

*"I Think I Might be a Simeonite!"*

Parashat Vayechi

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Did you know that one of this year's most popular holiday gifts was DNA testing kits?! The home ancestry kits, where you swab a cheek and send it in for analysis, revealing your genetic heritage and connecting you to a tree of presumed relatives is an absolute craze right now. A few years ago, I bought into it too, and was astonished to find out...wait for it...that I am 98% Ashkenazi Jew, and 2% of my genetic material hails from the Caucasus, the area of southern Russia and Central Asia made popular by none other than Borat! Unfortunately, I was not informed that I am the descendant of a prince or an earl; Though I have long hoped that Raskin was just a corrupted form of Rashi, and that I am connected to that greatness, this information was unfortunately also not corroborated.

The truth is, what I would really love to know, what I have wondered about since I was a little kid is what Tribe of Israel I am descended from. I remember asking my grandparents if they ever remember being told that we are kohanim or levi'im. Kohanim are of course part of the tribe of Levi, the only one of the original 12 tribes of Israel that anyone could conceivably claim membership in all these millennia later. Reviewing our Patriarch Jacob's deathbed words to the founders of the 12 tribes in our parasha, who wouldn't want to be a descendant of the Tribe of Judah, the lion, the king of the beasts?!. *Lo yasur shevet mi'yehudah*, the scepter shall not depart from Judah, *umechokek mi'bein raglav*, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet. Or perhaps a descendant of the tribe of Dan...*dan yadin amo*, Dan will judge his people; a tribe that will govern and lead the Jewish people is very auspicious. Asher sounds good too...Asher's bread shall be rich, said Jacob, *ve'hu yitein le'adanei melech*, and he will produce food fit for kings. Asherites certainly won't ever go hungry! *Z'vulun lechof yamim yishkon*, Zebulun will have beautiful sea-side property, *ve'hu lechof oniyot*, a safe harbor for ships... Sounds lovely, no?

Much less desirable are the destinies of Shimon and Levi. You may remember the unholy alliance between these two brothers. After the horrifying rape of their sister Dinah by a local chieftain Shechem son of Hamor (in Genesis 34), Shimon and Levi took bloody and brutal revenge by slaying not only Shechem, but every single male in the city, and plundering everything else. According to the rabbis, Shimon and Levi also conspired in the kidnapping and sale of Joseph. When these two brothers appear before their elderly father for his final blessing, what they get sounds much more like a harsh scolding: "Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. *Achaleik be'Yaakov*, I will divided them up among Jacob, *ve'afitzeim be'Yisrael*, and I will scatter them about in Israel. There's more to Jacob's invective, but you get the gist. Jacob can't come up with a single positive thing to say about Shimon and Levi; not only that, unlike the other ten tribes, Shimon and Levi will have no territory of their own. If you look on a map of the configuration of the tribes in *Eretz Yisrael* you'll notice that Shimon is like a little enclave completely within the borders of the tribe of Judah. And Levi had no land at all; they were completely dependent upon the tithes of the rest of the tribes for their most basic necessities. What a stinging rebuke of these two tribes.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose commentary I have really grown to love, provides a powerful insight into Jacob's rebuke of Shimon and Levi. He says that together, the two tribes posed a real danger. When the Jewish people are entirely within the land of Israel, Shimon and Levi can do some real danger. Maybe you've had the experience as a parent of trying to keep your child away from the other kid in the class who is not a very positive influence...who brings out the mischief and misbehavior of your kid when they're in the same class or when they hang out together. Shimon and Levi together stoke each other's zealous, ferocious, untamed nature. And Jacob, in a role as parental as patriarchal, endeavors to separate them in order to neutralize their combined threat to the nation.

Yet, we have to grapple with what does become of Shimon and Levi. As many of you know the Tribe of Levi is house of the Israelite priesthood! Both kohanim and levi'im, the officiants at the mizbeach, the holy altar, the conveners of the most sacred occasions and service of the Jewish people at the Temple were from *Sheivet Levi!* How could it be that the descendants of such a truculent tribe could become the clergy of the Jewish people? Moreover, Rashi tells us: *Ein lecha sofrim umelamdei tinokot eileh mi'Shimon*, the scholars and teachers of the children of the Jewish people are from the tribe of Shimon! At first blush that's a bit unsettling, no? A tribe that was so ardent and fanatical are the producers of teachers and scholars? Do we really want these people around our children? According to the tradition, when Jacob scattered and separated Shimon and Levi, he turned a threat into an opportunity. He had a vision of the Jewish people far into the future, in *galut*, in the diaspora, and he believed that the impulses of Shimon and Levi would be transformed into a source of endurance that the Jewish people would draw upon until the time of redemption, when they would be brought back to their land. What does this all mean? Together, Shimon and Levi are combustible. Separate and spread out they are fuel. The 14th Century sage Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher wrote that at various times in Jewish history we would be *chozer al apam*, we would have to draw on the fervor, the ardor, the intensity, the passion of Shimon and Levi in order to keep hope alive; in order to keep the flame of Jewish life burning against the darkness of oppression, fear, suffering, persecution. The primordial energy of Shimon and Levi channeled into religious leaders, scholars, and teachers would serve as the very energy the Jewish people would need to keep hope alive.

I have no idea what tribe I descend from. Not being a Kohen or a Levi, I am part of the mixed multitude called *Yisrael*—a generic Israelite. But when I try to imagine what tribe I may have been from, I wonder if I might just be a Simeonite, a member of the tribe of Shimon. As a devoted teacher of Torah and a non-priestly religious leader, I wonder if the vim and vigor that animates me, the passion in my soul for the Jewish people, for Torah, for God, and Israel is a vestige of a "Shimoni" identity. The truth is that in every generation there have been those who have nurtured and inspired the Jewish future...Rabbis and Rebbes, scholars and teachers, spiritual masters and religious role models, *lamed vavniks* and people of extraordinary piety. Indeed in my own life I was inspired to do this holy work by rabbis who took an interest in me and cultivated my instinctive love of Yiddishkeit. I'm sure many of you would say the same. In no way should the combined zealotry of Shimon and Levi be emulated. But separately, and spread among the Jewish people, the passion for Jewish life that they represent independently has been a mechanism for survival throughout the ages. Paraphrasing Yehoshua Ben Perachiyah in Pirkei Avot: *Asei Lecha Rav*, may we all attach ourselves to those who inspire us to grow in our Jewish

commitments, our learning, our observance of mitzvot, and our dedication to the community. Perhaps this is the true legacy of the Tribes of Shimon and Levi!