

Disconnection and Connection in Binyamin and Esther

While on his deathbed, Yaakov bestows a bracha upon Binyamin that establishes a unique intergenerational connection between Binyamin and Esther:

בְּנֵימִין יֵאָבֵד יִטְרֹף בְּבֶקֶר יֹאכֵל עַד וְלָעֶרֶב יַחְלֹק
שָׁלָל.

Binyamin is a wolf who will snatch its prey in the morning and in the evening divide its loot.

Bereishit 49:27

This blessing is actualized with the coronation of King Saul in the “morning” of the First Commonwealth, and in the victory of Esther and Mordechai at the “twilight” of this era (Rashi, Bereishit 49:27). The strikingly similar characteristics of Binyamin and Esther have been explicated and supported through examining the matriarchal influence of Rachel (her *tzniut* and silence) on both of them (*Esther Rabba* 6:12). However, perhaps it is actually the patriarchal effects of Yaakov that suffuse this lineage and provide an even stronger and more psychologically intriguing connection between Binyamin and Esther.

Binyamin is the quintessential loner, a *levado*. He is born alone in this world, with the knowledge that his birth caused his mother’s death, having neither a mother nor father to raise him; his father is emotionally inconsolable after the loss of his favorite son Yoseph (Bereishit 37:35).



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Binyamin lives his days aware of the lies and deceptions of his brothers,¹ never being accepted as one of them, while watching his father’s inexorable pain caused by those brothers. He is alone, living a solitary existence from the day of his birth, forced to face the reality of living life on his own.



This *levado* existence defines Binyamin, and so he is described by Yehuda as *vayivater hu levado*, “and he remained alone” (Bereishit 44:20). Despite being the subject of discussion, debate and accusations throughout the end of Sefer Bereishit, not one word of Binyamin’s is uttered or recorded. In Yehuda’s impassioned appeal to Yoseph to save Binyamin’s life, never does Yehuda declare his or his brothers’ love

for Binyamin, only the heartbreak Binyamin’s death would cause their father (Bereishit 44:31).

Binyamin’s state of *levado* is his destiny. He alone is the heir to the *levado* state of his father, as he and Yaakov are the only figures in Chumash described as *vayivater hu levado*. He is the only son born to Yaakov after his character-altering encounter with *levado* at *Nachal Yabok*. Yaakov’s experience of *levado* is an existential confrontation; a face-to-face encounter with himself as he is forced into a state of solitude described as *vayivater hu levado* (Bereishit 32:25). Finally able to face himself, Yaakov can at long last connect to G-d face to face, leading him to name the city P’niel, — *panim el panim* — a face-to-face connection with G-d (E-l) (Bereishit 32:31). This meditative, painfully honest, reflective state allows Yaakov to transform from his prior state of interacting from behind as Yaakov, to frontally, honestly and openly interacting as Yisrael, thereby acquiring his legacy of an *ish ha’emet*, man of truth.

Likewise, Binyamin, observing from the sidelines, recognizes the truth

of the family of Yisrael, unhindered by the need for justifications, rationalizations or defenses. The complex profile of a *levado* is unfettered by the need to conform and yield to social pressure, thus allowing for acute self-awareness and heightened spiritual growth.² Thus perhaps G-d chooses specifically the territory of Binyamin in which to dwell (Rashi, Devarim 33:12).

However, this particular persona faces the greatest risk of alienation and ostracism. The antidote for the alienation, isolation and even excommunication that jeopardizes the state of *levado*, is the blessing of *chen*. It follows that only after Yaakov experiences his struggle of *levado* does he express to Essav his appreciation of the gift of *chen* (of charisma) bestowed upon each of his 11 children (*hayeladim asher chanan Elokim et avdecha* — the children that G-d bestowed on your servant, Bereishit 33:5). It is this amorphous trait of *chen* (a free gift — *chinam*), an unearned natural quality, that attracts, connects and bonds people to each other. It is Yoseph's recognition of the *levado* state of Binyamin, its corresponding peril of isolation, as well as his conspicuous lack of *chen* that leads Yoseph to offer the *bracha* of *Elokim yachnecha b'ni*, "G-d shall be gracious to you, my son" (Bereishit 43:29), to his beloved Binyamin. The descendants of Binyamin continue through history sorely lacking the connectivity, likability and relatability that is necessary to be enduring leaders that unites their people. The concomitant effects of spiritual heights and social alienation resulting from a life of *levado* define the history of Shevet Binyamin.

The Midrash, *Mechilta Beshalach 5*,

describes the attempt of the tribe of Binyamin to be the first to cross Yam Suf as ending in failure, with the other tribes uniting in stoning them, and refusing the ostracized tribe of Binyamin the honor of being the first to cross the sea.

In the horrific tale of the *Pilegesh Begiva* (uncannily similar to the word *gavia*) (Shoftim, chapters 19-21), Binyamin stands alone in defying his brothers, refusing to hand over the perpetrators of the crime of murdering the concubine. It is only when Binyamin is nearly decimated that the brothers recant and resolve to save the tribe of Binyamin from extinction. The tribe of Binyamin is cast into the nadir of *levado*, having to honestly confront themselves and own up to their responsibility in the events

It is precisely the realization on the part of Binyamin of their near desolation, their stark confrontation with the state of *levado*, that gives rise to the first king of Israel, who himself is a loner, described as different and "head and shoulders beyond all others."

that led to their excommunication.

It is no wonder that King Shaul, the first King of Israel, emerges from the ashes of the *Pilegesh begiva*, from that state of *levado*. It is precisely the realization on the part of Binyamin

ותלבש אסתר מלכות - [בגדי מלכות מבעי ליה] אלא שלבשה מלכות בית אביה. [מ"ר פ' וירא פרשה נ"ו]: המפרשים נדחקו בבאור דרשה זו. ולי נראה פשוט דלבשתה מלכות בית אביה, שהוא שאול ... וכמו לשאול נמסר דבר אבדן עמלק כך לבשתה עתה אסתר רוח זה להאביד את המן העמלקי, וכמבואר שמטרת בואה עתה למלך לבקש את המן אל המשתה להוציא כל הענין לפועל כאשר באמת כן היה
תורה תמימה אסתר ה:א

“The verse (5:1) states ‘And Esther wore royalty.’ [It should have said, ‘Esther wore royal clothing,’] Rather she wore the royalty of her father’s house.” (Midrash Rabbah, Vayera no. 56). The commentators struggled to understand this interpretation. It seems obvious to me [to explain] that she wore the royalty of her father’s house, of Shaul. And just as Shaul was given the power to destroy Amalek, so too, Esther was cloaked with this mission to destroy Haman the Amalekite, as is clear, that the whole purpose of her coming now to the king was to request that Haman come to the feast and bring about everything that took place subsequently.

Torah Temimah, Esther 5:1

of their near desolation, their stark confrontation with the state of *levado*, that gives rise to the first king of Israel,

who himself is a loner, described as different and “head and shoulders beyond all others” (Shmuel I 9:2).

The direct heir to the *levado* character of Yaakov and Binyamin, the one that most mirrors the background and personality of Binyamin, is Esther. Like Binyamin, she too, has no parents; her mother too died while giving birth to her (*Esther Rabba* 6:5). She too is raised by a father figure who refuses to be consoled (Yaakov after the death of Rachel and Mordechai after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash). She too is left alone, waited upon, worried about, deliberated upon, while remaining silent throughout, asking for nothing and demanding nothing.

In being cast into this state of absolute and painful solitude, forced by Mordechai to face the reality of her life, the truth of her ancestral mistakes³ and her responsibility to her destiny, Esther finds her strength, finds her voice and rises up to the challenge of fighting for herself and her people.

Yoseph’s blessing of *chen* to Binyamin was not fully realized until the birth of his descendent Esther. It is only in

her that the blessing of *chen* is realized, underscored by its repetition three times in the Megilla.⁴

The story of Purim is a historic moment of redemption for the tribe of Binyamin as they are transformed from a tribe of *levado* to a tribe filled with *chen*, and are thus able to connect and inspire the entirety of the Jewish people. It is also a national redemption for the Jewish People, as they move from a state of *am mefuzar umeforad* (a nation that is scattered and disparate (Esther 3:8) to a united nation prepared to rally together to fight their enemies. It is the ability to unite as one people, resulting from an abundance of *chen*, that finally allows the Jewish People to defeat Amalek. This *chen* had been allotted to the tribe of Binyamin (*Baba Batra* 123a), but until now, Binyamin was not successful in accessing it. [Yaakov had recognized the enormous power of *chen* in his children while confronting Esav, foreshadowing the power of the *chen* of Esther in defeating Amalek.]

This is the concretization of the bracha given generations earlier to Binyamin by Yaakov when he said, “Binyamin is a wolf who will snatch its prey in the morning and in the

evening divide its loot.” Indeed, in the dawn of Binyamin’s history, he will kill his prey and bring it back to his secluded den, devouring it as a wolf, alone.⁵ Such was the description of Binyamin throughout his early history as seen in the incident of the *Pilegish begiva*, and Shaul. But in its twilight, with Esther and Mordechai, he will have acquired the wherewithal to divide his winnings and share them with klal Yisrael. Such was the bracha afforded to Shevet Binyamin, having incorporated the spiritual gifts of a life lived *levado* with the social connections gained from the G-d-given gift of *chen*.

Perhaps the emphasis on interpersonal mitzvot on Purim, such as the obligations of *mishloach manot* and *matanot la’evyonim*, is a means of celebrating the newly realized connectivity of the descendants of Binyamin to their brothers — finally having attained the status of *ratzui l’rov echav*, beloved to most of his brothers (Esther 10:3). But even more striking, perhaps, is the obligation to commemorate this day with the eating of a *seuda* with family and friends. Certainly this seems to be a reenactment and celebration of the fulfillment of the bracha of Binyamin: “in the evening, divide its loot.”

Endnotes

1 Sota 36b.

2 Long, Christopher and Averill, James R. “Solitude: An exploration of the Benefits of Being Alone,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 33:1 (2003).

3 Malbim, Esther 2:2, *Manot Halevi*. 4:14, *Torah Temima* 5:1.

4 Esther 2:15, 2:17, 5:2.

5 *Bechor Shor*, Genesis 49:27.

