

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter XII: Vavechi (Gen. 47:28–50:26)

Essay 12. The meaning of “brothers” in Jacob’s rebuke

פסוק "שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֶחָיִם", פֶּרַשׁ רַש"י, בְּעֵצָה אַחַת, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו "נִעְמָה לָכֹוּ וְנִהְרָגָהוּ" מִי הֵם, אִם תֹּאמַר רַאוּבֵן אוֹ יְהוּדָה הָרִי לֹא הִסְכִּימוּ בְהַרְיָגְתּוֹ, אִם תֹּאמַר בְּנֵי הַשְּׁפָחוֹת הָרִי לֹא הָיְתָה שְׂנֵאָתָן שְׁלִימָה, שְׂנֵאָמַר וְכו', יִשְׁשַׁכָּר וְזַבּוּלוֹן לֹא הָיוּ מְדַבְּרִים בְּפָנָי אֶחָיִם הַגְּדוּלִים מֵהֶם, עַל פְּרֻחָד שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי הֵם שְׁקָרָאִם אֲבִיהֶם אֶחָיִם עַכ"ל. מִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם קִיצוֹר שְׁהָיָה לוֹ לְרַש"י לֹמַר עַל בְּנֵי הַשְּׁפָחוֹת שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ מְדַבְּרִים בְּפָנָי אֶחָיִם הַגְּדוּלִים וְתוֹ לֹא הָיָה צָרִיךְ לְהַקְשׁוֹת עַל יִשְׁשַׁכָּר וְזַבּוּלוֹן.

Regarding the **verse** in which Jacob issued a rebuke, saying, **“Simeon and Levi are brothers; their weapons are tools of lawlessness,”**¹ **Rashi explained:**

They were of one counsel concerning Shechem and concerning Joseph. **They said, each man to his brother, “Now come, let us kill him”**²—**who were they** [who said this]? **If you say Reuben or Judah, they did not agree to kill him.**³ **If you say the sons of the maidservants** [i.e., Dan, Naphtali, Gad, or Asher], **their hatred was not complete, as it is stated,** “while a lad he used to be with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah.”⁴ **Issachar and Zebulun would not speak in the presence of their elder brothers. You are therefore compelled to say that it was Simeon and Levi, whom their father called “brothers.”**

- Rashi on Gen. 49:5

An objection is raised. Briefly, Rashi could have said merely that the sons of the maidservants would not speak in the presence of their older brothers. Then there would have been no need to raise a difficulty from Issachar and Zebulun, as the same would have applied to them.

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¹ Gen. 49:5.

² Gen. 37:20.

³ Cf. Gen. 37:21–22, 26.

⁴ Gen. 37:2.

ונראה לתרץ שמתחלה הסלקא דעתא הוא שהיו יתרים גדולים הם שדברו תחלה, ויהיו ראובן ויהודה הבכור ויהודה שהוא מלך, ועל זה אמר, אם תאמר ראובן ויהודה הרי לא הספיקו בהריגתו, ואם כן לפי הסלקא דעתא זה יהיה בנדאי שמעון ולוי הואיל שהם יותר גדולים אחר ראובן ויהודה, ולמה חזר והאריך, אם תאמר בני השפחות וכו', ומה צורך עוד לראיה.

It appears possible to resolve this as follows: initially the assumption is that the older ones spoke first, namely Reuben, who was the firstborn, and Judah, who was the leader. Concerning this, Rashi said: if you say Reuben and Judah, they did not agree to kill him. If so, according to this assumption it would certainly have been Simeon and Levi, since they were oldest after Reuben and Judah. Why, then, did [Rashi] return and elaborate, “if you say the sons of the maidservants,” etc.? What further proof was needed?

אלא נדאי שרש"י בא לדחות סברא אחרת, שלא נאמר שאדברא התחילו מהקטנים כי כן הסדר בקלקלה מתחילין מן הקטן, וזהו, אם תאמר בני השפחות, והוכרח לתרץ שלא היתה שונאתם שלימה, שאם היתה מתרץ שלא היו מדברים בפני אחיהם הגדולים לא היתה פירוץ של כלום, שאדברא הסלקא דעתא הוא כד שבשביל כבוד הגדולים יהיו מתחילים בקלקלה לדבר היו יתרים קטנים. ומעתה יש מקום לחזור ולהקשות, אם תאמר יששכר וזבולון, שלפי הסלקא דעתא זה שיתחילו הקטנים קודם הגדולים, הנה להם להתחיל מבני השפחות שהיו גרועים מכלם, ואם הם אינם רוצים להתחיל, שלא היתה שונאתם שלימה, אם כן הדבר נוגע ליששכר וזבולון.

Rather, Rashi certainly came to reject another line of reasoning. That is, we should not say, to the contrary, that [the plot to kill Joseph] began with the younger ones, for there is often a pattern in wrongdoing, in that it begins with those of least standing.⁵ This is what is meant by “if you say the sons of the maidservants.”

He was therefore compelled to answer that their hatred was not complete, because had he answered that they would not speak in the presence of their older brothers, that would have been no answer at all. For, on the contrary, the initial assumption would be that out of respect for the elders, wrongdoing would begin with the least significant speaking first.

From here there is a place for Rashi to return and ask: if you say Issachar and Zebulun—according to this assumption that the younger begin the wrongdoing before the older—then the wrongdoing should have begun with the sons of the maidservants, who were the lowest of all. If they were unwilling to begin the wrongdoing because their hatred was not complete, then the matter applies equally to Issachar and Zebulun.

ועל זה פירץ, שלא היו מדברים בפני אחיהם הגדולים מהם, כלומר הואיל שלא היו היו יתרים קטנים אם היו הם המדברים תחלה לא היתה שום הוכחה שמדברים לפי שהם קטנים שהוא דבר קלקלה, שהרי בני השפחות הנה להם לדבר ולא דברו, אלא הנה נראה שאינם חולקים כבוד לגדולים מהם, ומעתה מוכרח לחזור ולומר שהיו שמעון ולוי.

To this, [Rashi] answered that they would not speak in the presence of brothers older than they. That is to say, since they were not the very youngest, had they spoken first there would have been no proof that they were speaking because they were younger—a feature characteristic of wrongdoing—for the sons of the maidservants should have spoken first, yet

⁵ Berachot 61a.

did not. Rather, it would have appeared that they were not giving due honor to their elders. Thus, one is compelled to return and say that it was Simeon and Levi.

ועדיין יש לדקדק למה קראם אחים בענגן זה אם אדרבה בשעה שאמרו לכו ונהרגוהו הסיעו עצמן מן האתנה כדפרש רש"י על פסוק "נסעו מזה". ואף שלא נסעו אלא מן האתנה של יוסף ולא מהאתנה שלהם, עם כל זה לא שייך לומר אחים בענגן זה, דהשתא פונת יעקב היתה לדבר בגנותם ולשון אחים הוא לשון שבח ולא גנות.

It still requires careful consideration why [Jacob] called them “brothers” in this context, if indeed at the moment they said “Come, let us kill him” they removed themselves from all feelings of brotherhood, as Rashi explained on the verse, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.”⁶

Although they journeyed only from the brotherhood of Joseph and not from their own brotherhood, nevertheless it does not seem appropriate for Jacob to say “brothers” in this context. For at that point, Jacob’s intent was to speak in disparagement of them, and the term “brothers” is a term of praise, not disparagement.

ונש לומר דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "וישמע ראובן ויזלהו", אמר ראובן אני בכור ואין הסרחון תלוי אלא בי, ופירש שם ה"פ תאר, אין זה מצד פרעומת אביו, דנדאי אם ידע שנהרג תלונתו על כולם, ועוד אילו נהרגוהו נקרימו ביניהם שלא יגלו כמו שעשו במכירה, אלא מצד אחיו עצמם, כי אחר המעשה יסורו בהם ויתלו את הסרחון בבכור שהיה לו למונעם מבוא בדמים בהיותו בכור, וכמו שנתרעמו על יהודה שלא מיהה במכירה כמו שפרש רש"י גבי "ויגרד יהודה מאת אחיו" עכ"ל.

It may be said that it is stated in the Midrash on the verse “And Reuben heard and saved him,”⁷ that Reuben said, “I am the firstborn, and the disgrace will fall primarily on me.”⁸

The commentary *Yefeh To'ar* explains there that this was not because of his father’s complaint, for certainly, had Jacob known that Joseph was killed, his grievance would have been against all of them. Moreover, had they killed him, they would have imposed a ban among themselves not to reveal it, as they did in the sale. Rather, it was because of his brothers themselves: after the deed they would have regretted it and placed the disgrace upon the firstborn, who should have prevented them from coming to bloodshed, since he was the firstborn. This is just as they complained against Judah for not protesting the sale, as Rashi explained on “And Judah went down from his brothers.”⁹ Rashi wrote that the verse and its placement teaches us that Judah’s brothers demoted him from his role as leader. When they saw their father’s grief they said, “You told us to sell him: if you had told us to send him back to his father we would also have obeyed you.”¹⁰

⁶ Gen. 37:17.

⁷ Gen. 37:21.

⁸ Gen. Rabbah 84:15.

⁹ Gen. 38:1.

¹⁰ Rashi on Gen. 38:1 (base on Gen. Rabbah 85:2).

ולפי זה יש לומר שמה שקראם אחים הוא לגריעותא, לומר שלא נתחרטו מעולם על הדבר, שהרי תמיד היו אחים דבוקים זה בזה, שאם היו מתחרטים הנה לו להשני להתרעם על הראשון שהתחיל להתנפל על יוסף להמיתו, כדכתיב "ויאמרו איש אל-אחיו הנה בעל החלמות" וכו', אמנם שאר השבטים נתחרטו, ולפי שהיו הרב הורידו את יהודה, ואף כשירדו אחי יוסף בדעת שלם לפדותו כמו שפרש רש"י שם, מכל מקום כתיב "עשרה" לפי שלא היתה אהבה ושנאה של כלם שנה, ועיי"ש ברש"י, ולא הסכימו לפדותו אלא או כדי לילך אחר הרוב או משום צער אביהם.

Accordingly, it may be said that his calling them “brothers” was for disparagement, to say that they never regretted the matter at all, for they were always brothers, clinging to one another. Had they regretted it, one would have complained against the other, who began to scheme against Joseph to kill him, as it is written, “They said to one another, ‘Here comes that dreamer!’”¹¹ However, the other tribes did regret it; and since they were the majority, they demoted Judah from his role as leader.

Joseph’s brothers later went down with a full resolve to redeem him, as Rashi explained there, on the verse, “So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to get grain rations in Egypt,”¹² for which Rashi writes: “It does not call them ‘the sons of Jacob,’ teaching that they regretted having sold him and that they had made up their mind to behave towards him in a brotherly manner and to redeem him at whatever price people might fix for them to pay.”¹³

With all that, it is written “ten of Joseph’s brothers,” which seems superfluous, as we already know that Benjamin did not go. Rashi teaches that the “ten” is present **because their love and hatred were not all equal. See Rashi there, that their brotherly feelings were divided ten ways, because the love and hatred that all of them bore him were not alike, whereas in regard to buying grain they were all of one heart.¹⁴ **Thus, we learn that even though they had full resolve to redeem him, they had only agreed to redeem him either to follow the majority or because of the distress of their father.****

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¹¹ Gen. 37:19.

¹² Gen. 42:3.

¹³ Rashi on Gen. 42:3 (based on Midrash Tanchuma, Miketz 8).

¹⁴ Rashi on Gen. 42:3 (based on Gen. Rabbah 91:2).