

א ב י ס ל ת ו ר ה !

December 13, 2024

THE PARSHA NEWSLETTER
OF MAIMONIDES SCHOOL

י"ב כסלו תשפ"ה · ויציא

ראובן's Sin

By Anton Druskin '28

This week's פרשה, וישלח, is brimming with ideas and lessons. Many of these come from the תורה's wording, which includes the omission, redundancy, and juxtaposition of different things. One such interesting and seemingly disjointed juxtaposition, is that of ראובן's sin, which cost him the birthright and the affirmation that there are 12 sons of יעקב. In בראשית it says, "ל"ה:כ"ב וַיְהִי בְשָׁכְנוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הַהוּא וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן, וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת-בְּלֵהָהּ פִּילְגֶשֶׁת אֵבִיו וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל

"וַיֵּהִיו בְּנֵי-יַעֲקֹב שְׁנָיִם עָשָׂר:" "While ישראל stayed in that land, ראובן went and lay with בלהה, his father's concubine; and ישראל found out. And behold the sons of יעקב were twelve in number."

The direct interpretation of this is that ראובן "came to know" בלהה, which is the stance רד"ק takes. According to him, ראובן thought that it was okay to sleep with בלהה because she was only his father's maidservant and not יעקב's wife. רד"ק goes on to say that although ראובן thought this was okay, it was not, as according to רד"ק בלהה was given to יעקב as an exclusive partner in all legal matters.

Most commentators, however, agree that instead of cohabiting with בלהה, ראובן instead just rearranged his father's bed. This is from a משנה that רש"י quotes in שבת נה: where it explains that the reason right after this whole story there is a mention of the 12 sons of יעקב, is to show that all the sons were equal. Meaning, ראובן did not commit the terrible sin of sleeping with בלהה, but rather rearranged his father's bed. רש"י

expounds on this by saying that his reason was his indignation that even though רחל had died, יעקב still did not move into the tent of לאה, and instead moved into the tent of a mere handmaid.

Of all the commentators, the רמב"ן, seems to present the best answer to this question. רמב"ן gives two possible answers, the first being that ראובן's sin and the enumeration of the sons of יעקב were juxtaposed to show the humility of יעקב: that even though this was a sin, he didn't kick ראובן out of the family and still let him have a part in the inheritance. That is shown when he counts the 12 sons, showing that they all had a part in the inheritance. The alternative answer רמב"ן proposes is that ראובן didn't commit this act out of indignance over the injustice done to his mom, like רש"י says, rather, because ראובן was worried that more children would be born to יעקב. He reasoned that his mother was already too old to have any more children, and either זלפה had already died by then, or he had just been worried about hurting his mother's honor, as זלפה was לאה's handmaid. The reason ראובן didn't want יעקב to have any children was that he did not want to have to share the inheritance with any more siblings, and since he would get the double portion as a firstborn, he had the most to lose. This is why later, as מידה כנגד מידה, ראובן doesn't get the firstborn inheritance.

We can also learn this in our own lives. Often, we do not want to share what is ours, and we hope bad things happen to someone else, so it does not take away from our reward, but this is not how we should do things. If we live greedily and do not give to

others, others will not want to give to us, and we will end up with less.

Masters and Servants

By Yaniv Kaufman-Grob '26

When עשו sent his messengers to try and make peace with יעקב, he made an explicit point to say that עשו was his master and יעקב was עשו's servant. As it says in וַיֵּצֵא אֹתָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֲדֹנָי לְעֵשָׂו כֹּה, בְּרֵאשִׁית ל"ה: "And he commanded them saying, 'Thus you should say to my **master**, to עשו: 'Thus said your **servant**, יעקב: I have lived with לָבָן and have been delayed until now.'" Why did יעקב refer to עשו, his enemy, who wanted to kill him, as his master and himself as עשו's servant? Furthermore, it says that יעקב will be master over עשו in יצחק's blessing to יעקב. יעקב בְּנֵי. "be master over your brothers and may the sons of your mother bow down to you" (בראשית כ"ז:כ"ט)!

There are many answers given by מפרשים, one given by ר' אברהם בן הרמב"ם, who says that this is because יעקב wanted to appease עשו's anger about taking the birthright from him.

The רמב"ן, along with many others who quote him, says that יעקב was treating עשו with the same respect as a younger brother would treat the בכור, even though he had bought the בכורה and been given the ברכה by יצחק. This shows that he still treats עשו with the same respect that he would have if he hadn't bought the בכורה. This attempts to project to עשו that the purchase of the בכורה didn't mean much to him and that perhaps עשו won't be mad anymore about יעקב taking the בכורה because it's not that meaningful in terms of the respect that יעקב gives him.

A more interesting answer provided by the פרקי דרבי פרק ל"ז, אילעזר is that this was a strategy of self protection that יעקב was using: אמר לו הקב"ה יעקב: "עשית הקדש חול, אמר לפניו רבון כל העולמים אני מחניף לרשע בשביל שלא יהרגני, מכאן אמרו חכמים מחניפין את הרשעים בעולם הזה מפני דרכי שלום." "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, יעקב, you have switched the הקדש (the sacred) into חול (ordinary)." יעקב replied, 'Master of the Universe, I am flattering the wicked so that he will not kill me.' From here the sages said, 'One flatters the wicked in this world for the sake of peace.'" From this we can learn to not worry about whether we are raising a wicked person's self-worth by flattering them, but rather by being practical and helping save ourselves or the people around us. This can be used to justify an incident in פרק י"ז, מלכים ב' - when הושע paid tribute to the Assyrian king to keep peace.

But the most interesting explanation was from the מדרש תנחומא: which puts this narrative into a broader context of Jewish leaders referring to themselves as servants and powerful non-Jewish kings as masters. In addition to the יעקב-עשו story, this happened between אהרן, משה, פרעה, as well as מדרש ר' יהודה הנשיא and Antonius. The reason the מדרש gave for referring to themselves as servants was that it was out of respect for the government in power. Does this mean that Jews in extremely antisemitic countries must respect the government officials who hate them? Or is it only if it would actually make a difference?



Receive A BISL TORAH
on WhatsApp

A BISL TORAH

is published weekly
at Maimonides School,
Brookline, Massachusetts

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Avi Abbett '25
Eitan Orkaby '27

EDITOR

Theo Fraenkel '28
Eliana Goldenholz '26

FACULTY ADVISOR

Rabbi Yaakov Jaffe

FOUNDERS

Binyamin Orkaby '24
Ephraim Fischer '24
