

# JACOB'S BLESSING FOR DAN

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Chapter 49 of Genesis carries *Birchat Ya'akov*, Jacob's deathbed blessings of his sons. The address to Dan, Verses 16-18 reads as follows:

*'Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path that biteth the horse's heels, so that the rider falleth backward. I wait for Thy salvation, O Lord.'*

Genesis Rabbah and most of the classic commentators refer these verses to Samson, who was a member of the tribe of Dan.<sup>1</sup> The last sentence becomes, then, either a paraphrase of Samson's last prayer (Jud. 15:28) or an appeal by Jacob to God for help for the imprisoned and blinded Samson when the time would come.

Although, like all aggadic commentaries, this interpretation has its meaning, it cannot be taken as the *p'shat* [plain meaning] of these verses for the following reasons:

1. To conjecture a leap in Jacob's vision to the era of Samson would mean blithely skipping over the roles of the greatest leaders of Israel, Moses and Aaron. They are totally omitted in Jacob's address to Levi, nor is there any allusion to the future prominence of the tribe of Levi in the religious life of the people. Had Jacob wanted to allude to events in the far future it is unbelievable that he would alight upon the figure of Samson who lived hundreds of years after Moses and Aaron, the Exodus, and the trek in the desert. Compared to that epoch, Samson and his exploits are minor.

2. The general mode of Jacob's address is one of assigning to his sons their respective status in the family, not at some crisis in the distant future, but for the near future. Thus, the first three sons – Reuben, Simeon, and Levi – were disqualified from taking over leadership and no predictions were uttered pertaining to future events in the life of their tribes. It was the fourth son, Judah, who was appointed to become the immediate leader of the family

. According to the *p'shat*, Jacob's address to Judah can only be applied to the current situation and not to the kingdom-yet-to-be under David and his des-

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cendants. Otherwise, it would contradict the historic fact that Israel's first king, Saul, was not from the tribe of Judah, and the reign was taken from his family only because he disobeyed God's command concerning the Amalekites.

3. We are dealing here with an address of the dying patriarch to his assembled sons. Were the plain meaning an allusion to Samson, the address would have been totally incomprehensible to his listeners, unless one were to assume that they shared the foreknowledge of the life and deeds of Samson. Similarly, the generations that heard the Torah, from its inception at Mount Sinai until after Samson's death, could not have understood these verses.

4. The comparison of Samson to a snake is hardly appropriate. The man who possessed extraordinary muscular strength is not well described as a limbless serpent. Nor do we find in the story of Samson any mounted Philistines opposing him.

The Rashbam wants to apply this address to the tribe's place during the travel of Israel in the desert.<sup>2</sup> Its position at the northern outpost of the encampment meant it was responsible to fight off attacks from this direction. Nevertheless, this explanation also refers to the far future, not to contemporary events, and thus leaves the above objections valid.

Although Abraham ben-HaRambam (Abraham the son of Maimonides), too, ultimately refers to Samson in connection with Jacob's prophecy,<sup>3</sup> his comment comes closer to an understanding of the *p'shat*. He suggests that the personality of Dan was of a nature to compare him to the serpent. He would, apparently, not face his opponent openly, unlike Judah who is compared to the lion. Dan was more the guerrilla fighter, whose tactics are more snakelike.

Contemporary history in Egypt and Canaan seems to support Abraham ben-HaRambam's observation. During the period of the Patriarchs, the Hyksos had invaded Egypt and were later driven out of the country. We know that the Hyksos introduced the horse to the region.<sup>4</sup> When they were expelled, this strategic innovation remained with the Egyptians. There can be no doubt that these developments made Egypt an extremely strong military power. The foot soldier, the conventional hero of yesterday's battles, had little chance when directly confronting war-chariots drawn by horses.

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During Jacob's stay in Egypt, he had never ceased to imbue his sons with the idea of a return to the Promised Land. This is evidenced in Genesis 50:24, when Joseph requests that his remains shall be taken along to the Promised Land for burial. Joseph takes the Exodus from Egypt for granted. His request is not preceded by "If you leave Egypt"; the Exodus is a *fait accompli*. Contemplating what he had seen and deduced by the time of his death in Egypt, Jacob anticipated the overpowering strength of the Egyptian army with horse-drawn chariots, and reflected upon their expected resistance to an Exodus of the Hebrews. He feared that neither courage nor the skill of the sword could ensure the leaving of Egypt for the journey to Canaan.

Just as in modern warfare, every innovation in armament or tactics will eventually engender adapted counter-tactics. Jacob foresaw the defense against the horse. While the chariot-warrior has a great advantage over the foot soldier in open battle, the horse itself is open to attack and can bring defeat upon the warrior.

Jacob evaluated his sons with these thoughts and fears in the background of his mind, and focused on Dan, as he is described by Abraham Ben-HaRambam, a snakelike guerrilla fighter. He and his descendants appeared to him as the ones likely to employ the needed tactics against warhorses. And so he assigned this crucial task to Dan, for which he was apparently so well adapted.

With this interpretation in mind, the exclamation in Genesis 49:18 '*I wait for thy salvation, O Lord*' is no longer mystifying. If the success for the crucial battle of liberation depends on Dan's ability to neutralize the power of the horse, Jacob's appeal for God's help is both timely and important.

## NOTES

1. Genesis Rabbah 98,13-14. See also the commentaries to the verses quoted above by Rashi, Ramban, Sforno and Radak.
2. Rashbam's commentary to Genesis 49:16
3. *Peirush Rabeinu Avraham ben Harambam al Breishit u'Shemot* (London, 1958).
4. See William L. Langer, *An Encyclopedia of World History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) p.38, and William F. Albright, *From The Stone Age to Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1957) p. 203.