

The Changing Role of Shimon and Levi

BY: Ben Kandel

One of the most interesting parts of the stories of the Patriarchs is the description of how Yaakov's sons gradually developed into the twelve tribes of Israel. By the end of Yaakov's life, most of the tribes had assumed the roles that they would eventually take when they entered the Land of Israel as a unified people. However, the roles of Shimon and Levi seem to have undergone significant changes between the lifetimes of Yaakov and Moshe. Both Yaakov and Moshe blessed the tribes at the end of their lives, but the way they treated Shimon and Levi differed markedly. Yaakov proclaimed:

"Shimon and Levi are brothers; their weapons are instruments of treacherous violence. In their counsel, may my soul not enter; in their gathering, may my presence¹ not join, for in their anger they killed a man and in their caprice they hamstring² an ox. Cursed is their anger, for it is powerful, and their wrath, for it is harsh; I will divide them in Yaakov and will disperse them among Israel."³

Here, Yaakov harshly criticized his sons. Although the exact sin that led to the rebuke is left unnamed, most commentators assume that it is the destruction of Shekhem in *Bereshit* 34. Following the rape⁴ of Dinah, it was Shimon and Levi who killed everyone in the city of Shekhem in order to extricate her from her unfortunate union. Because of this unacceptable act, Yaakov felt that he had to divide Shimon and Levi from each other.

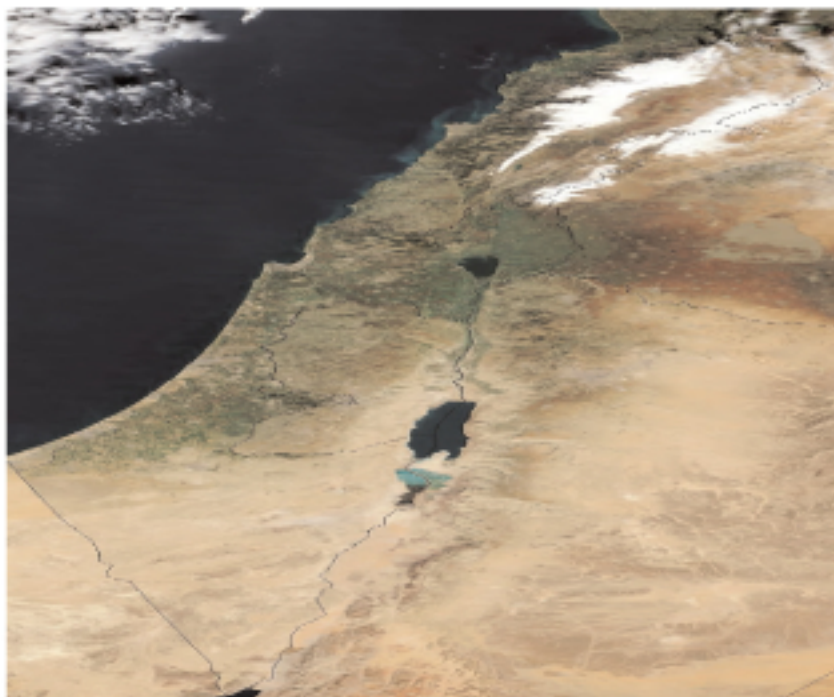
However, Moshe's blessing to the two sons was completely different:

"And to Levi he said, 'Your Urim ve-Tumim belong to your righteous man whom you tried at Masah and strove with at Mei Merivah, who said regarding his father and his mother, 'I have not seen them,' and his brothers he did not recognize, and his sons he did not know, for they guarded Your word and protected Your covenant. They will teach Your laws to Yaakov and Your instruction to Israel; they will place incense before You and offerings on your altar. Bless, God, his property, and be appeased with his actions; crush the loins of⁵ his enemies and foes so that they will not rise."⁶

We immediately notice two major differences between the blessings of the tribes by Moshe, on the one hand, and their treatment by Yaakov, on the other. First, Shimon is missing from Moshe's blessings.⁷ Second, Levi seems to have undergone a drastic change – before, he was shunned; here, he was even given the role of a priest! What changed?

The Midrash⁸ explains that both Shimon and Levi had sinned in Shekhem, but their be-

havior after sinning differentiated them from each other. Whereas Shimon had continued in his path of sinning, resulting in his descendants' illicit relationships with the daughters of Moab, Levi had reformed his ways. The Tribe of Levi, when called upon, was zealous for God both in the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf and during the very time in which the Tribe of Shimon showed the incorrigibility of its moral flaws: it was none other than Pinhas, from the tribe of Levi, who killed the leader of Shimon when he committed adultery with the daughters of Moab. In this way, Levi showed that he had performed *teshuvah*, repentance, and that he was fitting to be the priestly tribe. Therefore, the Midrash concludes, Moshe blessed only Levi and not Shi-



mon.⁹

However, closer examination of the consequences of Yaakov's statements reveals a more nuanced picture. First, as a consequence of Shimon's treatment in Yaakov's blessings, Yehoshua never allotted a separate portion of the Land of Israel for Shimon; he inherited with the Tribe of Yehudah. In fact, it appears that by the time of David, Shimon had assimilated into the Tribe of Yehudah to a certain extent, and even the cities granted to Shimon were considered Judean cities.¹⁰ Although Levi was indeed given the role of a priestly tribe, he also never got an independent inheritance.¹¹ In contrast to the Midrash's implication that Levi was reinstated into his original role, he never fully regained the status of a regular tribe. Since the pronouncement of Yaakov, Levi would always be dependent on the other tribes for his sustenance.¹² Perhaps more impor-

tantly, Shimon and Levi would never rule over other people. What, in particular, did Shimon and Levi do that merited this punishment?

Abarbanel¹³ suggests that the reason that Shimon and Levi were not permitted to have an independent inheritance is that after killing the residents of Shekhem, they plundered their booty.¹⁴ Had Shimon and Levi merely killed Shekhem, the prince of the city, they would have been justified, since they would only have been acting in defense of their sister Dinah. However, they also killed everyone else in the city and stole all of their possessions. This further step was an indication that their intentions were not solely righteous; they were propelled by greed. This greed made them unfitting to be kings, for a king must rule justly and fairly;

other nation. However, the reason that we never harmed any other nation is that we were never given the opportunity – we were always under the control of someone else. Once we established control of an autonomous state, the real test began – would we continue to follow in the footsteps of our fathers and become a benign and constructive force in the region, or would we mimic the nations who persecuted us? By always performing our actions only with the purest of intentions, we can ensure that we continue to deserve the tremendous gift – and challenge – of an autonomous existence in the Land of Israel.

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¹ So rendered by Rashi, Hertz, and NJPS. Others: "roots" (Ibn Ezra), "dwelling places" (Onkelos, Ramban, and Radak).

² *Kavod* often means "presence"; cf. Shemot 24:17.

³ To "hamstring" is to sever the tendons of the leg, rendering an animal immobile.

⁴ *Bereshit* 49:5-7.

⁵ See Ramban to *Devarim* 22:23; Yael Shemesh, "Rape is Rape is Rape: The Story of Dinah and Shechem," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 119/1, 2-21; and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, 445-481. Contrast to Ellen van Wolde, "Does *Inna* Denote Rape?" *Vetus Testamentum*, 52/4, 528-544; Dana Fewell and David Gunn, "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 110/2, 193-211. According to Pace Wolde's excellent analysis of the broader uses of *innah* in *Bereshit* 34, *innah* most certainly does denote rape.

⁶ *Motayim* here poses a syntactical problem. From the context in the verse, it appears to be a construct form, but the word itself does not take the form of a construct. Several possibilities have been suggested. Ibn Ezra reads *motayim* as a direct object that modifies "crush" (this would be translated very roughly as "loin-crush his enemies"). In a conversation I had with an itinerant linguist over *Simhat Torah*, two additional possibilities were pointed out to me. Some have read the *mem* of *motayim* as an enclitic *mem* (see Horace Hummel, "Enclitic Mem in Early Northwest Semitic, Especially Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1957 (76/2), 85-107). Although the import of

someone susceptible to bribes or corruption can never be appointed king.

Taking Abarbanel's basic understanding of the story of Shekhem, I would like to develop it one step further. Not only were Shimon and Levi prevented from being kings, they were also prevented from ever conquering and establishing a government in an area totally under their control. As noted above, Shimon was subject to the rule of Yehudah, Levi was subject to the rule of all the other tribes. It is possible that this is the lesson we are to take from the story of Shimon and Levi: When one becomes responsible for ruling over a territory that includes others, one must constantly make sure that one's actions are always done only with the best intentions. Yeshayahu Liebowitz notes¹⁵ that throughout the Jews' stay in Exile, we developed a sort of pride in the fact that we never oppressed or harmed any