

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Vayechi

The Short and Long-Term Effects of Yaakov's Blessings

A central section of our parsha deals with the *berachos* which Yaakov gave to each of his sons before he passed away, indicating the particular role that each tribe would play in the future of the Jewish People.

If we would ask: of what benefit were these *berachos* for the Jewish People, we would probably answer that there was none forthcoming for the next two hundred, since they only really pertained to the future when we were already in our land; and the reason Yaakov gave these *berachos* now was very simply because he was soon to pass away and it was not feasible to give them any later than this. However, from a comment of the Meshech Chochmah later on, in Chumash Shemos,¹ we can discern that the significance and benefit of the *berachos* to the brothers expressed themselves in a much more immediate way.

As we know, the Midrash² states that the Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Mitzrayim in the merit of the fact that they maintained a distinct sense of national identity. This was reflected in the fact that they did not change their names or their language from Hebrew to Egyptian. What gave them the fortitude of spirit to maintain this identity and resist the pressure to try and integrate fully into Egyptian society? The answer is, they had already received, through Yaakov's *berachos*, a vision of their national destiny, including the specific role that each tribe would play in the fulfilment of that destiny. This vision gave them strength to withstand the difficulties of all that they would endure in Mitzrayim during the two hundred years that they were there. Thus, the impact of Yaakov's *berachos* was felt long before we entered the Land of Israel; indeed, the *berachos* were what strengthened us throughout our exile and *enabled us* to endure and ultimately to get to our Land.

Indeed, with this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah offers a fascinating explanation of a comment made by the Midrash. There is a well-known idea that the tribe of Levi were not subjected to the hardships of slavery in Mitzrayim, on account of

¹ 6:13.

² Mechilta Bo sec. 5.

their unique dedication to Torah pursuits. However, the Midrash³ states that, from a certain point of view, it was not only Levi who were spared from all those hardships, rather, the tribes of Reuven and Shimon were likewise subjected to less persecution. In the words of the Midrash, “Reuven, Shimon and Levi enjoyed authority status (הנהיגו שררה) in Mitzrayim.” Why were these three tribes different?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that, as mentioned above, the Jewish people were able to withstand the difficulties of oppression and persecution because they were encouraged and fortified by a consciousness of their role in the future destiny of their people. However, the *berachos* which Yaakov gave to the first three brothers were not encouraging, neither in tone nor in substance! Rather, they consisted of words of rebuke over various traits and tendencies which these brothers exhibited in the various episodes of Bilhah and the city of Shechem.

Now, in truth, these too were blessings, as they served to make these brothers aware of these tendencies and to know to circumscribe them or perhaps even to channel them toward positive purposes. Nevertheless, the fact remains that these three *berachos* lacked the positive tone which could serve as a source of *chizuk* during the difficult years to come. Without a *berachah* as a source of strength, there was a concern that had these three tribes been subjected to the same hardships as the other tribes, they would not have been able to withstand them and might very well lose hope and disintegrate. It is for this very reason they were not subjected to the same level of hardship and enjoyed a relatively privileged status that their harsher *berachos* would allow them to endure!

From the Haftarah: Wisdom that Protects

וְשָׁמַרְתָּ אֶת מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Safeguard the charge of Hashem, your God (Melachim II, 2:3)

³ Bamidbar Rabbah 13:8.

This week's haftarah discusses David Hamelech's parting instructions to his son, Shlomo, just prior to his passing. The Meshech Chochmah explains the meaning of this particular phrase based on the Gemara's explanation⁴ of the words in Chumash Vayikra⁵ "וַיִּשְׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת מִשְׁמְרֹתַי" – as saying "עשו משמרת למשמרתי" – provide a safeguard for my charges," referring to the protective enactments which the Rabbanan set up to protect against potential violation of a Torah prohibition. And indeed, the Gemara⁶ informs us that Shlomo instituted protective laws of this nature, such as *netilas yadayim* and *eiruvei chatzeiros*.

In this vein, the Meshech Chochmah explains a comment found in the Midrash regarding Shlomo's wisdom, which is described by the pasuk as "כְּחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל הַיָּם – like the sand on the seashore." The simple meaning of this phrase is that it describes the vast scope of Shlomo's wisdom. However, the Midrash⁷ explains it as saying, "מה חול גדר לים כך היתה חכמה גדורה לשלמה" – Just as sand forms a boundary around the sea, so, too, Shlomo's wisdom formed a boundary." The "boundary" to which the Midrash refers is to the protective fence which Shlomo's enactments formed around the laws of the Torah.

Making Room for the Divine Presence

וְגַם אֶתֶּה יָדַעְתָּ אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לִי יוֹאָב בֶּן צְרוּיָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְשָׁנֵי שָׂרֵי צְבָאוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל
לְאַבְנֵר בֶּן נֵר וְלַעֲמָשָׂא בֶּן יִתָּר וַיְהִי־גַם וַיִּשְׁסָם דְּמֵי מַלְחָמָה בְּשָׁלֹם

Furthermore, you know what Yoav ben Tzeruah did to me, what he did to two commanders of the armies of Israel – to Avner ben Ner and to Amasa ben Yeser – whom he killed, shedding blood of war in peacetime (ibid. pasuk 5)

Among David's specific instructions to Shlomo was to see to it that Yoav ben Tzeruah be brought to justice for his murder of Avner and Amasa, two of David's commanders. On a basic level, this was simply a matter of seeing to it that justice be done and that Yoav pay for his crimes. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that there was a particular for Shlomo to see to this in terms of his own life's mission, which included building the Beis Hamikdash.

⁴ Yevamos 21a.

⁵ 18:30.

⁶ Shabbos 14b.

⁷ Bamidbar Rabbah 19:3

The ultimate goal in building the Beis Hamikdash is creating a place which allows for the Shechinah (Divine Presence) to dwell in this world. The Sifrei states in the end of Parshas Masei⁸ that one of the primary forces which serves to distance the Shechinah from the world is the shedding of innocent blood. In this regard, the pasuk states, “ וְלֹא תִקְחוּ כֹפֶר לְנַפְשׁ רֹצֵחַ וְלֹא תִטְמֵא אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שׁוֹכֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ – You shall not accept ransom for the life of a murderer... You shall not defile the land... in whose midst I dwell.” This teaches us that not only does the sin of murder itself distance the Shechinah from the land, but so too does the sin of neglect to bring the murderer to justice.

For this reason, David instructs Shlomo to punish Yoav for the murders of Avner and Amasa, for Yoav's going unpunished for these acts constituted an impediment to Shlomo's mission. Only after Yoav had been brought to justice for his crimes could Shlomo proceed to provide an abode for the Shechinah through the building of the Beis Hamikdash.

חזק חזק ונתחזק

⁸ Sec 161.