

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yehudah *ben* Ephraim HaLevi *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Pinchas and Zimri: The Ironic Climax **PARSHAS PINCHAS** **5775**

This week's *parshah* relates how the tribal leader Zimri, acting in a renegade and defiant fashion, was killed by Pinchas. The contrast is stark, as Zimri is deplored for the indiscretion for which he was condemned to die, while the Torah lauds Pinchas, on whom was bestowed eternal priesthood in recognition of his deed. The duration of this dramatic encounter, it would seem, was quite short, a matter of a few eventful moments. In truth, though, it was the culmination of a long and ironic story which, as we shall see, was actually hundreds of years in the making.

Together from the Start

Perhaps more than any of the other *shevatim* (tribes), Shimon and Levi were a real pair. This is evident from the Torah's description of an occurrence on the brothers' return journey from Mitzrayim (Egypt) to their father's house. Having just purchased grain in Mitzrayim (where Shimon was incarcerated), one of them made a frightening discovery: the purchasing money had been returned to his sack. As the *passuk* states (*Bereishis* 42:27): ... ויפתח האחד את שקו – ויגרא את כספו והנה הוא בפי אמתחתו – “And **the one** opened his sack... and saw his money, for behold! It was in the mouth of his sack.” Rashi identifies “the one” as Levi, explaining that he was referred to by this appellation “for he remained alone (as one) from Shimon, his natural partner.”

Apparently, the two were inseparable – for better or otherwise. This point was made by their father, Ya'akov; when granting his final blessing to his sons, he actually delivered an admonition to this pair, stating at the outset: “*Shimon v'Levi achim* – Shimon and Levi are brothers” (*ibid.* 49:5). This might seem like an unusual statement; isn't it obvious that they were brothers? Rashi explains that their father was emphasizing their quality of plotting together, such as in the attempt to rid themselves of Yosef and in planning the attack on the city of Shechem.

Thus, their paths began with a special closeness. Even in later years, we find that the tribes that descended from them were alike in a number of ways. They both had smaller populations in comparison to the other *shevatim*. And they both essentially lacked a distinct portion in Eretz Yisrael that they could call their own. Concerning the tribe of Shimon, the *passuk* says (*Yehoshua* 19:1): “And their portion was in the midst of the portion of Yehudah.” Levi was also only granted sporadic cities spread throughout the portions of the other tribes. All of this was in fulfillment of Ya'akov's charge: “I will divide them among (the Land of) Ya'akov and scatter them in Yisrael” (*Bereishis* 49:7).

But even within these similarities, we begin to notice some distinctions. Both of them lacked established portions in Eretz Yisrael – but for different reasons. For Shimon, the cause seems to have been simply a result of Ya'akov's decree. Regarding Levi, however, we find an additional, more elevated calculation; as the *passuk* states (*Bamidbar* 18:20): “**Hashem** is their portion.”

Their comparatively small population also resulted from different causes. In the case of Levi, it seems to have been a technical factor. Most of the nation proliferated exponentially in

Mitzrayim. But there was a prerequisite for such accelerated propagation: the oppressive bondage. As the *passuk* states (*Shemos 1:12*): “And as much as (the Egyptians) would afflict them, so would (the Jewish nation) increase and multiply.” The tribe of Levi was exempt from the enslavement and so were not included in the population explosion. The tribe of Shimon, who were enslaved, did initially attain a large population. But this was later diminished due to the unfortunate events connected to the act of Zimri (tribal leader of *shevet* Shimon) mentioned in this week’s *parshah*. In addition to Zimri’s demise, thousands of his fellow tribesmen were decimated by the plague Hashem inflicted on those who were similarly led astray.

Are You Paying Attention?

Thus we have a somewhat tragic story that developed over time. Two brothers from the most elevated Jewish household – themselves of exalted spiritual status – began as a steadfast pair. But over the years, as evidenced by the actions and situations of their progeny, their paths clearly diverged in separate directions. All of this culminates in this week’s *parshah*, as the righteous scion of Levi, Pinchas, killed the rebellious scion of the house of Shimon. What happened? Perhaps we can gain some insight from the following anecdote:

The story is told of two *chavrusas* (study partners) who had been studying a *masechta* (tractate) together for some time. One of them arrived one day at the daily session and began placing food items on the table. His partner saw that a platter of cake and *shnapps* had materialized next to their *Gemaras*. His face took on a quizzical look, leading to the following exchange:

CHAVRUSA # 1: “What’s all this for?”

CHAVRUSA # 2: “Oh, a *siyum* (celebration upon completing a volume).”

1: “A *siyum*? Who’s making a *siyum*?”

2: “What do you mean, ‘Who’s making a *siyum*?’ We are!”

1: “A *siyum*? But we’re only up to *daf lamed daled* (page 34)!”

2: “I know! That’s why we’re making a *siyum* – it’s the last page!”

1: “The last page? No it’s not! *Daf kuf hei* (page 105) is!”

2: “What are you talking about? *Maseches Erchin* only goes up to *daf lamed daled*!”

1: “*Erchin*? We’re learning *Eruvin*!”

Two people (allegedly) studying together; but paying attention really makes a difference!

R’ Shimon Schwab (*Mayan Beis Hasho’eivah, parshas Veyechi*) explains the divergent life-courses of Shimon and Levi in a similar fashion. As mentioned, their father delivered an admonished the both of them, simultaneously. It seems, however, that – judging on a standard corresponding to their elevated spiritual status – Levi took the matter more to heart.

While we might not always appreciate constructive criticism or a “*mussar-schmooze*,” Chazal encourage us to accept – and even desire – such exhortations to improvement. This quality is listed in the Mishnah in Avos (6:6) as one of the preconditions for acquiring Torah:

הַתּוֹרָה נִקְנֵית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וְשִׁמוּנָה דְּבָרִים. וְאֶלוּ הֵן ... אוֹהֵב אֶת הַתּוֹכָחוֹת.

“Torah is acquired through forty-eight items, including... loving (to receive) reproof.”

It can be challenging to be receptive to rebuke. But from the above, we see the vast difference that exists between one who takes the matter to heart... and one who does not.