

VeZot Haberakhah: An Exegetical Medley

1. A Change in the Lineup

Reuben, Simon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin (Manasseh, Ephraim)

QUESTION: In what order did Yaakov “bless” his sons?

ANSWER:

- (a) Yaakov first blessed his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh—inverting their birth order—before turning to his own sons.
- (b) Subsequently, however, he reverted to Reuben, the firstborn, and continued, in order, through Judah
- (c) Then he blessed Zebulun and Issachar out of turn, as well as inverting their own birth order.
- (d) Dan, Gad, Asher and Naftali were next, with Naftali out of birth sequence.
- (e) Finally, Joseph and Benjamin.

QUESTION: In what order did Moses bless them?

ANSWER:

- (a) Beginning with Reuben, the firstborn, seems to be S.O.P. The elimination of Simon is without obvious reason (although the behavior of Zimri is suggestive—cf. IBN EZRA Devarim 33:6), as is the inversion of Judah and Levi (although Moses could be trying hard not to treat his own tribe prejudicially).
- (b) The interpolation of Joseph and Benjamin could be an attempt to distribute the blessings on a more equitable basis based upon matrilineal relationships.
- (c) The interpolation of Issachar and Zebulun may also be matrilineally inspired—an attempt to group the children of Leah and Rachel together in the beginning with the children of Bilhah and Zilpah all together at the end. The precedence of Zebulun over Issachar, again (!), has no apparent reason.
- (d) No apparent reason for the precedence of Gad over Dan and Naftali, nor for his separation from his brother, Asher.

Here are three verses that list the names of the five daughters of Tzelaḥ. In two of them (Numbers 26:33 and 27:1), the list is: Mahlah, Noah, Haglah, Milkah, Tirtzah. In the third (Numbers 36:11), however, the order varies: Mahlah, Tirtzah, Noah, Haglah, Milkah.

NEHAMA LEIBOWITZ

The reader may think that the interpreter is burdening the change in sequence with a significance it really lacks. That is not the case. Perhaps we can endear the exegetical approach to the contemporary consciousness by citing a detail from the Shakespearean play Hamlet. The king, who murdered his brother, and the queen summon the two wicked courtiers, Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern, and induce them to spy on Hamlet, their erstwhile boon companion, and reveal to them his secrets. Their request concludes as follows (Act 2 Scene 2, ll. 33 – 34):

KING: Thanks Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

QUEEN: Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz.

This informs us that they are regarded equally by both the king and queen neither one is given preference less they become jealous of one another so that they may devote themselves wholeheartedly to the dastardly plot.

2. The Kiss of Death

דברים ל"ד (ה) וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבְרָה' בְּאַרְץ מוֹאָב עַל־פִּי ה':

So Moses the servant of Hashem died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. (OJPS)

רש"י על פי י"י – בנשיקה.

BY THE COMMAND (lit., MOUTH) OF THE LORD – by the Divine kiss (Moed Katan 28a; cf. Rashi on Numbers 20:1).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא בתרא דף יז עמוד א

תנו רבנן: ששה לא שלט בהן מלאך המות, ואלו הן: אברהם, יצחק ויעקב, משה, אהרן ומרים. אברהם, יצחק ויעקב, דכתיב בהו: בכל, מכל כל; משה, אהרן ומרים, דכתיב בהו: העל פי ה'. והא מרים לא כתיב בה על פי ה'! אמר ר"א: מרים נמי בנשיקה מתה, דאתיא שם שם ממשה, ומפני מה לא נאמר בה על פי ה'? שגנאי הדבר לומר.

Our Rabbis taught: Six there were over whom the Angel of Death had no dominion, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob we know because it is written in connection with them, "in all, of all, all" (כל, מכל, כל). Moses, Aaron and Miriam because it is written in connection with them [that they died] "By the mouth of the Lord." But the words 'by the mouth of the Lord' are not used in connection with [the death of] Miriam? — R. Eleazar said: Miriam also died by a kiss, as we learn from the use of the word 'there' [שם, in connection both with her death] and with that of Moses. And why is it not said of her that [she died] by the month of the Lord? — Because such an expression would be disrespectful.

Maimonides: Guide (III:51):

The meaning of this saying is that these three died in the midst of the pleasure derived from the knowledge of God and their great love for Him. When our Sages figuratively call the knowledge of God united with intense love for Him a kiss, they follow the well-known poetical diction, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (ישקני מנשיקות פיהו); Song of Songs 1:2). This kind of death, which in truth is deliverance from death, has been ascribed by our Sages to none but to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

3. Famous Last Words—But Whose?

רש"י דברים ל"ד:ה'

וימת שם – איפשר משה מת וכתב: "וימת שם"? אלא מכאן ואילך כתב יהושע. ר' מאיר אומר: איפשר ספר תורה חסר כלום, והוא אומר: "לקוח את ספר התורה הזה" (דברים ל"א:כ"ו)? אלא הקב"ה אומר ומשה כותב בדמע.

AND MOSES DIED THERE – Is it possible that Moses, died, and then wrote: "And Moses died there"? But, thus far did Moses write, from here and onward Joshua wrote. Rabbi Meir said: But is it possible that the Book of the Torah would be lacking anything at all, and yet it would state before the account of Moses' death was written in it, (Deuteronomy 31:26) "Take this book of the Torah" –? Rather the Holy One, blessed be He, dictated this, and Moses wrote it in tears (Sifrei Devarim 357:28; Bava Batra 15a, Menachot 30a).

אבן עזרא דברים ל"ד:א'

ויעל משה – לפי דעתי: כי מזה הפסוק כתב יהושע, כי אחר שעלה משה לא ירד, ובדרך נבואה כתבו. והעד: "ויראהו י"י את כל הארץ", "ויאמר י"י אליו" (דברים ל"ד:ד), גם "ויקבר אתו" (דברים ל"ד:ו).

AND MOSES WENT UP. I believe that Joshua wrote from this verse onward, for Moses did not write after he ascended. Joshua wrote prophetically. "And the Lord showed him"; "And the Lord said unto him" (v. 4); and also, "And he was buried" (v. 6) are proof.

אבן עזרא דברים א:א'

ואם תבין סוד השנים עשר, גם ויכתוב משה (דברים ל"א:ט'), והכנעני אז בארץ (בראשית י"ב:ו), בהר י"י יראה (בראשית כ"ב:ד'), והנה ערשו (דברים ג':א'), תכיר האמת.

If you understand the secret of the twelve and also that of "So Moses wrote" (Deut. 31:22); and "the Canaanite was then in the Land" (Gen. 12:6); "and In the mount where the Lord is seen" (Gen. 22:14); and "behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron" (Deut. 3:11); then you will recognize the truth.

בראשית י"ב (ו) וַיַּעֲבֹר אַבְרָם בְּאַרְץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁלֹם עַד אֵלוֹן מוֹרֶה וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאַרְץ:

Avram passed through the land to the site of Shekhem, to Elon Moreh, and the Canaanites were **then** in the land.

יוסף טוב-עלם: צפנת פענח

נראה שלא¹ כתב משה זאת המלה בכאן. רק יהושע או אחד משאר הגביאים כתבו כאשר מצאנו בספר משלי (כ"ה א') גם אלה² משלי שלמה אשר הסתיקו אנשי חזקיה מלך יהודה. כי אחר³ ששלמה⁴ חבר הספר למה נזכר שם חזקיה שנולד אחר כמה דורות. רק היה זה קבלה⁵ בידם איש מפי איש שלמה. ועל כן כתבו⁶ ונחשב כאלו שלמה כתבו⁷. וככה בכאן היה קבלה⁸ בירי⁹ ישראל שבימי אברהם היה הכנעני בארץ וכתב אותו אחד מן הגביאים בכאן. ואחר שיש לנו להאמין בדברי קבלה וכדברי נבואה מה לי שכתבו משה או שכתבו¹⁰ נביא אחר הואיל ודברי כלם אמת והם כנבואה; ואם תאמר הנה כתוב לא תוסיף

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה
שְׁכָל הַתּוֹרָה הַמְצוּיָה עִתָּהּ בְּיַדֵּינוּ
הִיא הַנְּתוּנָה לְמֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ עָלָיו הַשְּׁלוֹם.

8. I believe with perfect faith
that the entire Torah now in our hands
is the same one that was given to Moses our teacher,
peace be upon him.

In this, its popular formulation, this seems to imply a fundamentalist position, mandating the exclusivity of Mosaic authorship. But we have already noted that even the Mishnaic sages attributed eight Torah verses to Joshua; surely it was not Maimonides' intention to condemn them! Indeed, in his original, more prolix formulation of these articles (in his Commentary on the Mishnah), he explains that Moses' personal transcription of the Torah (*torah mi-sinai*) is subordinate to the primary belief in its divine origin (*torah min ha-shamayim*).