



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

54 VeZot HaBrakha — Feminist Blessings

Text

Devarim 33

⁶ May Reuben live and not die, Though few be his numbers.

⁷ And this he said of Judah: Hear, O Lord the voice of Judah, And restore him to his people. Though his own hands strive for him, Help him against his foes.

⁸ And of Levi he said: Let Your Thummim and Urim Be with Your faithful one, Whom You tested at Massah, Challenged at the waters of Meribah;

⁹ Who said of his father and mother, "I consider them not." His brothers he disregarded, Ignored his own children. Your precepts alone they observed, And kept Your covenant.

¹⁰ They shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your instructions to Israel. They shall offer You incense to savor and whole-offerings on Your altar.

¹¹ Bless, O Lord, his substance, and favor his undertakings. Smite the loins of his foes; Let his enemies rise no more.

¹² Of Benjamin he said: Beloved of the Lord, He rests securely beside Her; Ever does She protect him, As he rests between Her shoulders.

¹³ And of Joseph he said: Blessed of the Lord be his land With the bounty of dew from heaven, And of the deep that couches below; ¹⁴ With the bounteous yield of the sun, And the bounteous crop of the moons; ¹⁵ With the best from the ancient mountains, And the bounty of hills immemorial;

¹⁶ With the bounty of earth and its fullness, And the favor of the Presence in the Bush. May these rest on the head of Joseph, On the crown of the elect of his brothers.

¹⁷ Like a firstling bull in his majesty, he has horns like the horns of the wild-ox; With them he gores the peoples, The ends of the earth one and all. These are the myriads of Ephraim, Those are the thousands of Manasseh.

¹⁸ And of Zebulun he said: Rejoice, O Zebulun, on your journeys, and Issachar, in your tents. ¹⁹ They invite their kin to the mountain, Where they offer sacrifices of success. For they draw from the riches of the sea and the hidden hoards of the sand.

²⁰ And of Gad he said: Blessed be She who enlarges Gad! Poised is he like a lion To tear off arm and scalp.

²¹ He chose for himself the best, For there is the portion of the revered chieftain, Where the heads of the people come. He executed the Lord's judgments and Her decisions for Israel.

²² And of Dan he said: Dan is a lion's whelp that leaps forth from Bashan.

²³ Of Naphtali he said: O Naphtali, sated with favor and full of the Lord's blessing, Take possession on the west and south.

²⁴ And of Asher he said: Most blessed of sons be Asher; May he be the favorite of his brothers, May he dip his foot in oil. ²⁵ May your door-bolts be iron and copper, and your security last all your days.

דברים לג

ו יחי ראובן ואל ימות ויהי מתיו מספר.

ז וזאת אמר ליהודה ויאמר שמע יהוה קול יהודה ואל-עמו תביאנו ידיו רב לו ועזר מצריו תהיה.

ח וללוי אמר תמיר ואוריך לאיש חסידך אשר נסיתו במסה תריבהו על-מי מריבה.

ט האמר לאביו ולאמו לאראיתיו ואת-אחיו לא הכיר ואת-בנו לא ידע כי שמרו אמרתך

ובריתך יצא רוב יזרו משפטך ליעקב ותורתך לישראל ישימו קטורה באפך וכליל על-מזבחתך.

יא ברוך יהוה חילו ופעל ידיו תרצה מחץ מתנים קמיו ומשנאיו מן-יקומון.

יב לבנימן אמר ידיד יהוה ישכך לבטח עליו ח'פף עליו כל-היום ובין כתפיו שכך.

יג וליוסף אמר מב רכת יהוה ארצו ממגד שמים מטל ומתהום רבצת תחת. יד וממגד תבואת

שמש וממגד גרש ירחים. טו ומראש הררי-קדם וממגד גבעות עולם. טז וממגד ארץ ומלא אה

ורצון ש'כני סנה תבואתה לראש יוסף ולקדקד זריר אחיו. יז בכור שורו הדר לו וקרני ראם קרניו

בהם עמים ינגח יחדו אפסי-ארץ והם רבבות אפרים והם אלפי מנשה.

יח ולזבולן אמר שמח זבולן בצאתך ויששכר בא הליך. יט עמים הר-יקראו שם יזבחו זבחי-

צדק כי שפע ימים יינקו ושפני טמוני חול. כ ולגד אמר ברוך מרחיב גד כלביא שכך וטרף

זרוע אף-קדקד. כא וירא ראשית לו כי-שם חלקת מח'קק ספון ויתא ראשי עם צדקת יהוה

עשה ומשפטיו עם-ישראל.

כב ולדן אמר דן גור ארניה יזנק מן-הבשן. כג ולנפתלי אמר נפתלי שבע רצון ומלא ברכת

יהוה ים ודרום ירשה.

כד ולאשר אמר ברוך מבנים אשר יהי רצוי אחיו וט'בל בשמן רגלו. כה ברזל ונח'שת מנעלך

וכימירך דבאך.



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Context

The Five Books of the Torah conclude with Moshe's blessings to the tribes and his final scene on planet earth. Moshe dies while still healthy and strong, the greatest prophet of the Jewish People. Overlooking the Promised Land from which he is irrevocably barred, he is buried by God's hand on Mount Nevo in an unidentified location. Filled with the spirit of wisdom, Yehoshua is charged to lead the Israelites onward into the Promised Land.

Explorations

This parasha that concludes the Torah is read in the synagogue not on a Shabbat, but on the festival of Simchat Torah when communities celebrate the conclusion of the public Torah reading and commence immediately again with Bereishit. This process establishes a continuous cycle of engaging with the Torah in public. Jews are to study our sacred text as an endless process of renewing ourselves. Among many communities, it is traditional for every member of the congregation to be honored with an *aliya* – women and men. In order to accomplish this, the parasha is repeated until every person has an opportunity to bless the Torah reading.

VeZot haBrakha addresses the destiny of the Jewish people from our familial foundations in the tribes, the offspring of Yakov-Yisrael and four women. These particular blessings to the families who comprise the Jewish People at the brink of the Promised Land prepare for a challenging conquest and the responsibilities ahead.

In Bereishit, the Torah describes turbulent relationships among Leah, Rachel, Bilha and Zilpa who conceive children with Yakov, carry, and birth them - the predecessors of the tribes of Israel (Ber. 29:31-30:24 & 35:16-20). In order of their birth, the mothers name nearly all of the thirteen children according to their very personal, embodied feelings and experiences with their common spouse, Yakov. These mothers generate the Jewish nation. In our parasha, Moshe closes with his blessings toward the future. The table on the next page compares the birth sequence with the order of the blessings in our parasha.

The order of the two sets is different. Various theories explain Moshe's sequence of blessings. They might be grouped according to the inheritances the tribes are to receive in the Land, and / or according to the leadership and military roles they will play in the conquest (see link below).

Two of Yakov's children are glaringly absent from Moshe's blessings: Shimon and Dina.



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	Birth order of Yakov's children in Bereishit				Order of tribes in VeZot haBrakha
	Leah	Bilhah	Zilpah	Rachel	
1	Reuven 29:31				Reuven 33:6
2	Shimon 29:33				Yehuda 33:7
3	Levi 29:34				Levi 33:8-11
4	Yehuda 29:34-5				Binyamin 33:12
5		Dan 30:5-6			Efraim 33:13-17
6		Naphtali 30:7-8			Menashe 33:13-17
7			Gad 30:10-11		Zevulun 33:18-19
8			Asher 30:12-13		Yissachar 33:18-19
9	Yissachar 30:17-18				Gad 33:20-21
10	Zevulun 30:19-20				Dan 33:22
11	Dina 30:21				Naphtali 33:23
12				Yosef 30:23-4	Asher 33:24-5
13				Binyamin 35:16-20	

In the accounting of the census at the beginning of Bamidbar, the tribe of Shimon numbers 59,300 (Bamidbar 1:23). After the incident with the women of Moav, the text records their numbers again, 22,300, much less than half (Bamidbar 26:14). From this we might learn that the Shimonites sustained heavy losses in the plague of Baal Peor due to their immoral behavior, and therefore a much smaller inheritance was due to them. According to Rashi (on Devarim 33:7), Shimon's blessing is included in Yehuda's. Furthermore, Shimon's inheritance is included within the borders of Yehuda (see Yehoshua 19:1 & 19:9). According to these interpretations, the absence of Shimon clarifies one of Moshe's purposes at the conclusion of the Torah: to offer his last wisdom toward the fulfillment of the divine promise to enter the Land.

Nearly all commentators relate to the absence of Shimon from the blessings; very few, however, relate to the omission of Dina. Exploring Dina's disappearance in the very last



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parasha, we touch on some of the very difficult challenges of feminist Torah study; we face the exclusion and oppression of women in the text with conviction to rectify – through interpretation and action.

In Bereishit, after the rape of Dina (see [VaYishlach – Rape, Love, and Land](#)), Yakov does not upbraid his sons Shimon and Levi for their brutality in Shechem. He indicates that his primary concern is for the security of his family,

Jacob said to Shimon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed." (Ber. 34:30)

However, when Yakov blesses his children on his deathbed, he expresses delayed wrath at Shimon and Levi on account of their excessive violence after the rape,

Simeon and Levi are a pair;
Their weapons are tools of lawlessness.
Let not my person be included in their council,
Let not my being be counted in their assembly.
For when angry they slay men,
And when pleased they maim oxen.
Cursed be their anger so fierce,
And their wrath so relentless.
I will divide them among Yakov,
Scatter them in Israel. (Bereishit 49:5-7)

A midrash explains how the identity and fate of Shimon and Levi are bound up with their sister Dina. Speaking of a verse in the account of entering the city, Shechem,

Since they risked their lives for her, the Torah intentionally calls them, “Shimon and Levi, *brothers of Dina*” (my emphasis) (Ber. 34:25). (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta de-Shirah, BeShalach 10*)

Aharon the Levite who is renowned for his peaceful ways overcomes the tribal legacy of violence. Whereas Aharon proves worthy to officiate as the High Priest in the sacred service, the tribe of Shimon does not appear to have redeemed its poor standing. Shimon does not merit mention among Moshe's final blessings.

Dina is similarly absent from the closing blessings, yet not on account of her own actions. Dina is a victim of a harsh story. From the beginning, Dina's life is fraught with challenges. Owing to the sparseness and vagueness of the text, Dina's disappearance prompts much midrashic imagination. Tales are told of her life from conception through and after this scene.

The Jerusalem Talmud recounts that,

Leah was pregnant with a son. After Rachel prayed, the embryo changed to a girl. (JT *Berakhot* 9:3)

In this version of the story, Rachel prays for her sister, Leah to give birth to a girl rather than a boy. Rachel implicitly values a boy more, and jealously wants to prevent Leah from having another male child, for she herself has not yet given birth. This reading fills the



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story with conflict – between sisters, and between genders. Another version recorded in the Babylonian Talmud and in the midrash Tanhuma is more generous to the characters.

Why does the verse say, “Afterwards she bore him a daughter, and she called her name Dina” (Bereishit 30:21)? What is it after? Rav says that it is after Leah judged herself. [When Leah found that she was pregnant,] she thought about the fact that twelve tribes were to issue from Yakov. She said, “Yakov already has ten sons, six from me, four from the handmaidens [two from Bilhah and two from Zilpah]. Will my sister Rachel not be even as one of the handmaidens?” Leah prayed to God for the sake of her sister. She beseeched, “Change what is in my womb to a female, and do not prevent my sister Rachel from bearing a son.” God accepted her prayer and the fetus in her womb became a girl. The verse therefore says, “Afterwards she bore him a daughter” —that is, after Leah’s prayer. Since Leah had rendered judgment [danah din] on herself, the infant was named Dina. (BT Berakhot 60a; Tanhuma, Vayetze 19)

Rather than sibling rivalry, this midrash expresses sisterly caring. Leah seeks to protect Rachel's status in the family by ensuring that she might bear a child who would head a tribe. The number of tribes is pre-determined – twelve – and, Leah assumes, each one is to be headed by a male. The girl will obviously not take the rightful place of a boy.

The judgment for which Leah names Dina reinforces the patriarchal system of power. The mother herself imposes patriarchal gender roles on her children. Excluded, raped, and avenged, male rule is implicit from conception – the mothers conform and perpetuate it, accepting the unworthiness of their daughter to be a public leader in the family of the Jewish People.

The Torah mentions Dina again in Bereishit 34:26 following Shimon and Levi's violent rampage in Shechem, “They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dina out of Shechem's house, and went away.”

Dina resurfaces one last time in the Torah; her name appears in the list of the children of Israel who descend to Egypt (Ber. 46:15). Based on this verse, commentators understand that she lives out her life in Egypt, estranged from her family and people.

According to a midrash, Dina conceives a child with Shechem whose name is Osnat. Yakov’s sons seek to kill the baby in order to eliminate the evidence of harlotry among Yakov's descendants. Yakov brings a gold plate and writes on it the name of the Holy One blessed be S/He. Some say that he records the incident with Shechem. Yakov hangs the plate around Osnat’s neck and sends her away. God dispatches the angel Michael to take her to the house of Potiphar in Egypt. In another midrash, Dinah puts the infant Osnat on the palace wall in Egypt. When Potiphar walks with his entourage by the wall, he hears the infant crying. When his servants bring the baby to him, he reads the plate and proclaims, “This girl is the daughter of great ones.” Potiphar brings Osnat home and provides her with a wet nurse. Potiphar’s spouse is barren, and she raises Osnat as her own daughter. Consequently, she is called “Osnat daughter of Potiphara,” for she is raised in the home of Potiphar and his spouse, as if she is their own daughter (see *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 37; *Midrash Aggadah*, Ber. 41:45).

These legends about Dina, the daughter-who-would-have-been-a-son elaborate the fate



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of a daughter born with the premiss that a girl is not worthy to participate in the great destiny of her family. Dina is not to count among her male siblings, Yakov's children, as head of a tribe. Instead of honoring her human dignity, Shechem violates her and her brothers follow with murder and desecration of Shechem and his city.

Dina and her progeny are erased from the generations of Jewry. The Torah concludes with the omission of the one sister from among the descendants of Yakov, the ancestors of the Children of Israel.

This full cycle of studying the weekly Torah readings initiates into feminist approaches to struggling with and interpreting the *parashot*. Engaging our sacred texts with our lives and our communities, we become more aware of the process by which we generate and perpetuate norms. Feminist analysis equips us to practice our religion while aspiring to better fulfill our ethical standards. We learn to apply ourselves with commitment, and to evolve our tradition. Every national, cultural, ethnic and religious group needs to rigorously inspect, interpret its texts, traditions, and practices with the purpose of uprooting gender-based exclusion and oppression. Through feminist study, we become more aware of the challenges and aroused to better possibilities. We aim to achieve the full dignity of women as participants and leaders among world Jewry, and as decision-makers among humanity.

Questions for Discussion

As we mature, we need to refresh and develop our relationship with the Torah in order for our study to nurture our intellect and spirit. Consider the significance and challenges of a yearly cycle for reading the Torah publicly. How is it meaningful to return every year to the same *parashot*, to the same text?

Consider risks, benefits, disadvantages and constraints of patriarchal structures such as male-gendered leadership - to men and to women.

Given that the usual birth ratio of male and female infants is 1:1, relatively few daughters are mentioned or named throughout the Torah. The Torah only records one daughter among the offspring of Yakov with four women. What does this absence signify? Imagine and talk about the girls and women who are missing.

According to *midrashim*, after she is alienated from her Jewish family, Dina lands up in Egypt; her daughter is raised by Egyptians. Discuss whether you observe Jewish women today alienated from Judaism by their experiences of exclusion, turning to other nations and traditions.

Discuss whether gender ought to play any role in the process of families bequeathing their inheritance – monetary and political privilege and power. Why or why not?

How do you propose to enable more girls and women to become leaders among the Jewish People and throughout humanity? What steps ought we to take from conception onward - in our families, in our communities and at a national level to promote women into decision-making roles where we share the responsibilities and joys of forging Jewish and human destiny?



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Study Links

[This commentary](#) on our parsha from the Tanach Study Center by Menachem Leibtag proposes to solve the riddle of the order of the blessings in veZot haBrakha.

Patriarchy has and continues to handicap institutions throughout the world. In many cultures, religions and nations, feminists are actively interpreting their traditions critically in order to enable women's full participation.

Concerning the influence of European colonialism on Native Canadians,

Despite the vast socio-cultural diversity amongst Canada's hundreds of First Nations, historians and experts largely agree that a balance between women and men's roles typically existed in pre-contact Aboriginal societies, where women and men had different, but complementary roles. Many First Nations were matrilineal, meaning that descent – wealth, power, and inheritance -- were passed down through the mother. From [“Marginalization of Aboriginal women: A Brief History of the Marginalization of Aboriginal Women in Canada”](#) by Erin Hanson

See [“'Tradition' means male patronage”](#) in Chris Zithulele Mann's essay about proposed legislation in South Africa.

See [“Women can be priests”](#) - a resource for women's struggle for ordination in the Western Catholic Church.

The [“Chaldean Catholic Church”](#) functions under a hereditary patriarchate in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, France, USA.

See [“Challenging Patriarchy through Dance”](#) in traditional Indian culture by Nirmala Seshadri, choreographer and artistic director of N Dance & Yoga.

See this discussion of patriarchy in the Bahai faith, [“The Father and the Maiden: An Examination of the Abrahamic Patriarchate and the Divine Feminine,”](#) by Mark A. Foster.

- On the hereditary Islamic caliphate see [“Mu'āwiya's Endeavor for Hereditary Caliphate”](#) by Rasūl Ja'fariān.
- Here is a current debate for and against the ordination of Orthodox women as rabbis:
 - [Orthodox Women Reach A Milestone](#) by Zelda R. Stern and Elana Maryles Sztokman
 - a rejoinder [“Ordaining Women and the Role of Mesorah”](#) by Avrohom Gordimer
- This is a [“Timeline of women rabbis worldwide”](#)

See [this review](#) of Nancy Chodorow's interpretation of the methods by which cultures initiate girls into their female-gendered behaviors and accept their roles, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*.

For further study of women in the Torah, use the ICJW series, [Biblical Women](#).



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Summary of Issues

Among the final blessings that Moshe conveys, there are two significant omissions from the tribes of Israel: the tribe of Shimon and the descendants of Dina, daughter of Leah. Surrounding the disappearance of Dina, midrashim offer insight into the mechanisms by which culture perpetuates patriarchy. This example returns us to the genesis of the Jewish People, the tribes who derive from Leah's, Rachel's, Bilhah's and Zilpah's children with Yakov in Bereishit. We conclude this cycle of Torah study resolved to contribute toward liberation from gender-based exclusion and oppression, and toward the full participation and leadership of girls and women among the Jewish People, and throughout humanity.

Methods & Observations

Much Torah study points to straightforwardly inspiring texts such as the commandment to leave corners of the field, dropped and missed sheaves unharvested for the needy (VaYikra 19:9-10, Dev. 23:22, 24:19). On many pages, we perceive the beauty of the Torah, and its passion for a caring and just society.

At the conclusion of this feminist series on the weekly parasha, it is fitting to address a difficult challenge, to face the urgency of our task to improve both study and action, to contribute, to innovate, and to lead among the Jewish People. Rather than focussing on the grandeur of Moshe's passing, anticipation toward the long-awaited attainment of the Promised Land under Yehoshua's leadership – about which so many have written - we delve into unsavory, untidy, unstated, unresolved topics to which feminism directs our attention. We persevere to unearth and address the pain of women's exclusion and degradation and thereby attain more clear vision of a Judaism that is relevant and inclusive, welcoming to girls and boys, women and men. As we prepare to return again to the beginning, to Bereishit, we steel our resolve to continue to refine our ethical conscience through ongoing engagement with our Torah texts, and perhaps also by applying ourselves to a realm which women have relatively recently begun to explore - the rabbinic corpus, the Oral Torah.

Contact

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