

December 7, 2013 Parashat Vayigash

Shabbat Shalom. Sorry to be back here so soon. This d'var torah is being given in honor of my father's yahrtzeit. No. 28 for those of us counting. May his n'shama have an aliyah.

Unlike my last d'var torah that had to address two parshiyot because my mother's yahrtzeit fell on the day after Shabbat, and so it was a bit long, my father's yahrtzeit is actually today, so I only need to address this week's parasha. So, good news, this d'var torah is short.

In Vayigash, Yehudah makes his plea to Yoseph, Yoseph reveals himself to his brothers, he sends them back home to tell Ya'akov he's alive, Ya'akov and family are brought to Egypt, Ya'akov is introduced to Pharaoh, and Joseph saves the Egyptians from starvation and greatly enriches Pharaoh..

I want to talk about one point, related to one pasuk. It is unrelated to anything I just mentioned: the second pasuk in Perek 47. To understand it, however, we have to read the first pasuk of that perek.

[Read Hebrew] "Then Joseph came and told Pharaoh, and he said: My father and my brothers and their flocks and their cattle and everything they own, have come from the land of Canaan and they are now in the land of Goshen." Basically, Joseph wants his brothers and family set apart from the Egyptians in Goshen and he tries to accomplish that by explaining to Pharaoh that they are experienced only as shepherds and so Goshen is the place for them to live because of its pastureland.

The second pasuk states, "And from part of his brothers he took five men and stood them before Pharaoh." Pharaoh then goes on to question them about their being shepherds.

Yoseph had 10 brothers. So why did he only present 5? The normal thing would be to present all 10. Or, perhaps, if he wasn't presenting all of them, you'd expected him to present just 1, Binyamin, his brother from the same mother. Also, which were the five presented?

Now some among you might be thinking, Who cares? Why does it matter? And the short answer is, we care because everything contained in the Torah is important. That the case whether it's because you believe the Torah is divinely written or divinely inspired but written by Moshe or, perhaps, by others. For more on that subject, perhaps it'll be addressed in the one of the talks being given next Shabbat by Rabbi Farber.

Who were the five? This answer is not so easy. It's not written in the Torah and, surprise, there is a disagreement among the m'phorshim. One opinion is the 5 were Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yissachar and Binaymin. 4 children of Leah and 1 of Rachel. The other opinion is they were Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphatali and Zevulun. Leah's youngest and the children of Bilhah and Zilpah.

Which list more likely correct? Before addressing that, what are 2 things noticeable in the two lists? One, is that Yehudah is the only brother not on either list. Two, is that no name is on both lists. I'm no mathematician, but the odds of two lists of five of 10 brothers not overlapping at all is probably something close to 1 out of a zillion. Let's keep that in mind.

Our first proposed answer comes Sifre D'varim, a Tannaitic midrash which collected the braiisas relevant to Sefer D'varim. This book comes from the time that the mishna was written. It's very old. No answer give to why Joseph presented only 5 of his brothers instead of all of them. But it's stated that Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphatali and Zevulun were the ones presented. Why, because the "katzeh" in our pasuk in Vayigash should be interpreted to mean "the end" and these were the last 5 tribes blessed by Moshe in parasha Zot Ha'Bracha at the end of the Torah.. The problem with this is that "the end" is not actually what "katzeh" means. Although ArtScroll translates it as such, our other chumash translates it literally to mean "taken from."

Our second proposed answer comes later in time from the Talmud Bavli (Bava Kamma, p. 92). There, without reference to Sifre D'varim, it's assumed that Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphatali and Zevulun were the 5 brothers presented but without any reference to that being because they were the last tribes blessed by Moshe. Rather, the reason is given that these were the 5 tribes whose names were repeated by Moshe in his b'rachot and that was because these were the lesser weaker brothers. Over 500 years later, Rashi makes clear that Joseph only wanted to present to Pharoah the brothers who were "least in strength." The reason was that Joseph didn't want any of his brothers to be asked to serve in the Egyptian army.

There's a problem with this, however. Yehuda was also named twice! But we know Yehudah was not weak. He was strong like a lion based on Yaakov's blessing to that effect given in parasha Va'Yechi. So, in the Talmud Bavli, Rabbah bar Meri states that Yehuda's name was mentioned twice for a different reason. It was due to him getting a special blessing from Moshe on account of the potential banishment Yehuda had faced when he guaranteed to Ya'akov the well-being of Binyamin, which banishment was rescinded; and a second time to signify the acceptance of Yehuda's prayer. Eh. It seems like a stretch. Notwithstanding the explanation of Rabbah bar Meri, it would seem to make more sense to treat Yehuda's double naming no differently than the double naming of all of the 5 other brothers.

This leads us to a third opinion, from Bereshiet Rabba. This was written after the time of the G'mara. It posits that the 5 brothers presented by Joseph were Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yisachar and Binaymin. The reason for the exact opposite list is easy enough to explain. In Zot HaBracha, when blessing these tribes, Moshe mentions their names only once. Bereshiet Rabba, understood this to mean that those tribes were weaker. This would appear to make more sense, and it would avoid having to distinguish and differentiate the double naming of Yehuda by Moshe.

Those that support the Sifre D'varim and Talmud Bavli opinions claim that the author of Beresheit Rabba was unaware or had forgotten the explanation given by Rabbah bar Meri in Bava Kamma with respect to Yehuda's double naming by Moshe.

So, which position is more convincing? This is a question that I cannot tell you how many times Lynda and I have argued...often late in the night when she was sound asleep.

I think that the latter is more convincing for a couple of reasons.

One, Yehudah's name is said twice in Zot HaBracha.

Two, Binyamin is often referred to as a weaker son. That is one of the reasons why, in Parasha Miketz, Perek 42, pasuk 4, Ya'akov says to his sons before their first trip down to Egypt that they shouldn't take Binyamin: "Pen Yikra-aynu soof" Lest danger befall him." Of course, a danger could befall Binyamin from GD at any time. But the travails of travelling to Egypt was perceived to increase that likelihood. (Another reason given is that Binyamin was then thought by Ya'akov to be only surviving child of Rachel.)

In response, some commentators have suggested that just like we know that Yehuda was one of the strongest brothers, using the first list as the list of the weaker brothers leaves us with a problem. That would mean Shimon and Levi, the two who alone killed all the men of Shechem and the one (Shimon) who Yoseph was careful to choose to keep in prison while Binyamin was being sent for, are among the five weaker brothers.

To deal with that issue, we must remember the following. Shimon and Levi did not kill the male inhabitants of Shchem in a battle. They killed them on the painful 3rd day after they performed a brit on themselves and when they could not defend themselves. Two, Yoseph chose Shimon to imprison not because of his strength. Mephorshim bring down that it was in fact either because Shimon was the one who mocked him when he came toward his brothers in the field long ago and who actually threw him into the pit. Or, alternatively, it's because Yoseph was simply taking the oldest brother hostage and he would not imprison Reuven because he knew that Reuven had not been involved in selling him to the Midyanim.

So, if you're asked, I recommend going with Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yisachar and Binaymin.

Shabbat Shalom
Arthur Rosenson