BS”D

*Parshas Vayechi*

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Yaakov Blesses His Sons

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

Yaakov calls his sons together before he dies. He tells them what will befall in the end of days. When he concludes, the Torah tells us (Breishis 49:28), “This is what their father said to them. He blessed them; each man according to his blessing did he bless them.”

What is this passage adding? Didn’t the Torah already tell us each individual blessing that Yaakov gave his sons?

The Rashbam understands this passage as a sort of summary. These then are the blessings of the future of each tribe which Yaakov previously elucidated.

The Ibn Ezra holds that the previous individual blessings to each tribe were not actually blessings at all. After all, he didn’t bless Reuven, Shimon, and Levi. He criticized them, in fact. The twelve statements to his sons are prophecies about their future and not blessings. Afterwards, in our passage, the Torah tells us that Yaakov blessed all of his sons, but it doesn’t tell us what the blessings were, merely that each son received his appropriate blessing.

Rashi raises the same issue as the Ibn Ezra. Our passage says he blessed them, yet some of the sons did not receive blessings. Rashi, therefore, says that, in addition to what Yaakov said before, he now blessed all of his children including Reuven, Shimon, and Levi.

Is Rashi stating the same view as the Ibn Ezra that the previous passages were prophecies and not blessings? Rashi continues and explains the last words of the passage, “Each man according to his blessing he blessed *them*.” Shouldn’t it have said “he blessed *him*?” Rashi explains: Yaakov blessed Yehuda with the strength of a lion, Binyomin with the quality of a wolf, Naftali with the swiftness of a deer. When the Torah says “he blessed *them*,” it means that *all* of Yaakov’s children were blessed with these qualities. From this comment, we see that Rashi does refer to the prophecies to the twelve sons as blessings, not like the Ibn Ezra’s opinion. Rashi, however, adds that even though Yaakov’s statements to Reuven, Shimon, and Levi were in fact not blessings, Yaakov made up for it by blessing them as well albeit those blessing were not specified.

The Ohr HaChaim suggests that Yaakov’s declarations to his first three sons were, in fact, blessings although they sound like criticism. Yaakov mentions Reuven’s birthright although he takes it away from him. The Ohr HaChaim feels that the very mention of it is an indication that some day it will be restored to Reuven. He quotes a ChaZaL that in the future era the Divine service will be restored to the firstborn.

Similarly, cursing Shimon and Levi’s anger actually repaired them and weakened their anger. Also, dispersing them in Israel proved to be beneficial to them. Accordingly, even the statements to the first three sons could be considered a blessing.

There is another very important comment that the Ohr HaChaim makes on the passage, “Each man according to his blessing.” Each individual, each soul, has its own innate qualities. Yaakov blessed each son that he should find and develop his own particular talents and skills.

He also explains the final passage, “He blessed them,” i.e., in plural. If one brother (i.e., tribe) is successful, that affects positively all of the other brothers (tribes). In other words, if Israel is united, the success of any one branch is shared by the others to a certain extent. “They” are all blessed by the blessing of each individual tribe.

There is a Midrash Rabbah in Shir HaShirim (4:7) that discusses various reasons why in the Parsha of Vaeira, the lineage of the tribes Reuven, Shimon, and Levi are listed, but not that of the other tribes. The simplest reason is that the Torah wanted to list the genealogy of Moshe from the tribe of Levi, so it was appropriate to first list the tribes of the two elder brothers Reuven and Shimon. Another reason given is that most of the Jews in Egypt sank into idolatry, but these three tribes did not. A third explanation is that after Yosef died, the leadership of the Jewish people passed to Reuven, the oldest son. When he died, it passed to the next brother Shimon, and upon Shimon’s death, it passed to Levi. Levi was the last surviving brother, so the leadership was not passed on to the tribe of Yehuda. Only in a later generation (in the time of David) would the leadership be conveyed to the tribe of Yehuda.

Yet another explanation is linked to the subject we have been discussing, which is whether Yaakov’s declarations to his first three sons are considered blessings or not. The Midrash says that the genealogy of Reuven, Shimon, and Levi is mentioned here (in Parshas Vaeira) because Yaakov criticized those sons in his blessings. They accepted this criticism humbly in the spirit of the Proverb (15:31), “He who heeds the rebuke of life dwells among the wise,” and thus merited to have their tribes listed this extra time.

I suggest, based on this Midrash, that we may count Yaakov’s criticism of these three sons as a blessing. Because they accepted it, they learned from it. Only if you accept justified criticism can you change and grow, repair the damage you have done, and become the best person you can be. What greater blessing can there possibly be?