

## 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: Can you propose a reason for any (or all) of the changes?

ANSWER:

- (a) The precedence given to Ephraim and Menasheh is because Yosef brought them along on his visit to his ailing father. As long as they were there, albeit coincidentally, he blessed them. The inversion of their birth order is explained by Yaakov himself (and is reminiscent of similar inversions of siblings starting with Kayin and Hevel and including Yaakov himself!).
- (b) The planned blessings, however, begin correctly with the firstborn, Reuven, and by continuing through Yehudah, they give the impression that Yaakov intends to follow the birth order all the way through.
- (c) The interruption of the birth order by Yissakhar and Zevulun, however, indicates that what Yaakov really had in mind was to sort his sons by birth-mothers. The precedence of Zevulun over Yissakhar, though, has no apparent reason.
- (d) The postponement of Naftali until after Gad and Asher has no apparent reason.
- (e) The blessings conclude, properly, with the last two sons born.

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**.

Another example:

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**.

רש"י במדבר ל"ו: "א מחלה תרצה וגו' – כאן מנאן **לפי גדולתן** זו מזו בשנים, ונשאו בסדר תולדותן, ובכל המקרא מנאן **לפי חכמתן**, ומגיד **ששקולות** זו כזו.

MAHLA, TIRZA etc., – Here it enumerates them according to their advantage over one another in years and they were married in the order in which they were born. But everywhere else in the Bible, it enumerates them according to their intelligence, teaching us that **they were all equal** (cf. Bava Batra 120a; Rashi on Numbers 27:1).

### 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) וְיָמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדָהּ בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל־פִּי ה':

So Moses the servant of the Lord 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; [רש"י: כלומר, לא חסרו כל טובה.] משה, אהרן ומרים, דכתיב בהו: "על 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.

Given that God has no actual human physical characteristics and that only linguistic convention deems Him possessed of corporeal features and masculine rather than feminine, it is not a theological insight that we acquire here—but an anthropological one: If one truly desires to abide by "the mouth of the Lord" let him observe modesty in speech as well as in action.

במדבר כ' (כד) יִאֲסֹף אֶהְרֹן אֶלְעִמְיוֹ כִּי לֹא יָבֵא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲשֶׁר־מָרִיתֶם אֹתִי לְמִי מְרִיבָה:

"Aaron shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter into the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against my word at the waters of Meribah.

**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" (יישקני 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).

X

#### דברים ל"ד

(1) Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is opposite Jericho. Hashem showed him all the land of Gilead, to Dan, (2) and all Naphtali, and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, to the western sea, (3) and the South, and the Plain of the valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, to Zoar. (4) Hashem said to him, "This is the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your seed.' I have let you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not pass over there." (5) So Moses the servant of Hashem died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Hashem. (6) He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor: but no man knows of his tomb to this day. (7) Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, and his vitality had not abated. (8) The children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping in the mourning for Moses ended. (9) Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands on him. And the children of Israel listened to him, and did as Hashem commanded Moses. (10) There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom Hashem knew face to face, (11) in all the signs and the wonders which Hashem sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, (12) and in all the mighty hand,

(א) וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה מִן־הַעֲרָבָה מִזֵּבֹון הַר נֶבֹו רֹאשׁ הַפְּסֵגָה אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי יְרִיחוֹ וַיִּרְאֶהוּ יְיָ אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֶת הַגִּלְעָד עַד דָּן. (ב) וְאֶת כָּל נַפְתָּלִי וְאֶת אֶרֶץ אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶׁה וְאֶת כָּל אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה עַד הַיָּם הַיְאֻחַרְוֹן. (ג) וְאֶת הַנֶּגֶב וְאֶת הַכְּבֵד בְּקֵעַת יְרִיחוֹ עִיר הַתְּמָרִים עַד צֶעֶר. (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֵלָיו זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְזֶרְעֲךָ אֶתְנַנְּהָ הִרְאִיתִיךָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר. (ה) וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד יְיָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִזְבֵּעַ עַל פִּי יְיָ. (ו) וַיִּקְבֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּנֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מִזְבֵּעַ מִן־בֵּית פְּעוֹר וְלֹא יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת קְבֻרָתוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה. (ז) וּמֹשֶׁה בֶן־מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בָּמָוֶת לֹא כָהָתָה עֵינָיו וְלֹא נָס לַחֹה. (ח) וַיָּבֹכוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה בְּעַרְבַת מִזְבֵּעַ שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יָמָיו בְּכִי אֲבָל מֹשֶׁה. (ט) וַיְהִי־שָׁעָ בֶן־נֹון מֵלֵא רֹחַ הַכֹּמֶה כִּי סָמַךְ מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדָיו עָלָיו וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת מֹשֶׁה. (י) וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ יְיָ פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים. (יא) לְכָל הָאֲתָת וְהַמוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַח יְיָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעֹה וּלְכָל עַבְדָּיו וּלְכָל אֶרְצוֹ. (יב) וּלְכָל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכָל הַמוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

נוסח המקרא מבוסס על מהדורת **מקרא**

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) ויעבר אברם בארץ עד מקום שקם עד אלון מורה והכנעני אז בארץ:

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

אבן עזרא יתכן שארץ כנען תפשה כנען מיד אחר. ואם איננו כן, יש לו סוד, והמשכיל יבין וידום.

יוסף טוב-עלם: צפנת פענח (France, 11<sup>th</sup> century)

נראה שלא<sup>1</sup>) כתב משה זאת המלה בכאן. רק יהושע או אחד משאר הגביאים כתבוה כאשר מצאנו בספר משלי (כיה. א') גם אלה<sup>2</sup>) משלי שלמה אשר העתיקו אנשי חזקיה מלך יהודה. כי אחר<sup>3</sup>) ששלמה<sup>4</sup>) חבר הספר למה נזכר שם חזקיה שנולד אחר כמה דורות. רק היה זה קבלה<sup>5</sup>) בידם איש מפי איש שלמה. ועל כן כתבוהו<sup>6</sup>) ונחשב כאלו שלמה כתבו<sup>7</sup>). וכנה בכאן היה קבלה<sup>8</sup>) בירי<sup>9</sup>) 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 שכתבו<sup>10</sup>) נביא אחר הואיל ודברי כלם אמת והם כנבואה; ואם תאמר הנה כתוב לא תוסיף

ח אני מאמין באמונה שלמה

שכל התורה המצויה עתה בידינו  
היא הנתונה למשה רבנו עליו השלום.

- 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.

והיסוד השמיני הוא תורה מן השמים. והוא, שנאמין שכל התורה הזו הנמצאת בידינו היום היא התורה שניתנה למשה, ושהיא כולה מפי הגבורה, כלומר שהגיעה עליו כולה מאת ה' הגעה שקורים אותה על דרך ההשאלה דבור, ואין יודע איכות אותה ההגעה אלא הוא עליו השלום אשר הגיעה אליו, ושהוא במעלת לבלר שקורין לפניו והוא כותב כולה תאריכה וספוריה ומצותיה, וכך נקרא מחוקק. ואין הבדל בין ובני חם כוש ומצרים ופוט וכנען, ושם אשתו מהיטבאל בת מטרד, או אנכי ה', ושמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד, הכל מפי הגבורה והכל תורת ה' תמימה טהורה קדושה אמת. ולא נעשה מנשה אצלם כופר ופוקר יותר מכל כופר אחר אלא לפי שחשב שיש בתורה תוך וקלפה, ושאלו התאריכים והספורים אין תועלת בהם, ומשה מדעתו אמרם, וזהו ענין אין תורה מן השמים, אמרו שהוא האומר שכל התורה כולה מפי הקב"ה חוץ מפסוק אחד שלא אמרו הקב"ה אלא משה מפי עצמו וזה הוא כי דבר ה' בזה - יתעלה ה' ממה שאומרים הכופרים - אלא כל אות שבה יש בה חכמות ונפלאות למי שהבינו ה', ולא תושג תכלית חכמתה, ארוכה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני ים. ואין לאדם אלא להתפלל כמו דוד משיח אלהי יעקב שהתפלל גל עיני ואביטה נפלאות מתורתך. וכן פירושה המקובל גם הוא מפי הגבורה, וזה שאנו עושים היום צורת הסוכה והלולב והשופר והציצית והתפילים וזולתם היא עצמה הצורה שאמר ה' למשה ואמר לנו, והוא רק מוביל שליחות נאמן במה שהביא, והדבור המורה על היסוד הזה השמיני הוא אמרו בזאת תדעון כי ה' שלחני וכו' כי לא מלבי.

**The eighth principle** That the Torah is from Heaven and that is that we believe that this Torah that is given to us through Moshe, our teacher - peace be upon him - is completely from the mouth of the Almighty; which is to say that it all came to him from God, may He be blessed, in a manner that is metaphorically called speech. And no one knows how it came to him except Moshe himself, peace be upon him - since it came to him. And [we believe] that he was like a scribe who is dictated to and writes down all of the events, the stories and the commandments. And therefore, [Moshe] is called the engraver. And there is no difference between "And the sons of Cham were Kush and Mitsrayim" (Genesis 10:6), "and his wife's name was" Meheitabel" (Genesis 36:39), "And Timnah was his concubine" (Genesis 36:12) [ on the one hand] and "I am the Lord, your God" (Exodus 20:2) and "Hear Israel" (Deuteronomy 6:4) [on the other]; since they are all from the mouth of the Almighty and it is all the Torah of God - complete, pure and holy truth. And anyone who says, "These type of verses or stories were written by Moshe on his own," is for our sages and prophets a heretic, and one who reveals [incorrect] faces [of the Torah] more than all of the heretics; since he thinks that there is a heart and a peel to the Torah and that these chronicles and stories don't have a point to them and that they are from Moshe our teacher - peace be upon him. And this matter of one who holds that the Torah is not from Heaven, the sages said about it (Sanhedrin 99a), that it is one who believes the whole Torah is from the mouth of the Almighty except for this one verse, which the Holy One, blessed be He, did not say, but rather it was from Moshe himself. And this is "Since he disgraced the word of the Lord" (Numbers 15:31) - God, may He be blessed, is above the statements of the heretics. Rather every single word of the Torah contains wisdom and wonders for the one who understands them. And their ultimate wisdom is not [fully] grasped, as 'its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.' And a man should only walk in the footsteps of David, the anointed of the God of Yaakov, who prayed (Psalms 119:18), "Uncover my eyes and I shall look upon the wonders of Your Torah." And so too, the accepted understanding of the Torah is also from the Almighty; and [so] that which we today make a [certain] form for the *sukkah*, the *lulav*, the *shofar*, the *tsitsit*, the *tefillin* and other [such matters], it is the exact form that God, may He be blessed, said to Moshe, and which [Moshe] told to us - and he is reliable in his charge. And the statement that indicates this principle is that which is stated (Numbers 16:28), "with this shall you know that it is the Lord that sent me to do all of these acts, and it is not from my heart."