

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter LIV: Vezot haBracha (Deut. 33:1–34:12)

### Essay 6. Praise for the tribe of Levi

**יומא** פֶּרֶק ו' "וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה", אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׂמוּאֵל שֶׁבְטוֹ שָׁל לְוֵי לֹא טָעוּ בְּעִגְלַת דְּכָתִיב "וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לֵה' אֵלַי וַיֵּאֱסָפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־בְּנֵי לְוֵי". אֵיִתִּיבָה וְכוּ' "הָאֵמַר לְאָבִיו וּלְאִמּוֹ לֹא רָאִיתִיו". אָמַר לִיה אָבִיו אָבִי אִמּוֹ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, אִמּוֹ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

### Tractate Yoma, chapter 6:

Regarding the verse, **“Moses stood up in the gate of the camp,”**<sup>1</sup> **Rav Yehudah said that Shmuel said, the tribe of Levi did not err with the Golden Calf, as it is written in that verse, “and he said, ‘Whoever is for the L-rd is with me!’ And all the men of Levi rallied to him.”**

Ravina sat and related this teaching. [The sons of Rav Pappa bar Abba] **raised an objection** to Ravina. [Another verse says of the tribe of Levi:] **“Who said of his father and of his mother: I have not seen him,** neither did he acknowledge his brothers, nor did he know his sons; Your precepts alone they observed, and kept Your covenant.”<sup>2</sup> [The underlined part is taken to mean that some of them did engage in idol worship and were killed by their relatives.]

[Ravina] said to [the sons of Rav Pappa bar Abba]: **“His father”** [does not refer to his actual father, but rather] **his mother’s father**, [who was not a Levite, but] **an Israelite**. [Similarly,] **“his brothers”** [is referring to] his [half-]brothers from his mother [who were fathered] by an Israelite. **“His mother”** [is referring to] **his mother who is an Israelite**. [In fact, however, no one from the tribe of Levi worshipped the calf.]

- Yoma 66b

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 32:26.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 33:9.

מקשים דבקי צור הנה לו להקשות קראי אהדדי דהקא פתיב "האמר לאביו ולאמו לא ראיתיו" והתם פתיב "ונאספו אליו כל-בני לוי", ועוד קשה למה פריד מפסוק "האמר לאביו" ולא פריד מפסוק המוקדם בתורה בפרשת כי תשא "והרגו איש-את-אחיו" וכו' ו"מלאו ידכם" וכו' דמשמע מיניה נמי דשבת לוי חטאו.

People question that [the son of Rav Pappa bar Abba] could have asked more succinctly if there was a contradiction, that here it is written, “Who said of his father and of his mother: I have not seen him,” and there it is written, “And all the men of Levi rallied to him.”

Another difficulty is why did he dispute from the verse “Who said of his father,” and not from the earlier verse in the Torah, from parashat Ki Tisa, “Thus said the L-rd, the G-d of Israel, each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay sibling, neighbor, and kin. The men of Levi did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day.”<sup>3</sup> and “Dedicate yourselves to the L-rd this day, for each of you has been against blood relations—that [God] may bestow a blessing upon you today,”<sup>4</sup> for the meaning of this is that the tribe of Levi also sinned with the Golden Calf.

אבל עוד יש לדקדק שם בפרשת כי תשא למה נאספו אליו כל בני לוי בלבד והלא היו כמה אלפים מישראל שלא טעו בעגל קלל, וכשאמר משה "מי לה' אלי" למה לא באו גם הם אצלו. ואם תאמר שאין הכי נמי שבאו גם הם אצלו, למה משה לא ציוה אף לכשרים שבישראל כמו שצוה ללויים, שהרי התם בסמוך אמרנו זיבת וקטר, בס"ף. גפף ונשק, במיתה. שמח בלבבו, בהדרוקו. מקלל דמה שנשארו מישראל לא חטאו קלל אפילו בלב ובמחשבה.

But we can also check there in parashat Ki Tisa, why did [Moses] gather to himself all the tribe of Levi alone, for weren't there a few thousand of the other tribes of Israel who did not err with the Golden Calf at all? Also, when Moses said, “Whoever is for the L-rd is with me,” why didn't they also come to him? If you'll say, it is indeed so that they also came to him, why didn't he command the fit ones of Israel to come to him, as he commanded the Levites, for there in the adjacent section of tractate Yoma, it is said:

[One who] **sacrificed and burned** [incense to the Golden Calf, which are idolatrous practices that incur capital punishment, was punished] **by the sword**. [One who] **embraced and kissed** [it, which are not forms of idolatrous worship that incur capital punishment, was subject to a divine punishment of] **death** [by a plague]. [One] **who rejoiced inwardly** [but performed no act was killed] **by** [the intestinal illness known as] *hidrokan*.

- Yoma 66b

From this rule, we understand that the ones of the remaining tribes of Israel who remain undiscussed **did not sin at all, even in their heart or in their thoughts.**

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 32:27–28.

<sup>4</sup> Deut. 32:29.

אֵלָא נְדָאי צָרִיךְ לִזְמַר כְּמוֹ שְׁכַתְּבֵי הַש"ךְ שְׁכַשְׁאָמַר מִשָּׁה "מִי לֵה" אֵלֵי" כְּפִינְתֹו הִנְתָּה עַל מִי שְׁהִתְזַיֵּק מִצְוֹת מִיֵּלָה וְלֹא בְטָלָה, וְנִהוּ "מִי לֵה" שְׁהֵם אוֹתִיּוֹת "מִיֵּלָה". וְשָׁבֵט לְנִי לֹא בְטָלוּ הַמִּיֵּלָה בְּמִצְוֹת וּמִשׁוּם הִכִּי לֹא נִשְׁתַּעֲבְדוּ שָׁם כְּמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלָהֶם דְּנִקָּא נְאֻה לִזְמַר "שִׁימוּ אִישׁ-חֶרְבוֹ עַל-יָרְכוֹ", עַל יָרְכוֹ דְּנִקָּא שְׁבַמְצָנָה זֶה יְכוּלִים לְפָיִיס הַמְקוּם.

**Rather, it's certainly necessary to say, as the Shach wrote, that when Moses said, "Whoever is for the L-rd is with me," his intent was on those who held onto the commandment of circumcision [mila] and did not neglect it, and this is the meaning of "Whoever is for the L-rd" [מִי לֵה], for these are the letters of the word mila [מִיֵּלָה] [circumcision].<sup>5</sup>**

Unlike the other Israelites, **the tribe of Levi did not neglect circumcision in Egypt, and because of this, they were not enslaved there like the other tribes of Israel. For them, it is appropriate to say, "each of you put sword on thigh"—specifically on the thigh, i.e., adjacent to the area of circumcision, for by this mitzvah they are able to appease the Omnipresent.**

וּלְפִי זֶה בְּלֹא דְבָרֵי רַב יְהוּדָה לֹא הָיוּ קָשׁוּ קְרָאֵי אֶהְדַּדִּי, שְׁהִיִּיתִי אוֹמֵר שְׁ"נִיאָסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל-בְּנֵי לִוִּי" לְפִי שְׁהָיוּ כּוֹלֵם נִימוּלִים וּמִשָּׁה לֹא בְקָשׁ אֵלָא הַנִּימוּלִים כְּדַמְשָׁמַע "מִי לֵה" שְׁהֵם אוֹתִיּוֹת "מִיֵּלָה". אֲבָל לְאַחַר שֶׁרַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל פִּירֵשׁ הַפְּסוּקַת עַל חֲטָא הָעֵגֶל מִמָּוֶשׁ, שְׁשָׁבֵט לְנִי לֹא טָעוּ בְּעֵגֶל, קָשָׁה דְּהָא קְרָא כְּתִיב "הֵאמֵר לְאַבְיּוֹ וְלֵאמֹו" וְכוּ'. וְנִקְטַת פְּסוּקַת זֶה דְּנִקָּא לְפִי שְׁמִסְנִיִּים "כִּי שָׁמְרוּ אִמְרֵתְךָ וּבְרִיתְךָ וְנִצְרוּ" דְּמִשְׁמַע שְׁמָה שְׁבָא לְשַׁבַּח שְׁבָט לְנִי אֵינֹו אֵלָא בְּשִׁבְלֵי הַמִּיֵּלָה, וְתִירֵץ אֲבִיו אֲבִי אִמּוֹ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְכוּ'. וְסוּף הַפְּסוּקַת הוּא הַטַּעַם שֶׁנִּיצְוּלוּ מְחַטָּא הָעֵגֶל לְפִי שְׁשָׁמְרוּ הַמִּיֵּלָה, עַל דְּרָךְ מְצָנָה גּוֹרְרַת מְצָנָה.

**According to this, if not for the words of Rabbi Yehuda, they would not have been contradictory, for I would have said that "all the men of Levi rallied to him" because they were circumcised, and Moses only requested those who were circumcised, according to the meaning of "Whoever is for the L-rd" [מִי לֵה], for these are the letters of the word mila [מִיֵּלָה] [circumcision].**

**But after Rabbi Yehuda said that Shmuel explained the verse regarding the sin of the Golden Calf itself, that the tribe of Levi did not err regarding the Golden Calf, it is difficult to understand that the verse writes, "Who said of his father and of his mother: I have not seen him, neither did he acknowledge his brothers, nor did he know his sons," which indicates that some of them did engage in idol worship and were killed by their relatives.**

**This verse was specifically given because it concludes, "Your precepts alone they observed, and kept Your covenant," which means that the praise that comes to the tribe of Levi is because of circumcision, and the solution is as Ravina said, "His father" [does not refer to his actual father, but rather] his mother's father, [who was not a Levite, but] an Israelite. The end of the verse gives the reason they survived the sin of the Golden Calf was because they guarded the commandment of circumcision, in the way that observing one mitzvah leads to observing another mitzvah.**

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Mordechai Ha'Cohen of Safed (1523–62), *Siftey Cohen on Torah* (Venice 1605), on Ex. 32:26.