

# Simchat Torah / Vezot Habracha

Somehow, we never seem to learn Vezot Haberacha. Maybe we are busy learning other things about Sukkot and Shemmini Atzeret. Possibly we are turned off by the heaviness of the poetic language.

Equally true is that we know far more about the beginnings of books than the ends of books. Compare your knowledge of Bereshit with your knowledge of Vayechi, your familiarity with Parashat Bamidbar as opposed to Parashat Massei. We know the start of books better than we know their conclusions! Whichever way, Vezot Haberacha gets a raw deal.

So let us look at the parsha and gain some basic structural familiarity. Clearly Vezot HaBeracha consists of two parshiot, distinct both in subject matter and literary style:

Ch.33 – Moshe's final blessing to Bnei Yisrael

Ch.34 – Moshe's final hour: Moshe viewing Eretz Yisrael, and his death.

If we focus a little on Chapter 33, we denote that the chapter has a poetic, somewhat cumbersome style, with cryptic phraseology, and so it is difficult to translate. A good entry point then, is to comprehend its simple structure:

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| 33:1-5   | Introduction                                   |
| 33:6-25  | Moses' blessings to the tribes, tribe by tribe |
| 33:26-29 | Conclusion                                     |

The "middle section" of the berachot is structured by addressing the tribe in question, prominently denoted by name at the head of each paragraph (parshia). Exceptions to this are the Tribe of Shimon, who is omitted totally. Yissachar's blessing would seem to be absorbed into the blessing of Zevulun. But the pattern works for the majority.

## INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION

Moses' blessings to the tribes have a preamble and an epilogue. Who is addressed in these sections? What is the subject of these pesukim? At a basic level this is a poem that describes the relationship between Am Yisrael and God. [For a detailed analysis of these passages, please see the shiur by [Rav Mordechai Sabato](#).]

If I had to denote a single central theme between both the introduction and the conclusion here, I would focus upon **the unique relationship between God and Israel**.

33:1-5 takes us back in time to Sinai and the giving of the "fiery law." The verses develop the theme of the difference, or contrast between Israel and the surrounding nations. The backdrop to all this is clearly **the Torah**, which is the "heritage" or "inheritance" of the "Community of Jacob."

2. The LORD came from Sinai, And rose from Seir unto them; He shined forth from mount Paran, And He came from the myriads holy, At His right hand was a fiery law unto them.
3. Yea, He loveth the peoples, All His holy ones—they are in Thy hand; And they sit down at Thy feet, Receiving of Thy words.
4. Moses commanded us a law, An inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.
5. And there was a king in Jeshurun, When the heads of the people were gathered, All the tribes of Israel together.

On this basis, we may suggest that the statement being made here is that Torah establishes a special relationship between Israel and God, a relationship which does not exist for other nations. It should not be surprising then, that the Sifrei (2<sup>ND</sup> Century) selects our passage as the source-text for the famous legend in which God offers the Torah to all the surrounding nations. In that Midrash, the nations all reject the Torah due to the contradiction between the high moral demands demanded by Torah Law and the chosen lifestyle of those nations. In this context we read the famous verse: *Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe*: "Moses instructed us in Torah; The heritage of the congregation of Jacob."

33:26-29

26. There is none like unto God, O Jeshurun, Who rideth upon the heaven as thy help, And in His excellency on the skies.
27. The eternal God is a dwelling-place, And underneath are the everlasting arms; And He thrust out the enemy from before thee, And said: 'Destroy.'
28. And Israel dwelleth in safety, The fountain of Jacob alone, In a land of corn and wine; Yea, his heavens drop down dew.
29. Happy art thou, O Israel, who is like unto thee? A people saved by the LORD, The shield of thy help, And that is the sword of thy excellency! And thine enemies shall dwindle away before thee; And thou shalt tread upon their high places.

These verses discuss God's salvation of Israel and the protection that He bestows upon them. It is as if God's own pride or honour is tied up with that of Am Yisrael (cf. parallel phraseology 25 and 29). The background here would seem not to be Torah, but rather **the Land of Israel** which will become the land of God's protection and ongoing care. This land will produce sustenance plentifully and God will take care of the enemies of Israel.

So we have the Berachot of the Tribes flanked by the two most central themes: Torah itself, and Eretz Yisrael.

#### TRANSIT TO PERMANANCE

Maybe, I should add one further reflection prompted by the Midrash. In these pesukim, God is ascribed considerable mobility and movement: Verse 2 uses at least three metaphors for God's spatial movement, God's feet in verse 3, God "riding the heavens" in verse 26. However in verse 27, we might witness a change. The Midrash comments upon these verses highlighting the meaning of the word "maon" as "habitation" or permanent residence. Might we suggest that reflecting the transition of Am Yisrael from Midbar to Canaan, shifting from wanderers to fixed dwellers, the Torah depicts God Himself as undergoing a metamorphosis from transience to permanent residence? This could explain the contrast between God's movement in v.1-5 and the term "maon?"

And if this is true, then this is indeed a closing point for the five books of the Torah. Israel have been forever transient, relying on a promise to Abraham – "to your offspring, I have given this land" - ever since Genesis ch.12. But now the wandering is about to close. Israel now stands on the brink of their homeland, ready to culminate the historic drama of the covenant and its fulfillment. Israel are at the threshold of its home. Maybe it is time for God to discover His residence as well.

Chag Sameach!

[for further investigation of this topic, see the article by Nechama Leibowitz – "The Eternal God A Dwelling-Place," And the comments of the Netziv in particular, which to my mind reinforces this theme.]