

## **PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

### **Shimon and Levi in Shekhem**

**By Rav Amnon Bazak**

#### a. The problem

Chapter 34 in our parasha is devoted in its entirety to the episode of Shimon and Levi in Shekhem. The story presents a serious challenge to its readers, for the brothers' act has far-reaching moral implications, and in this case it is very difficult to identify the Torah's attitude toward their actions. In general, the Tanakh conveys a negative judgment in one of two ways: either by means of an explicit statement, indicating that the act was bad (such as, for example, in the story of David and Bat-Sheva: "The thing that David did was bad in God's eyes," Shemuel II 11:27); or indirectly, through mention of the punishment meted out to the perpetrator (for example, the death of Yehuda's sons after the sale of Yosef). Here we find no direct punishment of Shimon and Levi, and although their actions are not looked upon positively by their father, Yaakov, the reason for his displeasure is essentially tactical:

"You have brought trouble upon me to make me odious to the inhabitants of the land – the Canaanites and the Perizites, and since I am few in number they will gather against me and strike me, and I will be destroyed – both I and my household." (Bereishit 34:30)

Furthermore, even after Yaakov's statement of this reason for his censure, it is Shimon and Levi who have the final word on the matter:

"They said: Shall he treat our sister as a harlot?" (34:31)

However, when Yaakov takes leave of his sons before his death, he expresses much harsher criticism of Shimon and Levi, extending beyond the danger that their act may have brought upon him:

"Shimon and Levi are brothers; vessels of cruelty are their swords. Let my soul not enter their council; let my honor not be united with their assembly. For in

their anger they killed a man, and in their self-will they lamed an ox. Cursed is their anger for it is severe, and their wrath, for it is harsh; I shall divide them in Yaakov and scatter them in Yisrael." (49:5-7)

But here again, the intention is not clear, and the commentaries propose different ways of understanding Yaakov's words.

In short, at least upon initial review, the Torah's judgment of the act is not unequivocal. Indeed, the Rishonim are divided in their approach towards the act of Shimon and Levi. On one hand, Rambam writes:

"How are they [the nations of the world] commanded concerning justice? They are obligated to establish judges in every region to judge concerning these [other] six commandments, and to exhort the people. A non-Jew who transgresses one of these seven commandments is to be put to death by the sword. FOR THIS REASON ALL THE MEN OF SHEKHEM WERE DESERVING OF DEATH, FOR SHEKHEM KIDNAPPED [DINA] AND THEY SAW AND THEY KNEW OF IT, BUT THEY DID NOT JUDGE HIM. A non-Jew may be put to death by [the word of] a single witness and by [the verdict of] a single judge, without [the need for] forewarning, and by relatives." (Hilkhos Melakhim 9:14)

Ramban (34:13) disagrees:

"This is not correct, for if it were so, then Yaakov should have been the first to go in and put them to death. And if [the reason for his failure to do so was because] he feared them [the men of Shekhem], why did he express anger at his sons and curse their wrath later on, and punish them by dividing and scattering them? After all, [according to their thinking] had they not merited to perform a mitzva, with faith in God – and had He not saved them?"

Accordingly, he concludes that this act by Yaakov's sons was a sin:

"Regarding the matter of Shekhem: Since the men of Shekhem were wicked and [Yaakov's sons] considered their blood like water [i.e. Shimon and Levi felt it was permissible to spill their blood], therefore Yaakov's sons wanted to exact revenge on them with a vengeful sword. So they killed the king and all the men of his city for they were his servants, heeding his commands. And the circumcision that they had performed was worthless in [Shimon and Levi's] eyes, for [the townspeople] had performed it merely to please their master.

Yaakov now informed them that they had endangered him, as it is written, 'You have brought trouble upon me to make me odious...', and also 'Cursed is their anger...!' FOR THEY HAD ACTED CRUELLY TOWARDS THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY IN SAYING TO THEM – IN HIS PRESENCE – 'WE SHALL DWELL WITH YOU AND WE SHALL BE A SINGLE NATION,' AND THE TOWNSPEOPLE ACCEPTED THIS, BUT [SHIMON AND LEVI] BROKE THEIR WORD. PERHAPS THEY [the inhabitants of Shekhem] WOULD HAVE RETURNED TO GOD, AND THEY [Shimon and Levi] KILLED THEM NEEDLESSLY, FOR THEY HAD DONE THEM NO HARM AT ALL. And this is what Yaakov meant in saying, 'Weapons of cruelty are their swords.'"

In the Ramban's view, then, the sin of Yaakov's sons lay in violating their commitment to the men of Shekhem, who had done them no harm, and who may have repented later on. The source of this critical perception of the brothers' act is in Yaakov's speech to his sons in parashat Vayechi.

Still, we may perhaps view the sin of Yaakov's sons from a different angle.

b. Nothing at all of the 'cherem' shall remain in your hand

Another parasha in the Torah seems to hint at the episode of Shekhem: the parasha of the 'destroyed city' (Devarim 13:13-19). Let us list the parallels between the two parashot:

a. Both concern people who set out to convince the people of their city:

"Chamor and Shekhem, his son, came to the gate of their city and they spoke TO THE MEN OF THEIR CITY, SAYING..." (Bereishit 34:20)

"Good-for-nothing people will go out from among you and brainwash THE INHABITANTS OF THEIR CITY, SAYING..." (Devarim 13:14)

It should be pointed out that these are the only two instances in the Torah where the expression "the men/inhabitants of their city" is used.

b. Both instances describe a serious act that takes place in the city:

"For HE HAD COMMITTED A DISGRACE in Israel by lying with Yaakov's daughter; such an act should not be done." (Bereishit 34:7)

"THIS ABOMINATION WAS COMMITTED among you." (Devarim 13:15)

c. In both cases, the people of the city are punished by the sword for their grievous act:

"They came upon the city unhindered, and they slew every male. And they put Chamor and Shekhem, his son, to death BY THE SWORD." (Bereishit 34:25-26)

"You shall surely smite the inhabitants of that city BY THE SWORD."  
(Devarim 13:15)

However, this comparison actually serves to highlight two central differences between the two parashot. Firstly, as the Ramban noted, the parasha of the "condemned city" deals with a case in which all the people of the city have indeed been led astray to idolatry by idlers, as opposed to Shekhem, where the people of the city "had done them no harm at all." Secondly, there is an obvious difference concerning the spoils. The Torah emphasizes the conclusion of the mission to save Dina as follows:

"It was on the third day when they were in pain that Yaakov's two sons, Shimon and Levi, Dina's brothers, took each man his sword and they came upon the city unhindered, and they killed every male. And they put Chamor and his son, Shekhem, to death by the sword, and they took Dina from Shekhem's house, AND THEY DEPARTED." (Bereishit 34:25-27)

It was specifically then, when no "military need" remained, that Yaakov's sons helped themselves to the spoils:

"Yaakov's sons came upon the slain men and they plundered the city whose inhabitants had defiled their sister. They took their sheep and their cattle and their donkeys, whatever was in the city and whatever was in the fields. And all their wealth and all their children and their wives they took captive and plundered, and all that was in the house." (ibid. 27-29)

This is in complete contrast to the parasha of the condemned city, which concludes with a clear warning:

"You shall destroy it [the city] and all that is in it, and its livestock, by the sword. You shall gather all of its spoils into its open pland you shall burn with fire the city and its spoils, in their entirety, to the Lord your God. It shall be a heap forever; it shall not be rebuilt. Nothing at all of the 'cherem' shall remain in your hand, in order that God may turn back from His fierce anger and grant you mercy, and be merciful towards you, and multiply you as He promised to your fathers." (Devarim 13:16-18)

Why does the Torah emphasize so insistently the importance of not taking from the spoils of the condemned city? The Or Ha-Chaim writes (Devarim 13:18):

"In order that God may... grant you mercy and be merciful towards you' – the intention behind these words is that, since God commanded that all of the inhabitants of the condemned city be put to death by the sword – even its livestock – this act will give rise to a cruel nature in people's hearts. This is as the murderous Yishmaelites have told us in "The King's Saying," that they experience great passion when they kill a person, and the root of mercy cut out from them and they become cruel. So too will this quality become rooted in the murderers of the idolatrous city. Therefore God gives them a promise that He will give them 'mercy' - although natural circumstances would grant them the characteristic of cruelty, the Source of mercy will renew upon them the attribute of mercy, to nullify the attribute of cruelty that is born in them as a result of their act. Scripture says, 'He will be merciful towards you,' demonstrating thereby that so long as a person is in the category of one with a cruel nature, God will treat him accordingly, for God is merciful only towards a merciful person (Shabbat 151b)."

Putting to death all the inhabitants of a city is a very difficult mission, and by nature such an act is likely to bring about the dulling of a person's moral sensibility. The Torah therefore promises that if a person acts for the sake of heaven, the Holy One will miraculously replant the attribute of mercy in the hearts of the murderers (this is the meaning of the promise, "that He may grant you mercy and be merciful towards you and multiply you"), and cancel the moral damage caused by the act.

However, for this purpose there is an obvious precondition: that the entire act be undertaken solely for the sake of heaven, and not to further any personal aim. The Netziv, in his commentary Ha'amek Davar, explains:

"...That He may grant you mercy': [Mercy is required] because the killing of the condemned city causes three evils in Israel:

1. One who kills another person becomes cruel by nature. If an individual is put to death by the court, an agent of the court has already been appointed for that task. But if an entire city must be put to death, then, whether we like it or not, we shall have to accustom a number of people to killing and being cruel.
2. There is no inhabitant of that city who does not have relatives in another city; thus hatred increases in Israel [because the relatives will hate those who carry out the sentence].
3. The act brings about a lack and diminishing of Israel.

Therefore the text promises THAT BY VIRTUE OF THE FACT THAT ONE ENGAGES IN THIS ACT WITHOUT DERIVING ANY BENEFIT FROM PLUNDERING, THEREFORE GOD WILL TURN BACK FROM HIS FIERCE ANGER, and give you mercy – the attribute of mercy."

In light of the above, the sin of Yaakov's sons is revealed in all of its severity. Even if the killing of Shekhem and Chamor was justified, and even if the case could be made for killing all the men of Shekhem, the plundering of the city was not only unjustified, but actually nullified any possible moral justification for killing the city's inhabitants. The taking of the spoils casts a dark moral stain on the act itself, presenting it as an endeavor undertaken out of personal interests.

Now it is easier for us to understand Yaakov's rebuke:

"Shimon and Levi are brothers; vessels of cruelty are their swords. Let my soul not enter their council; let my honor not be united with their assembly. For in their anger they killed a man, and in their self-will they lamed an ox. Cursed is their anger for it is severe, and their wrath, for it is harsh...."

Yaakov introduces his rebuke of Shimon and Levi specifically with the issue of the "vessels of cruelty." It is the taking of the vessels that proved that their "anger" was indeed severe and their wrath harsh, and hence that there was no justification for killing the men – which itself was also undertaken out of "anger."

c. "Remove the foreign gods"

How much more grievous, then, is the plundering when it becomes clear what the spoils taken by Yaakov's sons included:

" God said to Yaakov: Arise, go up to Beit El and dwell there, and make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from Esav, your brother.

Yaakov said to his household and to all who were with him: Remove the foreign gods that are among you; purify yourselves and change your clothes, for we shall arise and go up to Beit El, and there I shall make an altar to God Who answers me in my time of distress, and Who was with me in the way on which I went." (Bereishit 35:1-3)

Yaakov, who himself has just expressed the concern, "You have brought trouble upon me to make me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizites, for since I am small in number they shall gather against me and smite me and I shall

be destroyed, I and my household," now receives a Divine command to return to the Land, but he understands on his own that there is a precondition: the removal of the foreign gods. From where could Yaakov's household have obtained foreign gods? The midrash (Sekhel Tov, Bereishit 35:2) explains:

"The foreign gods that are among you' – which they took from Shekhem, as it is written, 'And all that was in the house' (34:29) – this refers to the idolatry."

Before returning to the Land, Yaakov's children must therefore cleanse themselves of all that they took. They must divest themselves of the spoils: the act of taking them was in itself negative, and all the more so because it included artifacts of idolatry. It must all be buried in the place from which it was taken:

"They gave Yaakov all the foreign gods that were in their hands and all the earrings that were in their ears, and Yaakov buried them under the oak tree THAT WAS BY SHEKHEM. And they journeyed, and the fear of God was upon the cities around them, and they did not pursue after the children of Yaakov." (ibid., 4-5)

Only now is "the fear of God" upon the inhabitants of the land assured. In other words, had Yaakov's children not rid themselves of the spoils which they should not have taken in the first place, Yaakov would have been correct in his prediction that "I shall be destroyed, I and my household."

d. "Shimon and Levi are brothers"

In any act that may be tainted by a suspicion of personal benefit, the test of whether it is undertaken for the stated purpose or out of personal interest is what the person will do in a situation that is not to his benefit. If in this situation the person still acts in accordance with the stated aim, this serves to prove his honesty. But if he acts in the opposite manner, his behavior casts doubt even on his original act.

Shimon and Levi supposedly acted out of a desire to protect their sister. As stated, a heavy cloud of suspicion hung over their act after the plunder of the city. Would Shimon and Levi have been so quick to protect Dina if it had involved going against their personal interest? The answer to this question is soon revealed:

"They saw him from afar, and before he could approach them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to each other: Behold, here comes the dreamer!" (37:18-19)

Who exactly are the speakers here? Rashi elsewhere (on the verse, "Shimon and Levi are brothers" – 49:5) quotes Chazal as follows:

"'They said to each other, Let us kill him' – Who are the speakers? We cannot propose either Reuven or Yehuda, since they did not agree to killing him. It could not be the children of the handmaids, for they did not hate him so utterly, as it is written (ibid. 2), 'The lad was with the sons of Bilha and the soof Zilpa.' Yissakhar and Zevulun would not speak before their elder brothers. Thus we are forced to conclude that the speakers are Shimon and Levi, whom their father calls 'brothers.'"

This midrashic teaching reveals the depth of the plain meaning of the text. Shimon and Levi, who not long ago cried indignantly, "Shall he treat our sister as a harlot," do not stop here to ask themselves, "Shall we treat our brother as a murderer?" In their haste to pass the death sentence on their brother, another stain is cast on their behavior in the episode of Shekhem.

It seems that this is also what connects the episode of Shekhem and the sale of Yosef in Yaakov's rebuke of his sons, as Rashi (and most of the other commentators) perceives it:

"'For in their anger they killed a man' – this refers to Chamor and the men of Shekhem..."

'And in their self-will they lamed (akru) an ox' – they wished to uproot (la'akor) Yosef, who is called 'an ox,' as it is written (Devarim 33:17), 'The firstborn of his ox; grandeur is his.'"

It is specifically the fact that in their anger they killed the men of Shekhem, and in their self-will they wished to uproot Yosef, that proves that Yaakov viewed these two acts in an equally grave light, and that their motives were illegitimate.

This, it seems, may also be the reason why Yaakov's moral rebuke is delayed until this late date. Immediately after the act, Yaakov's claim against his sons was only a tactical one, for from a moral perspective his sons could still claim that they had acted with proper motives. Their treatment of Yosef, their brother, proved retroactively that it was not moral considerations that had driven their actions.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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Yeshivat Har Etzion  
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433  
[office@etzion.org.il](mailto:office@etzion.org.il)

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