

### The Blessing of Naftali: No Mere Cameo

We do not know much about the personality of Naftali; other than his birth, he does not appear in any of the narrative in Sefer Bereishit (the same is true of most of the other brothers). In the Torah portion of Vayechi, Naftali is given a blessing from Yaakov, as is to be expected. Yaakov's blessing to Naftali offers the same poetic yet cryptic description found with all the other brothers (Bereishit 49:21):

*"Naphtali is a swift gazelle; [he is one] who utters beautiful words"*

It is challenging to make heads or tails as to what idea is being conveyed with this blessing. The comparison to a gazelle quite possibly is a focus on a physical trait of speed. Beautiful words could mean just about anything. Is there a connection between the two?

The commentaries, for the most part, point to one of two angles in assisting the comprehension of this blessing. The first echoes the prophetic themes of the other brothers, where the blessing points to a future manifestation of a trait. In this instance, the hinted prophecy refers to Devorah, the future shofetet. Devorah calls for Barak, from the tribe of Naftali to help in the destruction of Sisra and his armies. Many of the troops that came forward were from the tribe of Naftali, instrumental in the eventual victory. Rashi emphasizes, based on a Midrash, that it was "through" the soldiers of Naftali that Devorah and Barak composed their eventual song to God in honor of the victory. The alacrity demonstrated in their desire to fight, alongside their participation in the song (the beautiful words alluded to above), complete the interpretation of the blessing. In a similar vein, Rav Yosef Bechor Shor points to a specific trait the soldiers of Naftali possessed. After victory, they would run ahead of the returning army and publicize the salvation from God.

The other approach, sourced from the Midrashim, directs us to a well-known story concerning the death of Esav. At the time of Yaakov's passing, Esav attempted to prevent his burial. His argument hinged on considering himself the final part of the "pairs" that were buried in the Cave of Machpelah, Esav being the counter to Leah. Yaakov's sons protest, explaining that Yaakov had purchased the final burial plot. In fact, they had a contract to prove the point; unfortunately, it was left in Egypt. Naftali, being the speediest of the brothers, jumps up and offers to run back to Egypt to retrieve the contract. Before his return, Chushim, the son of Dan, ends up killing Esav (the circumstances are not germane to the idea here).

In both instances, we are left puzzled as to what exactly is the grand trait that is the focus of Yaakov's blessing to Naftali. In the first explanation, the future sons of Naftali are praised for both their volunteering to fight and for their involvement (or inspiration) in the composition of the song by Devorah and Barak (he being one of the sons). While this is certainly praiseworthy, it does seem other tribes might also have this same attitude, evidenced in future wars. What

was unique about Naftali? Per Rav Yosef Bechor Shor, what does rushing back to announce salvation demonstrate to us about Naftali?

In the second explanation, the primary focus is on Naftali's speed. While being fast is certainly an advantage, are we to believe this is worthy of a blessing?

Naturally, military conflict is a dominant theme throughout much of the conquest of Israel. While knowing full well that many battles were fought through a directive from God, the clashes themselves were obviously hard-fought affairs. It would be completely normal for the victorious army to catch their breath after the battle, to eat, collect any loot, and celebrate. While not meant to be critical, one sees this trend in the story of Purim. After the Jewish victory over their enemies, the Megillah records in one verse the victory and the subsequent setting aside of the following day for celebration. In the case of Devorah, we see something different. Rather than stop and reflect on the victory, Devorah and Barak, on the **very same day** of victory, compose a song dedicated to praise and gratitude towards God. When studying the song, we see a panoply of important concepts relating to God's Kingship, Divine Providence and His unique relationship with the Jewish people. In a similar fashion, Rav Yosef Bechor Shor points to how the soldiers from Naftali would point to the aspect of salvation at the height of victory. Capturing the moment of tremendous joy and elation, and then directing that towards immediate praise of God, is certainly an admirable trait.

The second explanation offered above is a bit harder to understand. The Hermes-type reference to Naftali seems to be difficult to relate to as some type of true value. Often, when we think of talent, we often point to physical attributes as being the feature that stands apart from others. Athletes are revered for their skillset. Millions watch sporting events, reveling in the achievements of points scored and goals achieved. Events such as the Olympics laud humanity for milestones of physical triumphs. While there certainly is something to reflect on when it comes to success in these arenas, is physical prowess the highest aim for humanity? When one is blessed with a particular physical attribute, it becomes critical to assess how best to make use of it. In the case of Naftali, in that one brief moment where he volunteers to return to Egypt, we see someone seeing his speed for a task of the utmost importance, to right a potential injustice, and ensure the continuation of the Divine plan. Rather than focus on winning races, Naftali embodies the idea of someone concluding that whatever physical gift received is a means of achieving a greater good. Rather than use the gift solely in a competitive framework, an individual should seek out how best to direct the gift towards serving God.

As with all the brothers, the traits isolated by Yaakov should serve not just as insights into their personalities, but as paradigms for our own behavior. In each explanation, we see the individual turning their focus outside the self and towards God as being the guiding force. While Naftali's

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presence in Bereishit is not felt much, his influence as a beacon of ideal behavior is with us to this day.