



A Life in Pieces

R. David Kasher – kasher@hadar.org

Parashat Ki Teitzei 5784

It's just another law in Deuteronomy's massive catalog of laws, but something in the way it's written sounds like a fragment from some lost legend:

דברים כא:טו-יז

כי תהיין לאיש שתי נשים האחת אהובה והאחת שנואה וילדו לו בנים האהובה והשנואה והיה הבן הבכור לשנואה. והיה ביום הנחילו את בניו את אשר יהיה לו לא יוכל לבכר את בן האהובה על פני בן השנואה הבכר. כי את הבכר בן השנואה יכיר לתת לו פי שנים בכל אשר ימצא לו כי הוא ראשית אנו לו משפט הבכר.

Deuteronomy 21:15-17

If a man has two wives, one loved and the other hated, and both the loved and the hated have borne him sons, but the firstborn is the son of the hated one—when he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as firstborn the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the hated one, who is older. Instead, he must accept the firstborn, the son of the hated one, and give him a double-portion; since he is **the first fruit of his vigor**, the birthright is his due.



These are just the rules of inheritance, clarified. But it somehow breaks the heart to hear them. A hated wife, in the shadow of a beloved one. A husband's unfair disregard. And the poor child who was innocently born into disfavor. It reads like a story.

And, in fact, it is one. It is the story of Reuven, Ya'akov's firstborn son.

The references are barely concealed. Ya'akov is the character we know who had multiple wives. His second wife, Raḥel, was the one he loved, and Reuven's mother, Leah, was the one that "God saw was hated" (Genesis 29:31). Yosef, Raḥel's firstborn, was the child that Ya'akov "loved above all his sons" (37:3). And, if there were still any doubt, the most unusual phrase in the law above, the "first fruit of his vigor," is exactly the one that Ya'akov uses to describe Reuven in his final blessing to him:

בראשית מט:ג

רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אֶתָּה כָּחִי וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי יִתֵּן שְׂאֵת וְיִתֵּן עֹז.

Genesis 49:3

Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might, and the **first fruit of my vigor**.

But why bring Reuven's story up now, centuries later—and why so subtly? Reuven has not been one of the most prominent figures in the Torah's narrative. We get only glimpses of him, along the way, while others are in the spotlight. But a careful reconstruction of these pieces of Reuven's life reveals his story to be one of the most tragic in the Bible.

He is indeed the firstborn of Ya'akov's 13 children. We might have expected him to be destined for glory. But even at the moment of his birth there are portents of pain:



בראשית כט:לב

וַתֵּהָרָא לֵאָה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ רְאוּבֵן כִּי אָמְרָה ה' בְּעֵינַי כִּי עָתִידָא אֶהְיֶה אִישִׁי.

Genesis 29:32

Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuven, for she declared, “The Eternal saw my suffering. And now my husband will love me.”

The name, Reuven, appears to be an exclamation of delight at the appearance of a child: *r’eu ben*, meaning, “See—a son!” But the explanation Leah gives for the name inserts two other, more tragic meanings into the name by playing with the same consonant sounds, so that “Reuven” now also means: *ra’ah b’onyi*, “[God] saw my suffering,” and, *ra’ah... ye’e’haveini*, “[God] saw... and now [Ya’akov] will love me.” These are Leah’s expressions of her own pain, but they become infused in Reuven’s identity, and suggestive of his fate. He, too, will suffer and be desperate for his father’s love.

The next time we hear about Reuven, it is a strange scene indeed. He is still a boy, the family is still growing, and his mother and Raḥel are still competing for Ya’akov’s affections.

Reuven—with intentions somewhat unclear—ends up getting in the middle of this drama:

בראשית ל:יד-טו

וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן בְּיָמֵי קִצְרֵי חֹטִים וַיִּמְצָא דֹדָאִים בְּשָׂדֶה וַיָּבֵא אֹתָם אֶל לֵאָה אִמּוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר רַחֵל אֶל לֵאָה תֵּנִי נָא לִי מִדֹּדָאֵי בְנֶךָ. וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הִמָּעַט קִחְתְּךָ אֶת אִישִׁי וְלָקַחְתָּ גַם אֶת דֹּדָאֵי בְנִי וַתֹּאמֶר רַחֵל לֵךְ יִשְׁכַּב עִמָּךְ הַלֵּילָה תַּחַת דֹּדָאֵי בְנֶךָ.

Genesis 30:14-15

Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuven came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Raḥel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” But she said to her, “Was it not enough for you to take away my

husband, but you would also take my son's mandrakes?" Rahel replied, "I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes."

The word for these "mandrakes," in Hebrew, *duda'im* (דודאים), is related to "love"—sharing the same root as *dod* (דוד), the word for beloved, or lover¹—suggesting that they are some kind of aphrodisiac. The deal goes down between the two women, and when Ya'akov comes home from the field that day, Leah tells him that he is now obligated to sleep with her. And it is Reuven—in somewhat oedipal fashion—who has secured her that right.

We will return to the oedipal, but for now, let's push forward in Reuven's life. The favoritism toward Yosef drives the rest of his brothers wild with hatred. They decide to kill him, and throw him into a pit. We remember this story as a team effort, of all against one. But look how Reuven responds to their murderous plot:

בראשית לז:כא-כב

וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא נִכְנֹו נַפְשׁוֹ. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֵיהֶם רְאוּבֵן אֵל תִּשְׁפְּכוּ דָם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל הַבּוֹר
הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיֵּד אֵל תִּשְׁלְחוּ בּוֹ לְמַעַן הִצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהַשְׁיבוֹ אֶל אָבִיו.

Genesis 37:21-22

When Reuven heard of it, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life!" Reuven said, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out there in the wilderness, but do not send him to his death." For Reuven intended to save him from them, and return him to their father.

¹ Song of Songs 7:14 plays with the relationship between the two words: "הַדּוּדָאִים נָתַנוּ רֵיחַ וְעַל פְּתָחֵינוּ כָּל מִגְדִּים" - The mandrakes (*duda'im*) give off their fragrance, at our doors are all choice fruits, both freshly picked and long-stored, have I kept, my beloved (*dodi*), for you."

Reuven was playing the role of the firstborn, looking after the younger ones. He was the one brother who did not want to kill Yosef from the start, and the only one who ever intended to bring him back home.

But his plan failed. As we know, Yosef was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. This must have happened without Reuven present, because right afterwards we read:

בראשית לז:כט-ל

וַיָּשָׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אֵין יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו. וַיָּשָׁב אֶל אֶחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הִילָד אֵינֶנּוּ וְאֲנִי אָנֹכִי בָּא.

Genesis 37:29-30

When Reuven returned to the pit and saw that Yosef was not in the pit, he tore his clothes.

He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone! Now what will become of me?”

This is the first sign that Reuven is cracking. He has failed in his capacity as the firstborn. He feels responsible for what has happened, but not so much that he is willing to confess. He felt compelled to save Yosef, but was not powerful enough to simply insist that the other brothers back off. He is a man torn between competing moral impulses, between bravery and cowardice. This inner conflict will continue, and end up producing a man with instincts both noble and troubling.²

Years later, when Shimon has been captured by Yosef, who is calling for Benjamin to go down to Egypt, Ya’akov is understandably terrified of losing more children, and refuses. Reuven,

² For an excellent exploration of this duality in Reuven’s character in the sale of Yosef narrative, see my colleague, R. Shai Held’s essay on Parashat VaYeishev 5774, “Against Half Heartedness,” published in *The Heart of Torah* (JPS, 2017) and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/against-half-heartedness>.



who must once again feel panicked with the responsibility of the firstborn, this time for the brother closest to him in age, suddenly blurts out this disturbing offer:

בראשית מב:לז

וַיֹּאמֶר רְאוּבֵן אֶל אָבִיו לֵאמֹר אֶת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי תַמִּית אִם לֹא אָבִיאָנּוּ אֵלֶיךָ תִּנָּה אֹתוֹ עַל יְדֵי וְאֲנִי אֲשִׁיבֶנּוּ אֵלֶיךָ.

Genesis 42:37

Reuven said to his father, “You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you! Put [Benjamin] in my care, and I will return him to you.”

Ya’akov, not surprisingly, declines. “You may kill my two sons”?! Why would Ya’akov ever want to kill his own grandchildren? And what kind of father offers his own sons as a pledge? Someone willing to sacrifice his own children is not the person you trust your children to.

Yehudah then steps up and offers **himself** as a pledge—not his life, but his honor—and Ya’akov accepts (Genesis 43:8-14). From then on, it is Yehudah who assumes the symbolic place of the firstborn. Reuven has failed, and begins to fade into the background.

The last we hear of Reuven is in that moment of blessing we mentioned above. And yes, Ya’akov starts by calling him, “וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי יֵתֵר שְׂאֵת וַיֵּתֵר עֹז” - the first fruit of my vigor, exceeding in rank and exceeding in strength.” Reuven must have lapped thirstily at those words, finally feeling his father’s love.

But then Ya’akov goes on:

בראשית מט:ד

פָּחַז כְּמִים אֶל תּוֹתֵר כִּי עֲלִית מִשְׁכְּבִי אָבִיךָ אֲז חֲלִלְתָּ יְצוּעֵי עֲלֵה.

Genesis 49:4

Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer. For when you mounted your father's bed, you disgraced yourself! My couch he mounted!

This isn't a blessing at all. It sounds more like a curse, and one filled with venom. For Ya'akov is angrily referencing the most disturbing episode in Reuven's life.

While Ya'akov and his family were traveling back to the land of Canaan, Rahel dies, and Ya'akov (also called "Israel") travels on ahead, to be alone (Genesis 35:16-21). And then, out of nowhere, we read the following:

בראשית לה:כב-כג

וַיְהִי בִשְׁכֵן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הַחַוִּיל וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה פִּילגֶשֶׁת אָבִיו וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל {פ}
וַיִּהְיוּ בָנָיו יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר.
בְּנֵי לֵאָה בְּכוֹר יַעֲקֹב רְאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן וְלֵוִי וַיְהוּדָה וַיִּשְׁשֹׁנָה וְזִבְלֻן.

Genesis 35:22-23

While Israel stayed in that land, **Reuven went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine**, and Israel heard about it...

...Now the sons of Ya'akov were 12 in number.

The sons of Leah: **Ya'akov's firstborn, Reuven**, and Shimon, and Levi and Yehudah, and Yisakhar and Zevulun.

The verse literally breaks off—using the unusual scribal device of a *piska b'emtza pasuk* (a break in the middle of a verse)³—and moves quickly on to a new topic, as if the Torah doesn't

³ I also discussed this device in my essay on Parashat Pinchas, "How to Read a Census," available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/how-read-census>.



want to talk about what just happened. Instead, the next verse pointedly re-emphasizes Reuven's firstborn status, as if well aware that this status has just been jeopardized.⁴

Indeed, it seems that Reuven ultimately lost more than just a final blessing. In the Books of Chronicles, which recount the lineages of biblical characters, we find this record of Reuven's legacy:

דברי הימים א ה:א

כִּי הוּא הַבְּכוֹר וַבְּחֻלּוֹ יִצְעִי אָבִיו נִתְּנָה בְּכֹרְתּוֹ לְבְנֵי יוֹסֵף בֶּן יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא לְהַתִּיחֵשׁ לְבְכֹרָה.

1 Chronicles 5:1

He was the firstborn. But when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef son of Israel, so he is not reckoned as firstborn in the genealogy.

Reuven lost the birthright—not just symbolically, but literally. His portion was taken and given to Yosef. The firstborn of the hated wife—who became hated himself—was passed over in favor of the firstborn of the beloved wife.

In other words, what happened to Reuven is exactly what our law in Deuteronomy warns against: “When he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as firstborn the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the hated one.”

Why, then, does Moshe give this law now, here in the final book of the Torah, when it directly contradicts the outcome of the narrative that has come before it?⁵

⁴ That is how Rashi reads these verses, as we see in his commentary on Moshe's final blessing to Reuven (in Deuteronomy 33:6): “May he be counted among his brothers, exactly as he was when it said (in Genesis 35), ‘He slept with Bilhah... And the children of Ya'akov were 12’—for he was not taken out of the count.

⁵ The Seforno sees no difficulty in this seeming contradiction: “The birthright must not be passed away from the son because of the hatred of this one or the love of that one. But if it is done because of the wickedness of the firstborn son, then it is appropriate to pass him over... And that seems to be what Our Father Ya'akov did. For it



On one level, Moshe appears to be offering a broad critique of the favoritism that characterized much of the family dynamics in the early stories of the Torah. Throughout the early generations of Genesis, the firstborn child was again and again supplanted by a younger sibling, either due to parental preferences or by divine command. Again and again, this led to bitter conflict and violence—and left one child out of the covenant. Moshe is therefore communicating to the Children of Israel, who are about to cross over into the Land, that in the new society they are about to create, the rules of inheritance must follow the universal standard of the law, rather than the unpredictable whims of a patriarch.⁶

That critique, however, could have been issued without the law making reference to Reuven in particular. It seems, then, that the tragic tale of Moshe's ancestor stuck with him and he felt compassion for Reuven.

For Reuven may have failed to live up to his potential as the firstborn of the covenantal family, but he never really had a chance. He was, after all, born to a mother who was unloved by his father—so he tried, unsuccessfully, to win that love back for her with those mandrakes. He knew his father loved Yosef best, so he tried to save Yosef and redeem himself in his father's eyes—but in that, too, he failed. Finally, when no one else seemed to love him, he tried to steal some love for himself—and ended up cursed by the father he always wanted to please.

says (in I Chronicles 5:1), 'when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef son of Yisrael.'

⁶ In legal scholar Robert Cover's seminal essay, "Nomos and Narrative," he cites this law from Ki Teitzei and, after drawing the contrast between the terms of the law and the themes in the earlier narrative of the Torah, he writes: "In the Bible there is no earthly or heavenly precept so heavily loaded as that of Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 15 through 17, because there is no precept rendered so problematic by the narratives in which the law is embedded."



A *midrash* from Bereishit Rabbati imagines Moshe pleading with God, despite all these failures, to maintain Reuven's legacy among the Children of Israel:

בראשית רבתי וישלח

כיון שעמד משה ובקש עליו רחמים ואמר "יחי ראובן" (דברים לג:ו).

Bereishit Rabbati VaYishlah

When Moshe stood [before the Holy One], he asked for mercy for Reuven, as he said [in his final blessing], "May Reuven live!" (Deuteronomy 33:6).

As Moshe replaces the condemnation of Ya'akov's final words to Reuven with this call for Reuven's enduring place among the tribes of Israel, he leaves them with the message that no one is irredeemable. From here on out, all the Children of Israel will remain in the covenant.

