

# Asher Freed from Banishment

PARSHA INSIGHTS - V'ZOS HABRACHA (5758)

## A LITTLE KNOWN FACT– Asher Was Excommunicated

“Regarding (the *shaivet* [tribe] of) Asher, he (Moshe) said, ‘Asher is blessed regarding children; may he be pleasing to his brothers, and he immerses his foot in oil. Your shoes are iron and copper...’” (33: 24 - 25). As all the poetic *psukim* [verses] in the *parsha* [Torah portion], these need a great deal of interpretation to grasp even their simplest meaning. We shall view them through the eyes of an early commentator, the *Chizkuni*.

We must first realize that our *pasuk* [verse] in this last *parsha* of the Torah, *V'zos Habracha*, contains a blessing for the **entire *shaivet* [tribe] of Asher**. This is the case with all the *shevatim* [tribes] receiving their *brachos* [blessings] from Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher] on the day of his death. However, we all know that each *shaivet* had a progenitor, a son of Yaacov *Avinu* [Jacob our forefather]. Thus, the *brachos* given to the whole *shevatim* by Moshe in the year 2488 are sometimes connected to events that transpired with the forbears of the *shevatim*. The tribe of Asher is such a case. His blessing is directly related to an event that occurred with Asher, the son of Yaacov. We must turn back many pages in our *Chumashim* [books containing the Five Books of Moses] to find out why Moshe blessed the *shaivet* of Asher with the specific words mentioned above, found in 33: 24 - 25.

The flashback is to *Parshas Vayishlach*. Please recall what is recorded in that part of the first section of the Torah, in *Beraishis* [Genesis] 35:22. The Torah narrates that after Rachel passed away, there was a disturbing incident. Rachel had been the primary wife of Yaacov, although Yaacov certainly loved and cherished Leah as well (see *Oznaim L'Torah* on *Vayaitzai* 29:20). Since Rachel was the mainstay of the household of Yaacov, during her lifetime, Yaacov had kept his bed in her tent. When she died, one of two things could have happened. Yaacov could have transferred his bed to the tent of his other principal wife, Leah, mother of Reuven. Or, he could have moved it into the tent of Bilha, the maidservant of his deceased primary wife, Rachel, to indicate that Bilha would be taking Rachel's place. What did Yaacov do? He put it into Bilha's tent, since she was seemingly an extension of Rachel, the main wife, who had passed away. Reuven, son of Leah, felt a need to defend his mother's honor. After all, Leah WAS considered one of the *imahos* [one of the main mothers] of *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people]. How could Yaacov put his bed into a maidservant's tent, regardless of the fact that Bilha was **Rachel's** maidservant, instead of into Leah's tent?!

All this is brought in *Rashi* on *Vayishlach* 35:22. Reuven declared that it was enough for Rachel to be Leah's rival during Rachel's lifetime; should the maidservant of Rachel now ALSO be a rival to Leah? As a result, Reuven “disarranged” or confused his father's bedding. What does this mean? There are various explanations, but suffice it to say that Reuven did something to try to dissuade Yaacov from making Bilha's tent the mainstay of his marital life. These are the paraphrased words of Rav Baruch Halevi Epstein, the *Torah Temima*, on *Vayishlach* 35:22.

What does any of this have to do with Asher, son of Yaacov? Aren't we studying him, his *shaivet*, and the *bracha* [blessing] he received from Moshe? The answer is found in the *Chizkuni* on our *pasuk* in *V'zos Habracha*. **After Reuven objected to his father's decision concerning the placement of his bed, Asher went and told his brothers what Reuven had done.** We must certainly conclude that his intention was for constructive purposes; he probably planned to discuss the matter and attempt to go with his brothers to reprimand Reuven. (This is similar to the dialogue between Miriam and Aharon regarding Moshe's separation from his wife, in the end of *B'ha'aloscha*, where the *Chazal* [our Sages] explain that they intended to admonish Moshe.) However, the brothers of Asher strongly disagreed with his feeling that the incident be discussed. They were outraged that Asher had even related it to them. They rebuked him powerfully, and said, “This is how you act - you gossip about our oldest brother?” Afterward, the *Chizkuni* says, they officially excommunicated Asher.

In our *parsha*, Moshe is coming to release Asher from his excommunication. In other words, the father of the entire tribe of Asher had been put into *nidui* [excommunication or banishment], and the effects were still present in his *shaivet* so many years later! Now, we finally begin to understand our *psukim* in *V'zos Habracha*. Please refer to the *psukim* we cited at the very beginning. Why did Moshe state that “Asher is blessed (*BARUCH*) regarding children”? Since a person who is banned is subject to the “curse” of banishment, Moshe needed to say

the word “*baruch*” [blessed], the opposite of a curse, to begin freeing Asher from his *nidui*. And just like a banished person is not allowed to have marital relations, Moshe hinted that this prohibition was lifted from him, by saying that Asher is blessed “regarding children”. “Children” hints to marital relations. Furthermore, since his brothers had originally distanced Asher, Moshe expressed the wish that “he may be pleasing to (accepted by) his brothers”. And since an excommunicated person is not allowed to anoint himself with oil, Moshe blessed him that he should “immerse his foot in oil”. Finally, the *halacha* [law] states that one banished is not permitted to wear shoes. Thus, Moshe blessed Asher in regard to shoes, as quoted above.

All of our *psukim* now make sense. No doubt, Asher had noble intentions in relating the episode of Reuven and his father’s bedding arrangements to his brothers. He was definitely not a gossip; he merely planned to analyze the incident and probably to try and correct any damage that had been done. But they disagreed and considered his words *loshon hora* [evil gossip]. They did not feel that it was at all constructive to talk about it. Look at the reaction of the *Bnai* [children of] Yaacov to what they determined was a slanderous report! By reporting the apparent wrongdoing to his brothers, the brothers felt that Asher “disgraced the honor of a *talmid chacham* [wise scholar]”, their oldest brother (Rabbi Moshe Menachem Aharon’s commentary on the *Chizkuni*, based on the M’iri as well). Also, in the name of a *sefer* [book] called *Mesilos Chaim*, Rabbi Aharon quotes:

“The matter is astonishing, that for the duration of 200 years, Asher was excommunicated, even though Yaacov *Avinu* already publicized the deed of Reuven [showing that perhaps it shouldn’t be such a bad thing that Asher publicized it to his brothers also] when he took away from Reuven the birthright privilege (*Parshas Vayechi* 49:4). Despite all this, the *nidui*, was intact until Moshe came and undid it.”

Numerous lessons can be derived from all this. We must determine without a doubt that a transgression really NEEDS to be mentioned to people of authority, before we begin discussing negative behavior. The brothers obviously differed with Asher in the matter of Reuven’s deed, maintaining that nothing could be gained by discussing it. Consequently, it was simply *loshon hora*. In addition, we realize what effect a parent can have on children. Since Asher had been put into *nidui*, the negative effects still loomed over the whole *shaivet*, necessitating Moshe’s prayer and blessing to nullify them.

May we receive much divine assistance as we again start reading and learning *Beraishis*. *Chazak, chazak, v’nischazaik* [Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened].

*By Rabbi Moshe Heigh*

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