



DIVREI MENACHEM

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Nature or Nurture?

In the early seventies, there was a fierce debate concerning nature versus nurture: What determines our abilities? Are our aptitudes inherited, or are they a function of our surroundings and upbringing? How can one sibling become a powerful leader and the other brother or sister a lazy rascal?

When we look at the twelve sons of Yaakov, we might be amazed at their differences in temperament, achievements, and lot in life. For instance, in our Parsha, we discern that the Torah affords selective attention to one tribe over all the others. That tribe is Levi. Compared to Reuven and Shimon, whose described ancestry goes back two generations, the House of Aharon backtracks no less than six generations from Levi through to Moshe and Aharon (Shemot 6: 14-29).

What is it about Levi that is so significant? After all, Levi, in his more youthful days, was not exactly a Tzaddik. Together with Shimon, he massacred the men of Shechem after their sister Dina was defiled and earned the scorn of their father, Yaakov. With Shimon, he would be “divided among Yaakov, scattered among Israel.”

Rashi indicates that the Torah relates much about Levi’s descendants to tell us about Moshe and Aharon’s auspicious family roots. Moreover, following the Sforno, the longevity of the tribal heads descending from Levi (as delineated in the text) explains how they could take on elevated positions in the community, thus conferring to them a special status.

According to the Midrash, the tribe of Levi was so honored by Pharaoh that he spared them from servitude. Moreover, it appears that the Levites lived apart from their brothers, closer to the royal palace. Thus, we can better understand how Miriam, an Israelite woman, could have advised Pharaoh’s daughter concerning a wet nurse for Moshe.

Delving deeper, we might argue that Levi’s essential qualities were inborn. As the third child of Leah, his name indicated his mother’s more optimistic stance: “This

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time, my husband will become attached (*Yelaveh*) to me.” Moreover, concerning the following statement that “Therefore he was named Levi,” the Midrash asserts that he was “*accompanied by* and will accompany the King” (*Midrash HaGadol, Bereishit, 29:34*).

It appears then that, in some ways, Levi was chosen. In her analysis of Levi, Tamar Weissman notes that this notion is supported by several Midrashim that imply that Levi was “attached to Hashem,” would serve Him in later generations, and was endowed with “twenty-four gifts that were the tributes due to the priests.”

Indeed, some people might say that Levi’s special status was “genetic” since, to paraphrase Tamar Weissman, Levi (Yaakov’s son) could claim no constructive accomplishments during his lifetime. But something was there, and something did change eventually: Both Shimon and Levi displayed zealotry and loyalty to the integrity of the national mission. Whereas Shimon took the spirit of action to the wrong place, Levi was the only tribe that amassed around Moshe after the incident of the Golden Calf.

That act elevated the tribe to become the bearers of the *Aron Habrit* and to supersede the firstborn of Israel. Moreover, later still, Pinchas, Aharon’s grandson of the tribe of Levi, would similarly stand up for righteousness by killing Zimri, prince

of Shimon, in the matter of the Midianite woman – for which he earned the Covenant of Peace.

It appears that we choose what we do with our passions, zealotry, and integrity. We can take our “inborn” or “designated” positive attributes to high places or flout them in the pursuit of our personal whims. Paradoxically, even though Levi was dispersed among the people, the Levites could now take their fervor and serve as teachers among the flock, spread across the entire land.

It makes us ponder *our* personal preferences and aptitudes and the places to which we could take them. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff

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