt and revelation at Har Sinai, the first laws enumerated are those concerning the Eved Ivri, a Jewish slave who is owned by a fellow Jew. At first glance, it is surprising that the laws explicated first, and thereby emphasized most, to the Jews at Har Sinai were those of Eved Ivri. Would it not have been proper to leave behind the legacy of slavery and move on to a brighter future?

Among the many Rishonim who answer this question is Ramban, who explains (Shemot 21:2 s.v. Ki Tikneh Eved Ivri) that Hashem purposely chose to set forth a set of laws concerning the Eved Ivri after Har Sinai because, among other things, the sending away of an Eved Ivri at the end of seven years serves as a remembrance to Yetziat Mitzrayim. Ramban points specifically to the law of Ha'anakah, essentially a slave's severance pay, as proof that the constructs of the Eved Ivri parallel Bnei Yisrael's slavery and exodus from Egypt. Indeed, immediately following the command to release an Eved Ivri with severance, the Torah relates, "VeZacharta Ki Eved Hayita BeEretz Mitzrayim..." "And you will remember that you were slaves in Egypt" (Devarim 15:14-15). While a simple reading of these two Pesukim suggests that the commandment to release a slave after a relatively short seven year period is a response to our 210 year enslavement, it is also important to realize that the specific law of Ha'anakah after enslavement parallels Hashem's having mercy on Bnei Yisrael upon their exodus and His ensuring the Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt "BiRechush Gadol," "with tremendous wealth" (BeReishit 15:14). Just as Hashem provided Bnei Yisrael with material sustenance upon their exodus to ensure that they would not slip back into their slave mentality, each and every Jewish slave owner is commanded to act in a similar manner and provide Ha'anakah upon his slave's release.

And just as Bnei Yisrael are commanded to release their slaves in a compassionate manner similar to the way in which Hashem mercifully took them out of slavery, Bnei Yisrael are commanded

to not treat their slaves as they were mercilessly treated by Phar'oh. In the second set of Pesukim addressing the laws of an Eved Ivri, the Torah relates that a Jewish slave owner must not force his slaves to work "BeFarech" (VaYikra 25:43,46,53). This uncommon and unclear word is used only one other time in the Torah, and that is in describing the kind of work which Bnei Yisrael were forced to do as slaves in Egypt. In essence, Hashem is commanding us to distance ourselves from the cruel slavery of Egypt and instead mimic Hashem's merciful actions in taking us out of that wretched slavery.

In response to our 210 year slavery in Egypt, the Torah does not wholly ban or ignore the institution of slavery; instead, it addresses the issues directly and prominently, presenting it first among all other laws after Ma'amad Har Sinai. The Torah does not ignore our painful past but rather bears it in mind in setting the course for our existence post-slavery. To ensure that Bnei Yisrael, the abused in Egypt, never become abusers themselves, the Torah presents the laws of an Eved Ivri to serve in contrast to Avdut Mitzrayim and to demonstrate the proper way to treat slaves.

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