

חמודי שי על התורה והמועדים

Chamudei Shai on the Torah and Holidays

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Parashas V'Zos HaBerachah

From rebuke to blessing: Yaakov, Moshe, and Shevet Levi

At the end of Sefer Bereishis, Yaakov Avinu gathers his sons, the Shevatim, before his passing and addresses each of them. At the close of the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu likewise blesses the shevatim immediately before his passing. The parallel is clear, yet there is an important difference between the two. Yaakov begins by speaking sharply to his first three sons. Reuven is rebuked for his impulsiveness, and Shimon and Levi for the anger they displayed at Shechem. Moshe's final blessings, by contrast, appear entirely positive.

The contrast is particularly striking in the case of Levi. Yaakov declares:

שָׁמְעוּן וְלֵוִי אֲחֵים כָּלִי חָמָס מְכַרְתֵּיהֶם... אָרוּר אָפָם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשָׁתָה
אֶחָלֵקֵם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאֶפְיָצֵם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

"Shimon and Levi are brothers, instruments of violence are their weapons... Cursed is their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is harsh. I will divide them in Yaakov and scatter them in Israel" (Bereishis 49:5, 7).

Yet Moshe speaks of Levi in entirely different terms:

**arouse the Jewish people
towards repentance**

- ▶ **Moshe's gamble**
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וּלְלֵוִי אָמַר תְּמִידָה וְאוּרִידָה לְאִישׁ חֲסִידָה... יִרְוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְיַעֲקֹב וְתוֹרָתְךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל

"And of Levi he said: Your Tumim and Your Urim are for Your devout one... They shall teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Torah to Israel" (Devarim 33:8, 10).

How did the shevet associated with anger and wrath in Yaakov's final words become the *אִישׁ חֲסִידָה*, entrusted with the Urim and Tumim, the avodah, and the teaching of Torah to Klal Yisrael?

The transformation of Levi

My father, Rabbi Leib Geliebter, zt"l, addressed this contrast in an essay published in *HaPardes* in 1971. His discussion begins with a different question: Why was Shevet Levi exempt from the servitude in Mitzrayim? His answer develops from the connection between Yaakov's words concerning Levi and the very different blessing that Levi ultimately received from Moshe.

My father points to the remarkable transformation that took place within Shevet Levi. Yaakov's rebuke was not merely a condemnation of Levi's conduct but became the impetus for change. Levi took his words to heart, and a profound transformation began to take place. My father points to the remarkable transformation that took place within Shevet Levi. The shevet that Yaakov had said would be scattered among Klal Yisrael ultimately became separated for avodas Hashem, serving in the Mishkan and teaching Torah. As he writes regarding Moshe's blessing, Levi was entrusted with "the task of serving in the Mishkan, of teaching Torah to Yisrael, and of blessing in His Name," as the pasuk states, "יִרְוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְיַעֲקֹב וְתוֹרָתְךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל." Their dispersion was no longer a dispersion of reprimand, but a dispersion in the service of holiness. In every city and throughout Klal Yisrael, Levi would teach, Levi would serve, and Levi would bear the Name of Hashem.

This transformation was demonstrated most clearly at the Cheit HaEgel. My father writes that Shevet Levi had dedicated itself "in body and soul to the service of G-d," and therefore, when Moshe called "מִי לִהָ אֵלַי," they were prepared to stand for Hashem. In his words, "From that moment they began anew, on a new path, ascending toward good."

The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh, on אשר נסיתו במסא, understands Moshe's blessing in light of Yaakov's rebuke. Yaakov had condemned Levi's ועברה, his anger and wrath. Yet at Massah, when the other *shevatim* tested Hashem, Levi did not join them. Moshe could therefore testify that the anger rebuked by Yaakov had quieted: **הא** למדת ששכך רוגסו. The *middah* of anger that had expressed itself improperly at Shechem had subsided, and that same capacity for intensity could now find proper expression as *kinah l'shem Shamayim*.

What happened to Shimon?

This may also help us understand one of the most noticeable features of Moshe's blessings: There is no separate blessing addressed to Shevet Shimon.

Shimon and Levi had stood together before Yaakov. The rebuke was directed toward both: **שָׁמְעוּן וְלֵוִי אֲחֵי... אָרוּר אַפֶּם כִּי עָזוּ**. Yet generations later, their paths had diverged. Levi receives one of Moshe's most elevated blessings, while Shimon is not explicitly blessed at all.

The *Sifrei* makes the contrast between Shimon and Levi explicit. Both had incurred the same "debt" at Shechem and therefore shared Yaakov's rebuke, **אָרוּר אַפֶּם כִּי עָזוּ**. But their subsequent histories took different courses. Levi "repaid" that debt at the *Cheit HaEgel*, when the entire *shevet* answered Moshe's call of **מִי לֵה' אֵלַי** and later went even further with Pinchas's zealotry at Shittim. Shimon, by contrast, added to the debt through Zimri. Thus, Moshe's blessing of Levi does not contradict Yaakov's rebuke; it reflects what changed in the generations between them. The very trait for which Levi had been rebuked became the area in which the *shevet* demonstrated its loyalty to Hashem (*Sifrei*, *Devarim* 33:8).

Moshe did not give Shimon a separate blessing because the transformation accomplished by Levi had not taken place in Shimon to the same degree. The episode of Zimri, a leader of Shevet Shimon, provides a painful expression of this distinction.

The difference between Levi and Shimon therefore teaches us something about Yaakov's words. His rebuke was not meant as a final judgment upon his sons. It presented them with a call and obligation to change. Levi accepted that mussar and transformed himself. The words that could have remained a condemnation instead became the beginning of his elevation.

Did Moshe refrain from rebuke?

This contrast raises a broader question. Yaakov begins his final words with explicit rebuke, while Moshe seems to take a different approach. In V'Zos HaBerachah, Moshe speaks only of the virtues and destiny of each *shevet*. There is no equivalent to Yaakov's **"פָּתְחוּ כַּמִּים"** or **"אָרוּר אַפֶּם כִּי עָזוּ"** sharp words of rebuke.

One may suggest that the difference is not as great as it first seems. Moshe's final blessing does not stand alone. Immediately before V'Zos HaBerachah comes Shiras Haazinu. Before blessing Klal Yisrael, Moshe indeed gives them mussar. Haazinu contains some of Moshe's strongest warnings:

וַיִּשְׁמְנוּ יִשְׁרוּן וַיִּבְעֲטוּ... וַיִּטֵּשׁ אֱלֹהִים עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יִשְׁעוֹתוֹ

"Yeshurun grew fat and kicked... he forsook the G-d Who made him and disgraced the Rock of his salvation" (*Devarim* 32:15).

Shiras Haazinu warns of what will occur when Klal Yisrael abandons Hashem, of *hester panim* and the consequences of forsaking the covenant. These are certainly

words of rebuke. But Moshe presents this mussar in the form of a shirah.

This helps explain the sequence of Moshe's final words. Moshe does not eliminate rebuke from his farewell to Klal Yisrael. He presents it first as a shirah, in a form intended to remain with them:

וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלִמְדָהּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
שִׁירָה בְּפִיהֶם

"Now write for yourselves this song and teach it to Bnei Yisrael; place it in their mouths" (Devarim 31:19).

The mussar is placed בְּפִיהֶם, into their mouths, as a *shirah* that will accompany Klal Yisrael throughout the generations. Only after they have heard that *shirah* does Moshe proceed with:

וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בִּרְךְ מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ

The same path from mussar to berachah

One may therefore suggest that Moshe Rabbeinu followed a path similar to Yaakov Avinu. Yaakov first gave mussar, heard not only by the three shevatim addressed, but by all the brothers. The rebuke carried a lesson for everyone.

Moshe likewise gave his mussar first, not within the individual blessings, but in Shiras Haazinu, addressed to all of Klal Yisrael. Only afterward did he turn to each shevet with berachah.

The sequence itself teaches a lesson: first mussar, then berachah. Levi illustrates why. By accepting Yaakov's rebuke and transforming himself through teshuvah, the shevet that once heard "אָרוּר אַפָּם כִּי עָז" could later merit to hear "תְּמִידָה וְאֶוֶרֶךְ לְאִישׁ חֲסִידְךָ."

This may be one of Moshe's final lessons: the berachah is realized through the willingness to heed mussar.

שָׁמַע בְּנֵי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ

Levi heard the mussar of his father, used it to change, and became worthy of a transformative blessing.



Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah

The final verse of the *Torah* reads, "And for all the great might and all the awesome power that Moshe performed לעיני כל ישראל - before the eyes of all Israel" (Devarim 34:12). Rashi comments on the phrase, "לעיני כל ישראל" "before the eyes of all Israel:"

[This alludes to the time that Moshe's] heart stirred him to break the *Luchos* before the eyes [of the Jewish people]. As the verse states, "And I broke them לעיניכם before your eyes" (Devarim 9:17). And Hashem gave His approval. Thus, [when Hashem told Moshe] "that you broke" אשר שברת (Shemos 34), [He meant], "You did well to break them!" יישר כחך ששברת (Shabbos 87a).

The reason that the Torah concludes with an allusion to the breaking of the Luchos

On Simchas Torah, which is part of Shemini Atzeres, we complete the final portion of the Torah, which we read publicly in weekly installments over the course of a whole year. This is a day of great celebration above and beyond the fact that it is one of the biblical festivals. The celebration of Simchas Torah is particularly significant because it honors the achievement of

continuous and communal Torah study. On its face, Rashi's comment is a very sad way of interpreting the final verse of the Torah. Why did Rashi choose to apply these words of the Sages to conclude the Torah?

The Gemara states (*Shabbos* 87a) that Moshe decided to break the *Luchos* after the *chet ha'egel* (the sin of the golden calf) based on a *kal vechomer* argument, which belongs to the realm of the oral Torah. He reasoned as follows: if the Torah forbids an apostate to eat the *Korban Pesach*, which is only one of the 613 Mitzvos, how much more so were the people of Israel, who were at that moment apostates, forbidden from receiving the *Luchos*, which represent the entire Torah (*Shabbos* 87a).

Tosafos states that this is not a flawless *kal vechomer*, because although the *Korban Pesach* is forbidden to an apostate, in this case Moshe should have given the Jewish people the Torah which would have brought them to repent.

When the Jewish people engaged in *chet ha'egel*, they lost their spiritual crowns, and they were immersed in sin

One may respond to *Tosafos's* argument by saying that the Jewish people had turned their back on the great and awesome event at Mount Sinai where they heard Hashem declare, "I am Hashem your G-d." In other words, they were so immersed in the sin of worshipping the *egel* that they could not repent. They were no better than "a person who immerses in a *mikvah* [to purify himself] while holding a lizard, [which keeps him impure]."

As a result of having served the *egel*, the Jewish people cast off the yoke of accepting the Torah and lost the crowns they received for having accepted the Torah without preconditions through their

declaration of "נעשה ונשמע" ("We shall do and we shall hear" [*Shabbos* 88b]). They had plummeted so far that they could not even begin to repent. That is, they were too immersed in evil, without the Torah to protect them. The *Ohr Hachaim* tells us (*Parashas Shemos*) that a person who has reached the fiftieth gate of impurity cannot repent without the power of the Torah. Similarly, the *Chasam Sofer* writes (at the end of *Yoma*) that a person who has reached the fiftieth gate of impurity cannot repent on his own but only with the help of heaven.

The Jewish people were so deeply immersed in the depth of impurity that they could not repent on their own. However, they were undeserving of the Torah, "the light of which impels a person to improve." How then could they elevate themselves? And how would they be saved from their spiritual plight?

Moshe took action to arouse the Jewish people towards repentance

The source of repentance must come from man. Therefore, Moshe, acting as the conscience and representative of the people of Israel, had to devise his own plan. That plan was to inspire the Jewish people to repent. The catalyst for this plan was the dramatic act of breaking the *Luchos*, which would shock them into an awakening. The *Luchos* represent the heart of Israel, as in the verse, "Write them upon the tablet (the *luach*) of your heart" (*Mishlei* 3:3). The essential purpose in the breaking of the *Luchos* was to break the hearts of the Jewish people and bring them to repentance, as in the verse, "Hashem will not despise a broken and oppressed heart" (*Tehillim* 51:19). This is in keeping with the statement of the Kotzker Rebbe, "Nothing is as whole as a broken heart."

When Moshe broke the *Luchos*, the Jewish people turned their eyes toward him

and toward Mount Sinai, and they recalled the great event of giving of the Torah, which they had forgotten. By breaking the *Luchos*, Moshe caused the Jewish people to pivot from the *egel*, face Moshe and Mount Sinai, confront the gravity of their sin, and were moved to repent.

Moshe's gamble

In truth, Moshe was concerned that after his death he would have to give an accounting for this act. Moshe had broken the *Luchos*, which were not his, but belonged to Hashem, based completely on his own judgement. The *Luchos* were written with the finger of Hashem, and embodied miracles and wonders (such as the final *mem* and the *samech* standing in their place miraculously). How could Moshe even consider breaking them? Seemingly, breaking them would constitute a desecration of the sacred and the erasure of Divine names, and would be similar to dropping a Torah scroll!?

I suggest that Moshe understood well that the *Luchos* were the work of Hashem and the writing was the writing of Hashem, and that their existence were miraculous beyond the natural order. He therefore reasoned that breaking them would not necessarily bring harm. Moshe prayed that because his entire intent was for the sake of heaven, to bring Klal Yisrael to repentance, Hashem would not allow any evil to result from this act, only good.

Moshe's breaking of the *Luchos* occurred only "before the eyes of Israel"

Perhaps the breaking of the *Luchos* existed only "before the eyes of Israel" on a physical plane, but the *Luchos* remained intact in higher realms. This may explain why the fragments of the *Luchos* were

placed in the *aron kodesh*. These fragments accompanied Klal Yisrael into war, to help them vanquish their enemies. Although physically shattered, the *Luchos* retained their heavenly power.

This unbreakable dimension of the *Luchos* is in line with a wondrous story told about Rabbi Yisrael Alter, the *Beis Yisrael* of Gur, who tried to console a survivor of the Shoah who had lost everything. The *Beis Yisrael*, who had also lost his family in the Shoah, told him, "It is written about the breaking of the *Luchos*, 'I broke them before your eyes' and 'before the eyes of all Israel.' This is in keeping with the Sages' comment quoted by Rashi on the verse, '[Yosef] imprisoned [Shimon] before their eyes...' (*Bereishis* 42:24) that Yosef only imprisoned Shimon before [the brothers'] eyes, but when they left, he freed him and fed him and gave him to drink. Similarly, it is only before the eyes of the Jewish people that the first *Luchos* are broken; in reality, however, they remain whole." The *Beis Yisrael* concluded: "Similarly, we must believe that everything we lost in the Shoah was only 'before our eyes,' and everything still truly exists in another realm."

Referring to the original question as to why Rashi would end his commentary on the Torah, interpreting the last three words of the Torah on a sad note, we can now understand Rashi's uplifting message. Hashem consoled Moshe and informed him that he would not be punished, but on the contrary, "You did well to break them." He promised Moshe that he would be the leader of the people of Israel not only for the generation of the desert, but for every generation – and that power of repentance is the secret of our existence. We continue to atone for the sin of the *egel* throughout the generations, until in the future, in the days

of Moshiach, no trace of that terrible sin will remain.

The Mei Merivah waters and their connection to the breaking of the *Luchos*

The Torah relates that about forty years after Moshe's breaking of the *Luchos*...

"Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying:

Take the staff and gather the congregation, you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock לעיניהם before their eyes so that it will give forth its water....

Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and much water came forth....

And Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon: "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify me לעיני בני ישראל in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them..."

(Bamidbar 20:8-12)

Hashem instructed Moshe to speak to the rock before the "eyes of the nation." Had Moshe performed the action as instructed, it would have sanctified the name of heaven. When instead Moshe struck the rock before Klal Yisrael, he deprived them of this opportunity to glorify Hashem and increase their Emunah in Him. Hashem therefore decreed that Moshe would not enter the Land of Israel.

This ties into the last verse in the Torah. The Talmud discusses how the entire Torah could have been written by Moshe, since the final verses tell of his death and onwards. Rabbi Shimon states: "Until the point [that Moshe was about to die], Hashem would dictate, and Moshe would repeat and write. At that point [where Moshe was about to die], Hashem dictated,

and Moshe wrote with tears" (Bava Basra 15a).

There is no doubt that when Moshe wrote the verses that describe his death and burial outside the Land, the reason he shed tears was that he recalled having hit the rock before the eyes of the nation, since that is what caused him to die outside the Land.

Hashem consoled Moshe at the very conclusion of the Torah with the words, "לעיני כל ישראל" "before the eyes of all Israel." This phrase hints at the time that Moshe broke the *Luchos* before the eyes of all Israel, and in so doing saved them forever. That is a fine conclusion for the eternal Torah and an ultimate message for the eternal nation.

How is it that we attained complete atonement so that we were not destroyed? That came about when Moshe broke the *Luchos* before our eyes and thus caused us to look toward Mount Sinai and recall the giving of the Torah. That opened the gates of repentance, saved us from destruction, and placed us on the road to complete atonement.

We completed an analysis of the significance of the last three words of the Torah, and how Moshe ensured the survival of Klal Yisrael and the Torah. With the security of the Torah established, we can now proceed to study the Torah from the beginning again.

Reflections Post Simchas Torah 5784

Six years after the original essay on Simchas Torah was published, the Hamas attacks took place in Israel on Simchas Torah 5784, October 7, 2023. I therefore feel compelled to add this postscript.

Rashi concludes his commentary on the Torah's final three words by referring to the breaking of the *Luchos*.

We initially struggled with the question of why Rashi chose to write his final commentary on a seemingly sad note. The completion of the yearly reading of the weekly Torah portions is a *siyum*, a joyous time that calls for great celebration, which we celebrate on Simchas Torah. The horrific attacks on Simchas Torah 5784, was a tragedy compounded by occurring on this very day of our festival, when we were to celebrate with great simcha.

In our essay on Simchas Torah, we struggled to find a path to understand the complexity of Moshe's breaking the *Luchos* and to draw lessons of its enduring impact on Klal Yisrael. Some of those lessons may help us begin to navigate the present tragedy.

We concluded that Moshe's dramatic action was his way of breaking our hearts so we would repent for the *chet ha'egel*. By doing so, he saved Klal Yisrael, preserved the Torah, and spared the world from destruction. Thus, at the

end of the Torah, we recall Moshe's heroic act; his call for teshuvah. As a result of Moshe's actions, we can reach the end of the Torah each year and celebrate the *siyum* of the Torah with tremendous joy. Simchas Torah is that time for joy, but it's also a time for reflection, as Rashi directs us to with his final thought-provoking commentary.

To preserve the *mesorah* and the Torah, Moshe had to break the hearts of Klal Yisrael to stir them to teshuvah. In our day, when we experience a tragedy like the one that befell us recently, we need to process it, learn from past experience, and go forward and continue our *mesorah*. That is the only way to go forward. The only way we can continue is through simcha. *Simchas haTorah*, will carry us forward. We need to reflect on where we came from and what we need to do to continue our existence. We must accept that we do not have all the answers. But we do know the rules of our existence and assurances guiding our resilience.



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