

OVERVIEW

It is Moshe's final day on earth. The men, women and children to whom the venerable leader has dedicated his whole life now pass before him. Memories flood his mind, of the stay in the Sinai desert, of the Revelation when G-d, the King of Israel-Yeshurun, presented him with the Fire-Law that was to become the heritage of the Jacob nation. Following Jacob's example, Moshe directs words of warning and blessing to the heads of the tribes who are assembled before him - prophetic words of promise and of hope.

COMMENTARY

Reuben

"...So that Reuben shall live..., and that G-d may protect him". The tribe of Reuben was constantly threatened by its Transjordanian neighbors. Even in the desert the number of men capable of bearing arms was reduced by almost three thousand to a total of forty-six thousand men. During the reign of King David, part of Reuben's territory was occupied by the Moabites. In contrast to the other tribes, Reuben is not distinguished by any special quality; it is indeed the tribe of the "average Jew".

Yet Reuben "will live" and demonstrate that Judaism will never be the exclusive realm of the elite. Reuben will live and not die, for no part of Israel can vanish without inflicting an irreparable injury to the national body.

There is no mention of the tribe of Simeon. It did not inhabit an independent territory but farmed an enclave within Yehuda's land. It also lost much of its identity by frequent intermarriages with the neighboring tribes.

Yehuda

At the conquest of Canaan, the tribe of Yehuda will be in the forefront. It will advance boldly into the interior of the land and will for a long time be isolated from its fellow tribes. "Bring him back to his people,.. " (33:7). He will be equally in the forefront of Israel's spiritual battles providing the nation with most of its spiritual leaders as well as its royal dynasties.

Levi

The אורים ותומים, the high priest's badge of honor, are the symbol of this brave tribe which proved its moral probity on numerous occasions. Its men will be the true guardians of the sacred fire. Although "they will teach and will do battle" (33:10-11), their contribution will not be acknowledged by the other tribes. Thus they are the only tribe on whose behalf Moshe prays for divine intervention, for no other tribe will be a similar target of jealousy and lack of fraternal trust. Yet it is Levi who embodies the calm confidence that flows from the knowledge of one's close bond with G-d.

Benjamin

"Beloved by G-d". The Holy of Holies was located on his portion of the land. (The border between Yehuda and Benjamin crossed the forecourt of the temple and was marked by a visible line; it divided a corner of the base of the altar leaving the central area of the Sanctuary in Benjamin's portion). "It rests between his shoulders" (33:12). For the temple does not rise on the summit of Mount Zion where the well of Etam emerged but on a slightly lower plot of land, corresponding to the relative height of the shoulders" to the top of the head.

Joseph

Favored by the fertile soil and the blessings from above, the twins, Ephraim and Manasseh, will enjoy extraordinary prosperity. For their "founder" was the "Nazir" among the brothers (33:16) who was devoted to a strict regime of self discipline which enabled him to serve G-d amidst temptation and idol worship. Bursting with strength (33:17), the brothers convey the picture of powerful tribes dedicating their great power and rich resources to the service of G-d.

Yissachar and Zebulun

Zebulun is the seafaring tribe, its members enterprising merchants. It is a perfect match with Yissachar, the man of learning and teaching. United, they will be an example of a fraternal community whose families strengthen and support each other in their endeavor to dedicate themselves to the service of G-d and the perpetuation of his Torah law.

Gad

Moshe will be buried in Transjordan, in the land apportioned to the tribe of Gad. In 33:20-21 Moshe seems to sketch in a few words that which his people might have inscribed on his tombstone if the location of his grave had been known. "Regarding Gad he said: Blessed be he who granted domicile to Gad; now he reposes there like a lion and he has already overpowered the arm and the crown of the head". (i.e. he has defeated warring nations and thereby he became master over their territory). "He chose for himself the primary portion, for there lies also the portion of the lawgiver, he who remains concealed, he who came to the head of the people and employed G-d's righteousness and lawful precepts for (the benefit of) the people". Moshe refers to himself as the hidden lawgiver who remains

concealed and who proclaims the divine commandments in the name of G-d.

Dan

"A young lion springing forth from Bashan". Bold and full of energy, Dan represents the zest of life and the youthful strength of a people that produced men of the caliber of Shimshon (from the tribe of Dan). He will play a vital part in imparting an ever-fresh dynamism to the people of Israel.

Naphtali

In contrast to Dan (to whom the text ties him, there being no separation here as there is for the aforementioned tribes), Naphtali does not convey the image of a heroic figure. Yet he is in reality a man of great inner strength who is "satisfied with his portion". His peaceful disposition will form a happy synthesis with the stormy character of his brother tribe, Dan.

Asher

There are two interpretations of Asher's blessing (33:24): "Preferred among the brothers (Jacob's sons) Asher will be blessed of sons". Another meaning seems more appropriate: Asher, whose territory has rich resources of iron and copper and whose land bears an abundance of olive trees, presents a picture of prosperity and a happy family life. His wealth will not be used for egoistical pleasure but will provide the means for the construction of many houses.

Epilogue

By comparing the sequence of the blessings with, the geographical contours of the land we realize that Moshe followed the outlines of the area occupied by the different tribes as they presented themselves to his view from the summit of Mt. Nebo which was situated in Reuben's portion. Looking beyond the Dead Sea, he sees the territories

of Yehuda and Benjamin and the place of Levi's future activities (the Temple). The geographical center of the land will be located in Ephraim's portion. Parallel to it, on the far side of the Jordan river, lies the area of half of the tribe of Menashe, in close proximity to Issachar and Zebulun. The tribe of Gad dwells beyond the river's eastern border, parallel to Dan on the west side. Naphtali in the north-east and Asher in the northwest complete the picture of Israel its national home.

Overcome by the emotional impact of the grandiose panorama Moshe exclaims: "There is none like G-d, O Yeshurun! He guides heavens as your help and clouds in His majesty" (33:26). Israel is finally at peace but it must take leave from its leader who is bound to his people with every fiber of his being. Israel will approach an ever more glorious future: "Hail Israel, who is like you, O people, saved, by G-d, the shield of your help...." (33:29).

There follows the lonely ascent to the summit. The clamor of the crowd, their problems and their hopes pale and fade from Moshe's mind. One last glance encompassing the land of Hermon's snow-covered mountains, the stark hills of Yerushalaim, the plains by the sea and the desert in the south. The entire land lies spread out before him, literally and historically. His spiritual eye sees all those who will continue his unfinished work (see Rashi), who will carry the burden of the

people - and he experiences a sharp pain at the thought of having to leave his people who depend on his guidance more than ever at this time of the approaching entry into the promised land.

Moshe dies "by a kiss of G-d". No one will ever know his grave (to prevent it from becoming an object of mass pilgrimage and cult worship). He was "the man of G-d", in all his simplicity and greatness. This is the testimony at the end of his book: "No prophet will ever arise in Israel like Moshe whom G-d had permitted to know Him face to face".

Moshe's life was lived "before the eyes of the people" (34:12). His every act was performed in the Name of G-d. His memory is bound up with the Torah which he received from the Hands of G-d and which will forever be known as "the Torah of Moshe". His every word reverberates through the millennia. He is as close to us today as he was to his people on that sixth day of Sivan, close to G-d on the stormy summit of the Sinai.

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