



A Prince, Inside and Out

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This week's *parashah* prepares *Benei Yisrael* to travel through the desert. Leading each tribe along this journey was a special officer, a *nasi*, a prince, appointed by God and elevated to leadership by Moshe. Although these appointments were not accompanied by any fanfare, paying close attention to the description of this inauguration can teach us what it means to truly be princely, to act our best even when we feel that we should not have to.

The verse states:

במדבר א:ד

וַאֲתַנְחֶם יְהוָה אִישׁ אִישׁ לְמִטָּה אִישׁ רֹאשׁ לְבֵית אֲבוֹתָיו הוּא:

BeMidbar 1:4

A man from each tribe shall be with you, each man the head of his ancestral house.¹

R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, the Keli Yakar,² points to a redundancy in this verse,

מדקאמר איש איש למטה, מה חזר ואמר איש ראש לבית אבותיו הוא?

Once [the verse said], **A man from each tribe**, why does it need to repeat **each man the head of his ancestral house**?

The Keli Yakar answers:

...הוא דומה למה שכתבו המפרשים בפסוק דן ידין עמו כאחד שבטי ישראל (בראשית מט:טז). שלא היה מחניף לשבטו שנקראו עמו אלא היה דן אותם כאחד שבטי ישראל, כאחד מן שאר שבטים,

¹ Trans. NRSV.

² 1550-1619, Prague.



כך נשיאים אלו היו כשרים והיה כל אחד איש למטה. לכל השבט היה כאיש גבורתו לנהוג עליהם נשיאתו ברמה, ולא זו לכל השבט הרחוקים קצת ממנו אלא אפילו היה ראש לבית אבותיו. הקרובים אליו ביותר גם להם היה לראש לנהוג נשיאות עליהם.

...It is similar to what the commentators explained regarding the verse, **Dan will judge his people like one of the tribes of Israel** (Bereishit 49:16), [to mean] that [Dan] did not flatter his own tribe which is called **his people**. He would judge [his own tribe] **like one of the tribes of Israel**, i.e. like any one of the other tribes.

Similarly these princes were worthy and each of them was **a man of his tribe**. Each tribe had a man strong enough to assert his ascendancy (or princeliness) in an elevated manner. And not just toward the tribes which were slightly far from him, but he was even **the head of his ancestral house**. He was a head even to those who were closest to him, behaving with ascendancy over them.³

To answer his question, the Keli Yakar looks at our verse as the companion to another verse elsewhere in the Torah which has a similar redundancy. In Ya'akov's parting blessing to his son, Dan, he appoints him to the role of judging his brethren **like one of the tribes of Israel**. The Keli Yakar cites a traditional explanation⁴ of this phrasing which teaches that the Torah needs to say explicitly that Dan judges his people like the other tribes of Israel in order to point to the need for a judge to be impartial. A judge from Dan has to mete out the same justice to members of the tribes of Reuven or Zevulun as he does to the members of his own tribe, even if it means a loss to the people who are closest to him. When Dan judges everyone impartially, he treats **עמו, his own people** like any other tribe **כאחד שבטי ישראל, like one of the tribes of Israel**.

The redundancy found in our verse is similar: If a *nasi* is in charge of his entire tribe, then he would certainly rule over the smaller, subunit of his own ancestral house. The Keli Yakar understands that this seeming redundancy can teach a lesson which is complementary to what the Rabbis derived from the blessing of Dan. The Torah demands that Dan's tribe judge everyone impartially, teaching us not to show preferential treatment to those who are close to us. The risk that the verse is cautioning against is that a judge will decide in favor of his own tribe, instead of deciding in favor of the litigant who truly deserves to be vindicated. But the lesson learned from the appointing of the *nesi'im* is designed to counteract the opposite concern. Just as one acts like a prince towards strangers, one also has to act like a prince

³ The word *nasi*, which is often translated as prince, is derived from the verb נָשָׂא, to lift. The prince is the one who is ascendant. The Keli Yakar reads the word ראש, as in the head of the tribe, to point to this element of ascendancy. Just as the head is the highest part of the body, so too these leaders are the most ascendant members of their tribes.

⁴ The Keli Yakar does not state which commentator(s) he is referring to, but this interpretation is reflected in the commentary of R. Sa'adya Ga'on to Bereishit 49:16.



towards his family, his ancestral house. Lest you treat those far away from you with more refined behavior, the verse says that just as you are a *nasi* of your larger tribe, you are also a *nasi* in your own home.

The language that the Keli Yakar uses to describe what it means to be a *nasi* is to be ascendant, to rule over, and to be above. To have proper perspective and to rule fairly requires one to take a step back, to be able to have a healthy amount of emotional and personal distance from the people involved and the challenges raised. This healthy distance is far easier to achieve when dealing with acquaintances and loosely related tribal affiliates. When it comes to dealing with one's close friends, one's family members, the people we live alongside (and often come into conflict with), these interactions can be clouded by personal feelings of attachment or resentment. It may be that the hardest time for a prince to truly act like a king is when he is in his own castle.

There is another component raised by the interpretation of the Keli Yakar that is relevant to all of us, even those of us who are not in positions of authority, we who are not rulers or kings. Just as a prince needs to be a prince to everyone, close friends and family included, so too we need to behave in a princely fashion to everyone, even those who live with us at home. Often we reserve our best selves for strangers and our worst selves for the people we love and who are closest to us. We are patient... with strangers. We are kind... to strangers. We are charming... to strangers. We clean the house and display our best behavior for guests, while paying no attention to making it pleasant for our roommates, parents, spouses, siblings, and children who live with us. But it is equally important, if not more critical, to show some of those good manners and pleasant attitudes to the people whom it is easiest to show short tempers and nasty demeanors—our loved ones.

To be a prince at home means not to interpret the feeling of comfort that we feel at home as a license to act however we want towards the people there. It can be hard to tell the difference between relaxing and recovering from a bad day at work when we get home and taking that bad day out on the people who live at home with us. The people who are closest to you bear the burden of interacting with you when you are at your most depleted, when you have no emotional or mental energy left to be genteel and to engage your own good manners. The *nesi'im* teach us how important it is to rise above the tendency to mistreat those who are available to be treated poorly by us. We need to be careful with the people we care about.

The Talmud Bavli in Massekhet Nedarim asks why it is that Torah scholars often have children who are rebellious, who do not take after their parents by choosing to follow in the path of leadership.



תלמוד בבלי נדרים פא.

ומפני מה אין מצויין ת"ח לצאת ת"ח מבניה?
 אמר רב יוסף שלא יאמרו תורה ירושה היא להם.
 רב ששת בריה דרב אידי אומר- כדי שלא יתגדלו על הצבור.
 מר זוטרא אומר- מפני שהן מתגברין על הצבור. רב אשי אומר משום דקרו לאינשי חמרי. רבינא אומר
 שאין מברכין בתורה תחלה...

Talmud Bavli Nedarim 81a

And why do we not find that Torah scholars produce more Torah scholars from their children?

Rav Yosef said: So that they will not say [the Torah] is an inheritance to them.

Rav Sheshet the son of Rav Iddi says: So that they will not act presumptuous towards the community.

Mar Zutra says: Because they arrogate power to themselves over the community. Rav

Ashi says: Because they call people donkeys. Ravina says: Because they do not make the initial blessing over learning Torah...

Rav Yosef and Rav Sheshet suggest that the universe works in such a way that children happen not to inherit the mantle of leadership from their parents. This prevents the creation of an elite culture of scholars who are the children of scholars. These children might become entitled and come to think of the Torah as an inheritance or act presumptuously towards the community. Mar Zutra, Rav Ashi, and Ravina, on the other hand, see this phenomenon as a reflection of behavior that is already being demonstrated: They arrogate power, they call people donkeys, and they don't make a blessing over studying Torah. What these three Rabbis do not make clear is: Who are the "they" who behave in this way?

One possibility is that "they" are the parents who are rabbis and sages. In the public eye, the parents are kind to their constituents and act with humility. As public figures, they treat people with respect, and they act truly appreciative of the Torah, which is both their responsibility and their reward. But when the Torah scholars come home, there is a different face, a different attitude that only the children see. At home, the scholar is transparent about being in it for the power or the money. The scholar demonstrates that he thinks he's better than all of the people he serves; he thinks of them as idiots, as donkeys. When push comes to shove, he even comes to take the Torah for granted and stops making the blessing on it.⁵ The children see the other face of the clergy, they see their parent as being sweet on the outside and bitter within. All of the love for the Torah faces outward and all of the resentment

⁵ It seems unlikely that "they" are refusing to make the initial blessing when being called up to the Torah for an *aliyah*, so it is much more likely that the blessing upon the Torah that they are neglecting to say is the blessing made before private Torah study.



towards the difficulty of a life of Torah is expressed within the privacy of the home. But the children of these scholars are the ones who are at home, so they are being miseducated in the love of Torah. The children are being trained to experience being neglected by their scholar-parent in favor of the needs of the community. Then the parent comes home and bashes the community. Of course the children are going to feel no love towards the Torah and no desire to sacrifice themselves—or their children—for it.

But it is not only the case that the people who are closest to us are more available or more likely to be the recipient of our poor treatment of them. It is also the case that when we treat them poorly, it is more likely to be deeply harmful and to have a lastingly painful effect. This dangerous reality is demonstrated by the most famous *havruta* in Rabbinic literature, R. Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish:

תלמוד בבלי בבא מציא פד.

...אקרייה ואתנייה, ושויה גברא רבא.

יומא חד הוּוּ מפלגי בי מדרשא: הסייף והסכין והפגיון והרומח ומגל יד ומגל קציר מאימתי מקבלין טומאה - משעת גמר מלאכתן.

ומאימתי גמר מלאכתן? רבי יוחנן אומר: משיצרפם בכבשן, ריש לקיש אמר: משיצחצחן במים. - אמר ליה: לסטאה בלסטיותיה ידע! - אמר ליה: ומאי אהנת לי? התם רבי קרו לי, הכא רבי קרו לי. אמר ליה: אהנאי לך דאקרבינך תחת כנפי השכינה. חלש דעתיה דרבי יוחנן, חלש ריש לקיש.

Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 84a

R. Yoḥanan taught [Reish Lakish, a former bandit] Torah and Mishnah and made him into a great man.

One day there was a dispute about [this *baraita*]: *From when do the sword, the knife, the dagger, the spear, hand sickle, or harvest sickle become susceptible to impurity? From when the work of manufacturing them is completed.*

And when is their manufacture completed? R. Yoḥanan said: From when he forges them in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: From when he rinses them with water. [R. Yoḥanan said to Reish Lakish]: A bandit knows about his banditry! [Reish Lakish] said back to him: And how have you benefited me?! Then they called me Master (Rabbi), and now they call me Master! [R. Yoḥanan] said back to him: I benefitted you by bringing you under the wings of God's presence!

R. Yoḥanan got upset. Reish Lakish fell [gravely] ill.

R. Yoḥanan knows all about Reish Lakish's past as a successful bandit and highwayman, and he uses this information to mock him during the dispute. We see that R. Yoḥanan insults Reish Lakish in such a personal way, not in spite of the fact that they are *havrutas*, but *because* they are *havrutas*. Their closeness is what provides the opening for R. Yoḥanan to say what he would later regret. And because R. Yoḥanan is so close to Reish Lakish, he knows what is



going to really hurt him. R. Yoḥanan doesn't necessarily intend to hurt Reish Lakish as much as he does—R. Yoḥanan probably thinks that he can pal around with his *havruta*, make a mean jab at him, and that Reish Lakish will shrug it off as no big deal. But it does matter to Reish Lakish, and it irrevocably changes the course of their friendship and both of their lives. Family and friends often take you less than seriously. It's hard to be a prince at home. But the *nesi'im* teach you to rise above, to hold yourself to the same standards of sensitivity irregardless.

This interpretation of the teaching of the Keli Yakar leads to a new understanding of Rava's principle of *tokho k'varo*, that a person who holds and represents the Torah needs to display an inner demeanor which is consistent with their outer demeanor:

תלמוד בבלי יומא עב:

מבית ומחוץ תצפנו (שמות כה:יא). אמר רבא: כל תלמיד חכם שאין תוכו כברו אינו תלמיד חכם.

Talmud Bavli Yoma 72b

From within and from without, you shall cover [the ark] (Shemot 25:11). Rava said:

Any Torah scholar whose inside is not like his outside is not a Torah scholar.

The traditional interpretation of Rava's teaching is that he is making an appeal to your integrity. A scholar's behavior has to be good, their intentions have to be good. A scholar needs to be worthy through and through. But matching your outside to your inside is not only about you and your integrity, it's also about how you should behave towards others: You behave on the inside, inside your home, with your friends and family, as you do on the outside, with acquaintances and strangers, people you feel the need to impress. Fine and refined people have truly good character that makes no exceptions, and are good to everyone, even the people whom we love the most.

Wishing you a Shabbat of Shalom, inside and out.

