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Which Tribes Were Powerful?

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1.

WHO WERE THE MIGHTY ONES

Regarding the verse,¹ “And from part of his brothers, he took five men and stood them before Pharaoh,” Rashi explains:

From the least among them in terms of strength, those who did not look mighty, for were Pharaoh to see them as strong, he would make warriors of them.

Following this, Rashi brings two opinions as to the identity of the weak tribes:²

Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yisachar, and Binayimin, those whose names Moshe did not repeat when he blessed them.³ But the names of the strong tribes, Moshe repeated (and Rashi spells them out). This is the version of *Bereishis Rabbah*,⁴ which is the *aggadah*⁵ of the Land of Israel. But in our *Babylonian Talmud*,⁶ we have found that those whose names Moshe repeated were the weak ones, and it was they whom Yosef brought before Pharaoh....

(And Rashi concludes:)

In the *Beraisa* in *Sifri*, in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah*,⁷ we have learned as in our Talmud.

We need to clarify:

- a. It is clear why Rashi needs to quote the teaching of our Rabbis as to who were the strong and weak ones of the tribes, since the simple meaning of

¹ *Bereishis* 47:2.

² {In the Hebrew original, *shevatim*, lit., tribes; a reference to the twelve sons of Yaakov who were progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel.}

³ {*Devarim* 33:6 ff.}

⁴ *Parshas Vayigash*, ch. 95, sec. 4.

⁵ {*Aggadah*, otherwise known as *Midrash*, is the method that uses homiletics to explain the Torah. Rashi will bring “*aggadah* that clarifies the words of the verses” only when the simple explanation does not suffice.}

⁶ *Bava Kamma* 92a.

⁷ *Sifri* on *Devarim* 33:18, 20, 22-4.

the passage⁸ offers no clue. However, why is Rashi's subsequent explanation — the lengthy explanation detailing that “Moshe did not repeat when he blessed them,” and, “Moshe repeated...” — relevant **here**? This question is even more acute in light of the fact that Rashi, in any event, references three works as his source — which can be examined by whoever wishes to do so.

- b. The fact that Rashi brings two (conflicting) opinions from our Rabbis indicates that here, the *pshat* does not **side with** either one. (Albeit, the first one has a certain advantage over the second one, and therefore, Rashi quotes it first). This leads to a twofold question:

(a) In *VeZos HaBerachah*,⁹ Rashi writes explicitly:

Regarding these five tribes whom he blessed last, Zevulun, Gad, Dan, Naftali, and Asher, he repeated their names to strengthen and fortify them, for they were the weakest tribes. They were the same ones whom Yosef brought before Pharaoh, as it says, “And from part of his brothers he took five men.”

Meaning, over there, Rashi conclusively sides, according to *pshat*, with one option (in accordance with the second opinion. This is evident from the fact that Rashi writes this without attribution, without saying, “our Rabbis explained,” or something to that effect).

(b) In *parshas Matos*¹⁰ and in *parshas Devarim*,¹¹ Rashi writes, without qualification, that the tribe of Gad was among the powerful ones. This assertion contradicts what Rashi writes in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah* — that (according to *pshat*) Gad was one of the weaker tribes!

⁸ {In the Hebrew original. “*pshat*.” The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.”}

⁹ *Devarim* 33:18.

¹⁰ *Bamidbar* 32:17.

¹¹ *Devarim* 3:18.

We cannot answer that in each particular case, Rashi explains this point based on the **compelling evidence** from *pshat in that context*. [That is, in *parshas Matos* and *parshas Devarim*, *pshat* clearly indicates that the tribe of Gad were of the powerful ones; in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, we **must** conclude that the tribe of Gad were among the five weak tribes; and the *pshat* in our *parshah* gives no compelling evidence to resolve this.] For, as mentioned many times (and this is self-understood), the explanation according to *pshat* in one context cannot **contradict** the explanation according to *pshat* in a different context.

2.

ANSWERING TWO OUT OF THREE PROBLEMATIC SOURCES

The reason Rashi offers different explanations here, in *parshas Matos*, and in *parshas Devarim*, is as follows:

There could be two reasons why in one place, Rashi offers two interpretations to explain a verse, while in another, he offers only one of these two interpretations:

- a. In the vast majority of cases — {Rashi only offers one interpretation in the second context because} according to the interpretation that he *does* cite, there is a difficulty in the (second) verse, and therefore, Rashi addresses it. Whereas, according to the other (uncited) interpretation, this second verse is **obviously** self-understood, and so Rashi does not need to address any issues.
- b. Alternatively, an opposite reason — in this context {of the second verse} *pshat implies*{that this verse is to be understood} in accordance with the (mentioned) interpretation. (However, this is not **conclusive**, because we could also understand the meaning here in accordance with the other interpretation.)

Similarly (the second reason) in our context: In our *parshah*, it is not conclusive who were the weak sons and who were the strong ones. However, *parshas Matos* and *parshas Devarim* **imply** that the tribe of Gad were mighty (for were this not so, they would never have volunteered, “We shall arm ourselves swiftly before the children of Israel.”¹² Additionally, *Moshe Rabbeinu* would have not accepted their offer. Moreover, he told them in a commanding tone, “armed shall you cross over before your brothers, the children of Israel.”¹³

[Therefore, we cannot suggest that the basis for Rashi’s explanation in *parshas Matos* and *parshas Devarim* that the tribe of Gad were the mighty ones is because **later**, Moshe repeated their name in his blessing. This is especially evident in light of the fact that Rashi’s proof that they were powerful is not only from the verse in *Yehoshua*,¹⁴ “The armed troop went before them,” which occurred **after** Moshe’s blessing, but from the verses in *parshas Matos* and *parshas Devarim* themselves — **before** Moshe’s blessings.]

Nevertheless, this does not contradict Rashi’s second interpretation in our *parshah* (that Gad was one of the weaker ones), for according to this interpretation, we can suggest simply that Gad, **the son of Yaakov**, was in fact from the weaker ones. But his descendants, the men of the **tribe** of Gad, who lived 250 years later — members of the generation who entered Israel — were powerful. Moreover, the tribes intermarried with each other. Thus, it was possible that the men of Gad married the women of the powerful tribes and that their children inherited the strength of their mothers’ families.

However, a question remains unanswered: How do the verses in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah* indicate that the tribes whose names Moshe repeated were the weaker ones, in accordance with the second interpretation mentioned by Rashi in our *parshah*? And if, in fact, this is indicated in the *pshat* (in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah*), why does Rashi not mention this interpretation in our *parshah*, as the first and primary interpretation?

¹² {*Bamidbar* 32:17.}

¹³ {*Devarim* 3:18.}

¹⁴ {*Yehoshua* 6:13.}

3.

QUESTIONS REGARDING RASHI'S WORDING

Additionally, we need to clarify why Rashi, in our *parshah*: 1) writes his commentary at such length; and 2) uses diction that is completely uncommon for Rashi's commentary:

- a. He adds, "(This is the version of *Bereishis Rabbah*) which is the *aggadah* of the Land of Israel";
- b. The words, "(in our) *Babylonian Talmud*";
- c. "In the *Beraisa* in *Sifri* in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, we have learned as in our Talmud." (a) Of what significance is it that the same is written in a *Beraisa* in *Sifri*? (b) What is the meaning of the nuanced wording, "**In the *Beraisa*** (in *Sifri*)"? (c) Of what relevance is it that the *Beraisa* and the *Sifri* are in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah* or any other *parshah*?

4.

TROUBLE WITH BOTH EXPLANATIONS

The explanation to all the above questions:

When we learn the verse, "And from part of his brothers he took five men," which does not specify the identity of these five men, it is reasonable to assume that somewhere in the *Torah*, the five tribes are singled out.

Therefore, Rashi brings the lengthy explanation from our Rabbis that we can deduce this information from the blessings of Moshe, where he repeated the names of some of the tribes, but not the names of others. This is the (only) place where we find the Torah singling out five tribes individually (in line with the two possibilities based on the two explanations).

On the other hand, although here, the *Torah* does not specify who the five weaker ones were {nevertheless}, from what we have learned until this point, we can know (according to *pshat*) about the strength (and weakness) of **some** of the tribes:

From learning the story of Shechem, we presume that Shimon and Levi were incredibly strong — the two of them by themselves killed all the men of the city, etc. This raises a question on the first interpretation that “those whose names Moshe did not repeat” were the weaker tribes, for this includes Shimon and Levi.

Therefore, Rashi mentions the interpretation that “those whose names Moshe **repeated**” were the weaker ones. Thus, Shimon and Levi were among the powerful ones. But having said this, Rashi had to (address an issue and) add, “and as for Yehudah, whose name was repeated, his name was not repeated because of his weakness.” — After all, we know that Yehudah was not weak because from the events that occurred to the sons of Yaakov (which we have already studied), it is clear that Yehudah was among the powerful ones; moreover, he was the strongest of all the tribes, the king of the tribes.¹⁵ He stood up for Binyamin, and he stood up against Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, etc.¹⁶ — Rashi concludes, “Rather, there is another reason for the matter {as to why Yehudah’s name was repeated}.”¹⁷

However, there is also a difficulty according to the second interpretation that maintains that Binyamin was among the stronger ones. The simple understanding of Scripture suggests that he was among the weaker ones: He was the youngest; he was called “a young child of his old age.”¹⁸ Yaakov was particularly worried, “lest disaster befall him,”¹⁹ and similarly, Yehudah’s speech to Yosef also implied as such (at least somewhat).²⁰

¹⁵ As understood from *Bereishis* 37:26; see Rashi, *Bereishis* 38:1; see *Bereishis* 49:8,9 where Yehudah is compared to a lion, the king of the animals.

¹⁶ *Bereishis* 44:18 ff., as Rashi writes there, “if you will antagonize me, I will kill you and your master {Pharaoh}.”

¹⁷ *Bava Kamma* 92a.

¹⁸ *Bereishis* 44:20.

¹⁹ *Bereishis* 42:4.

²⁰ Rashi, *Bereishis* 44:33, “For any matter, I am superior to him, for strength, and for war, and for serving.”

Nonetheless, the first interpretation stands as the primary one. The reason: According to the second interpretation, indeed it is true that Yehudah was included among those whose names Moshe repeated for a different reason, and not because of weakness. Thereby, five tribes remained whose names Moshe repeated “to strengthen and fortify them.” (This is especially significant in light of Rashi’s emphasis in *VeZos HaBerachah*, “the five tribes whom he blessed **last**.”) But these five tribes are not singled out openly because at the end of the day, Yehudah’s name was also repeated. Therefore, the first interpretation is more reasonable, for there are exactly five {tribes} who were singled out and whose names were not repeated.

The aforementioned difficulty, i.e., according to the first interpretation, Shimon and Levi were included among the weaker ones, can be resolved as follows: True, they were indeed among the weaker ones. Although they had successfully fought with and killed “every male; and Chamor and Shechem...,”²¹ their victory was not due to their strength. Rather, their bravery was motivated by their {passion, by} feeling **as** if they were the **eldest** of the brothers. And so they felt it had been their responsibility to avenge {the violence against Dinah,²² as they had said to Yaakov:} “Should he treat our sister like a harlot?”²³ — since Reuven had not avenged Dinah.

Furthermore, since the men of Shechem were at that time “in pain.”²⁴ This fueled Shimon and Levi with more courage, as it says, “their rage, for it is mighty.”²⁵

²¹ *Bereishis* 34:25,26.

²² {*Bereishis* 34:1-2.}

²³ *Bereishis* 34:31.

²⁴ *Bereishis* 34:25. {Therefore, overcoming them did not require such extraordinary strength.}

²⁵ See *Bereishis* 49:6,7.

WHY IS THE FIRST ONE BETTER

However, when learning the verses in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, the simple meaning of the verses imply that the names that Moshe repeated were the weaker ones, and not the stronger ones. In order to understand this, we need to first explain the different rationale of the two interpretations — whether Moshe repeated their names because of their weakness or because of their strength:

If we presume that Moshe repeated the names of the **weaker** ones, the reason why he repeated them was to bestow additional blessings upon them — as **Rashi** writes there, “to strengthen them and fortify them” — they needed this because of their weakness.

If we learn that Moshe repeated the names of the **strong** ones, the explanation is as follows: Being the stronger ones gave them a unique importance which manifested itself (also) in the repetition of their names. Meaning, their names were **more** distinguished than the names of the other tribes (similar to, “I will aggrandize your name”).²⁷

This is similar to **Rashi’s explanation**:²⁸ “*Avraham, Avraham* — this is an expression of affection, that He repeated his name.” Rashi offers no rationale for this, for it is so simple.

The difference between the two interpretations in the context of Moshe’s blessing is as follows: According to the interpretation that Moshe repeated the names of the **weaker** ones to confer them with additional blessings, we understand that Moshe repeated their names as part (and in continuation) of the blessing. However, according to the interpretation that Moshe repeated the names of the stronger ones, the repetition of the names was not part of Moshe’s **blessing**. Meaning, Moshe did not repeat the names of the strong ones in order

²⁶ {The original *sichah* does not note a section 5; this section is numbered as section 6 in the original.}

²⁷ *Bereishis* 12:2.

²⁸ *Bereishis* 22:11.

to bestow additional blessings. Rather, when their names are mentioned in Torah, the Torah repeats and emphasizes them because of their fame, {as the saying goes} “his name precedes him.”

On this basis we can appreciate why when learning the verses in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah* straightforwardly, and specifically the verses that discuss Moshe’s blessings themselves, it makes more sense that every word written in the context of the blessings to the tribes is a part of Moshe’s blessings.

Therefore, **over there**, Rashi understands that Moshe repeated the names of the weaker ones in order to strengthen them and fortify them, for according to this understanding, the repetition of the names was also a form of blessing.

6.²⁹

BABYLON VS. JERUSALEM

On this basis we can also clarify why Rashi, in his commentary on our *parshah*, adds, “which is the *aggadah* of the Land of Israel. But in our *Babylonian Talmud...*,” for this helps us understand the meaning of each explanation and the different rationales of the two explanations.

The difference between Torah study in the Land of Israel (*Jerusalem Talmud*) and the study of the *Babylonian Talmud* is as follows: The method of study in the Land of Israel was in a concise form and using concise wording, without lengthy debate about an idea or elaboration. (As the *Gemara* says,³⁰ “This *Tanna*³¹ is a **Jerusalemite**, who teaches using easy and concise diction.”)

In contrast, the method of study in Babylon, the “*Babylonian Talmud*,” involves elaboration, both regarding the discussion of the substance of the ideas as well as the style and wording.

²⁹ {Numbered as sec. 7 in the original.}

³⁰ *Bava Kamma* 6b.

³¹ {*Tanna* is the title given to the Sages of the *Mishnah*.}

Thus, we can appreciate why *Bereishis Rabbah*, “which is the *aggadah* of the Land of Israel,” maintains that when it is possible to either understand that Moshe blessed them at length, by repeating the names of the weaker tribes,³² or to understand that Moshe blessed them concisely — and the repetition of the names, those of the stronger tribes, was not an extension of **Moshe’s blessings**, *per se*, but was a **separate** point³³ — we must accept the position that Moshe conferred the blessing concisely. Consequently, Moshe did not repeat the names of the weaker tribes, but {the Torah} repeated the names of the stronger ones {because of their fame}.

“But in our *Babylonian Talmud*” — i.e., according to the method of study practiced in Babylon that employed a lengthy style and wording in order to further the explanation of the matter — we must assume that Moshe repeated the names in order to add blessings to the **weaker ones**. Moshe prolonged the wording of his blessing in order to strengthen and fortify them. Although a shortened blessing and prayer could also have brought about the same result, a repetitious and lengthy wording confers additional strength and emphasis; therefore, we must assume that this is what Moshe did.

7.³⁴

DOUBLE ADVANTAGES

On this basis, we can also appreciate why Rashi adds, “In the *Beraisa* in *Sifri* in *parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, we have learned , as in our *Talmud*.”

All the above demonstrates how each of the two interpretations has a dual advantage over the other: a) regarding the *psbat* in the verses here; and b) regarding the idea of repeating the names.

³² Which is not undisputable, since blessings and prayers can be said concisely [as indeed is the case] (see *Bamidbar* 12:13, and Rashi, *ibid.*). {Moved from the main text into this footnote for readability.}

³³ I.e., the Torah repeats the names to emphasize that these tribes were famous for their great strength. {Moved from the main text into this footnote for readability.}

³⁴ {Numbered as sec. 8 in the original.}

The dual advantage of the first interpretation:

- a. According to *pshat* here, Binyamin was among the weaker ones and Yehudah was among the mighty ones.
- b. When the Torah singles out, “(And from part of his brothers he took) **five men**” without specifying who they were, presumably, the Torah is referring to the five weaker tribes, since the number of those whose names Moshe did not repeat is exactly five (people, tribes) as mentioned.

The dual advantage of the second interpretation:

- a. According to *pshat*, Shimon and Levi were among the stronger ones, not the weaker ones.
- b. It is more reasonable to assume that when a name is repeated in the context of a blessing, this is germane to the very nature of the blessing itself, in order to strengthen them, etc., rather than to assume that the Torah is hinting at a **secondary** point, viz., that they were mighty. (Their being mighty is not particularly relevant to the **bestowing** of blessings **upon them**. On the contrary, it would have been more relevant in the context of a discussion of the **individual** virtues of the tribes.)

Rashi emphasizes **this** second advantage by mentioning the *Sifri*, “we have learned **in parshas VeZos HaBerachah** {lit., “and this is the **blessing**}, as in our *Talmud*.” Since this is written in **VeZos HaBerachah**, presumably, the repetition of the names is also part of the blessings.

Just as regarding the first two interpretations, Rashi indicates the difference between these approaches by adding, “which is the *aggadah* of the Land of Israel. But in our *Babylonian Talmud*.” In doing so, Rashi alludes to their method of study. Similarly, Rashi also adds here, “In the **Beraisa** in *Sifri*.”

Everything written in the *Beraisa* can be traced back to a *Mishnah*. However, the difference is that in the *Mishnah*, it is succinct and intimates: “a succinct formulation condensing many ideas,”³⁵ but in the *Beraisa*, the ideas are clearly explained, at length and in detail.

In this way, Rashi alludes that because of the method of arrangement of the *Beraisa* (at length), it is more understood why the “*Beraisa in Sifri*” concurs with the “*Babylonian Talmud*” that “those whose names Moshe repeated were the weaker ones.” As mentioned above, Moshe spoke **at length**, and he repeated the names of the weaker ones in order to strengthen and fortify them.

Nevertheless, in our *parshah*, this interpretation is presented second: Because this advantage of the second interpretation is primarily relevant there, in the context of the blessings, in *VeZos HaBerachah*; whereas according to *pshat in our parshah*, the advantage of the first interpretation takes precedence, as discussed.

-Based on a talk delivered on *Shabbos parshas Matos-Masei*, 5729 (1969)

³⁵ Rambam’s introduction to his *Commentary on Mishnah* (s.v., “*achar kein ra’ah lehistapek*”).