

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #29: Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 16-17 – Part 1

Yehuda and Yosef

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 16 and 17 of Sefer Yehoshua spell out the tribal boundaries of Yosef. Recall that last time we considered Chapter 15, in which the borders of Yehuda were delineated. These two tribes, Yehuda and Yosef, were of course the most important in ancient Israel. Their pivotal tribal roles were already indicated by the Divinely-ordained arrangement of the camp of Israel, during the peregrinations in the wilderness. Then, Yehuda and its associated tribes of Yissachar and Zevulun, were arrayed on the prestigious eastern flank, along the axis of approach to the Mishkan and next to the leadership clans of Moshe and Aharon (see Bemidbar 2:1-9; 3:38). The Yosef encampment, in contrast, composed of the tribes of Efraim, Menashe and Binyamin, was positioned on the western side of the Mishkan (2:18-24), opposite the sacred enclosure of the Holy of Holies and next to the priestly family of Gershon (3:23-26).

In effect, then, the Tabernacle was bracketed by these two tribes of Yehuda and Yosef, highlighting not only their relative importance, but also indicating the inherent tension in their relationship concerning the conflicting claims to control over the sacred precinct and, by extension, to the exercise of authority and leadership over the nation. In fact, much was suggested in this polar wilderness arrangement that presaged the future destiny of the people of Israel. After all, while David, who lived some four hundred years after the Exodus, succeeded in forging a nation out of the disparate tribes of Israel, his achievement was short lived. Soon after the demise of his son Shelomo and the dissolution of the United Kingdom of Israel, the ancient tribal rivalries resurfaced, as Yehuda in the south was pitted against the so-called Kingdom of Efraim or Israel in the north. And so the people remained divided until the bitter end: the conquest and exile of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in the 8th century BCE, to be followed by the destruction of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Yehuda some 150 years later by the Babylonians.

EARLIER SOURCES – YOSEF AND HIS BROTHERS

We may, in fact, trace the ancient conflict even further back in Biblical history. Returning to the story of the sons of Ya'acov who were the progenitors of the tribes (see Bereishit chapters 37-46), we note that the two most prominent brothers among the twelve were none other than Yosef and Yehuda. Yosef was his aged father's favorite, groomed for greatness by Ya'acov with the gift of the coat of many colors and himself aware of his precocious talents early on. Though his other brothers may have resented his pretensions mightily, they also knew in their hearts that Yosef's dreams indeed foretold his future rise to prominence. When Yosef unexpectedly fell into their clutches while far from the protective gaze of father Ya'acov, the brothers seized upon the opportunity to plan his death. Though Reuven the firstborn won a brief reprieve for his brother, it was Yehuda who succeeded in preserving Yosef's life by initiating his sale to the Yishma'elites. Later still, it was Yehuda who argued the case so poignantly to the Viceroy (none other than Yosef in disguise), in order to secure the release of Binyamin, an episode that led to Yosef's revelation of his true identity and then his tearful and sincere reunion with his brothers. When Ya'acov's household subsequently descended to Egypt in order to secure survival during the famine then blanketing Canaan, it was Yehuda who served as the vanguard for the migration, arriving ahead of the family to prepare the way.

Both brothers therefore embody the ideals of dynamic leadership and well-placed ambition. Both of them exemplify the paradigm of spiritual striving and maturation, of overcoming setback to triumph in the end. Both remain true to their ideals and loyal to their calling. In other words, while Sefer Yehoshua presents us with the centrality of the tribes of Yehuda and Yosef as it is expressed in the divisions of the Land of Canaan, the critical function of those two tribes is really introduced much earlier, with the riveting account of Yosef and his brothers. In Sefer Yehoshua, the prominence of the two is awarded with expansive territories that are designated ahead of any of the other tribes. But the beginnings of that importance are to be found in the lengthy narratives of Sefer Bereishit, where the respective roles of both are broadly delineated as Yehuda is designated for leadership and Yosef for success. While initially, Yosef and Yehuda are pitted against each other as rivals, in the end they are together responsible for reuniting the family of Israel and for ensuring its well-being in Egypt. It is therefore not only the perils of discord that are indicated by their relationship, but the promise of resolution as well.

EARLIEST SOURCES – LEAH AND RACHEL

If we search even earlier for the source of this primal rivalry and conflict as well as for the hope of its eventual settlement, we come finally to the account of Ya'acov's strained marriage to the two sisters Leah and Rachel (Bereishit Chapters 29-30). Recall that Ya'acov had earlier fled eastward from the wrath of his brother Esav, who blamed his brother for the deceitful theft of the birthright and blessing. Ya'acov arrived empty-handed at the well located in the fields outside of Charan, the ancestral home of his crafty uncle Lavan, the brother of his mother Rivka. There Ya'acov first met the beautiful Rachel, Lavan's daughter and shepherdess, and immediately resolved to marry her. Lavan set upon him a condition of seven years of tending sheep, and to this Ya'acov readily agreed. At the conclusion of the term, however, as the marriage canopy was festally arranged towards dusk, Lavan deviously substituted Leah the older sister. Ya'acov discovered the ruse too late, and while he eventually won Rachel's hand as well, the household was forever dominated by a bitter rivalry between the two sisters. How terribly the matter was exacerbated by Ya'acov's own natural preference for Rachel, whom he loved more. But while the fertile Leah went on to mother six children, Rachel had only two. What is significant for our purposes is to recognize that Leah's offspring included Yehuda, while Yosef and Binyamin were the only children of Rachel.

In essence, then, the competition that existed between the tribes of Yehuda and Yosef throughout the Biblical period had as its source the fractious family of Ya'acov, the distressing dynamic that characterized the relationship between Leah and Rachel. Of course, we must wonder: why did the Torah set up such a situation that was sure to produce friction? Why did the text in Sefer Bereishit devote so much attention to the convoluted relationship of these two women? How do we explain the Torah's only recorded case of polygamy involving sisters?

PERSONAL LIVES AND NATIONAL LIFE

The commentaries have not attempted to provide a comprehensive explanation for every episode in the pained story of Leah and Rachel. Although the local, individual account may strike us as troubling, projecting the story to its national dimension makes it eminently intelligible. This is to say that the story of Leah and Rachel and their children is much more than the account of their personal lives. It is a concise description of the awesome trials and challenges that their descendents will face in their valiant attempts to forge a nation and maintain its unity and integrity in the face of the more natural tendency for narrow self-interest to win the day.

As we stated earlier, the children of Leah included a number of prominent players but chief among them was Yehuda. In the course of the Yosef narratives he emerged as the most significant of the brothers, and as Biblical history unfolded, the tribe of Yehuda became its most potent element. The Davidic line was eventually descended from Yehuda and the capital of Jerusalem was established on its borders.

Rachel's children were but two, Yosef and Binyamin. The entire last third of Sefer Bereishit revolved around the saga of Yosef, and the tribes of Menashe and especially Efraim that descended from his sons later constituted the counterweight to Yehuda's influence on the national polity throughout the Biblical period. After all, the national shrine was housed at Shilo in Efraim for a period of close to four hundred years, from the time that Israel entered Canaan under Yehoshua until the dawn of the monarchy. Israel's first king was none other than Shaul, a descendent of the tribe of Binyamin.

These two poles, Yehuda and Yosef, Leah and Rachel respectively, therefore represent two disparate elements that tended to be in a constant state of rivalry and conflict. As the larger Biblical story played itself out over the course of a thousand years, Yehuda and Yosef, or 'Yehuda and Efraim/Yisrael' in the typical prophetic formulation, gradually draw apart, eventually becoming two separate peoples in the aftermath of Solomon's ignominious end. The 'Kingdom of Efraim' with its eventual capital sited at Shomron was, in the end, exiled by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser in the 8th century BCE. The 'Kingdom of Yehuda,' with its capital at Jerusalem, enjoyed another 150 years of partial independence until itself suffering exile at the hands of Nevuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

EVENTUAL RESOLUTION

Thus, considering the matter from a more 'cosmic' perspective, it is clear that the animosity, enmity, and strife that color the relationship of the two 'sisters,' foreshadowed the very difficult struggles that would unfold as the nation of Israel took shape, and alluded to the conflicts that continued to mold its development until the termination of its sovereignty and national independence almost two millennia after Leah and Rachel had been laid to rest. The account in Sefer Yehoshua is therefore a further expression of the great challenge that faced the nascent nation of Israel: to enter Canaan not in order to follow the detached example of the fractious Canaanite city-states, but instead to become a cohesive people with common goals, shared aspirations, and a collective destiny. Yosef and Yehuda each embodied different

aptitudes and abilities. These were suggestive of variation and diversity, the critical characteristics for any people to possess if they are to fashion a rich and textured national life rather than one that is one-dimensional and shallow.

Of course, the Biblical people of Israel never succeeded in overcoming sectarian and narrow interests to become a truly unified nation. Even while Yehoshua was still alive but especially after his demise, the tribes often pulled in different directions as a function of their local needs and concerns. Their leaders frequently found it difficult to see beyond the limitations of tribalism and factionalism to address the broadest possible concerns of all of the people. First as tribal confederacies and later as independent kingdoms, Yehuda and Efraim were often in competition with each other and occasionally even engaged in open warfare.

Nor did the destruction of the First Temple bring an end to the divisiveness. The strife of Leah and Rachel is sadly still with us awaiting its resolution. Fortunately, the Prophets who lived through the destruction of the first Jewish State were granted a comforting vision of a Messianic future, when Israel would be restored to its land and would finally succeed in transcending its internal divisions to become a single people.

"God said to me: Mortal man, take a branch and inscribe upon it 'for Yehuda and the children of Yisrael his compatriots,' and take another branch and inscribe upon it 'for Yosef the tree of Efraim and all of the House of Yisrael his compatriots.' Draw the branches together to become one in your hand...for thus says the Lord God: Behold I will take the children of Yisrael from among the lands of their exile, and I will gather them from afar and bring them to their land. I will make them into a single nation in the land of the mountains of Yisrael and they will have one king. They will no longer be two nations and will no longer divide into two kingdoms...They will dwell in the land that I gave to My servant Ya'acov, the land in which their ancestors dwelt, and they will dwell upon it, they and their children and their children's children forever...My presence will be upon them and I will be their God, and they will be My people. The nations will then know that I am God Who sanctifies Yisrael, for My Temple shall stand in their midst forever" (Yechezkel Chapter 37).