

Tribal Blueprints
Twelve Brothers and the Destiny of Israel





Nechama Price

TRIBAL BLUEPRINTS
TWELVE BROTHERS AND THE
DESTINY OF ISRAEL

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It is both an honor and a privilege to play a small role in helping to publish Nechama Price's first book, *Tribal Blueprints*.

We first met Professor Price a few years ago when she served as a Shabbat scholar-in-residence in our *shul*, the Young Israel of West Hartford, Connecticut.

We watched her inspire our entire congregation with her incredible scholarship and captivate us with her warm and open teaching style and her insightful analysis.

So began our journey with Nechama Price, a pioneer and role model for Orthodox women. As our relationship has developed we have come to appreciate even more fully the depth of her scholarship and her teaching skills. We are grateful for her leadership role at GPATS, the Graduate Program for Advanced Talmud Study for Women at Yeshiva University.

At GPATS, through her teaching and by her example she encourages and inspires young women to follow in her footsteps – to become scholars and teachers, *yoatzot halacha* and spiritual leaders. These young women represent many of the current and future leaders of the Jewish community.

We thank her for her continued tenacity in advancing women's Torah education, her role as a public educator, and her tireless service to the community as a *yoetzet halacha*. We hope this is the first of many books by Professor Price so that even a wider audience can benefit from and be inspired by her Torah knowledge and insights.

Ann and Jeremy Pava



Dedicated with love to my wonderful children

Elisha, Nava, Ariella, and Leora

You fill every day with joy, happiness, love, and meaning.

I pray that you continue growing
in your *middot tovot* and Torah study.

In the words of Yaakov to his children:

הַמְלֵאךְ הַגָּאֵל אֶתִּי מִכָּל-רָע יְבָרֵךְ אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים וְיִקְרָא בָהֶם
שְׁמִי וְיִשֵּׁם אֲבֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק וְיִדְגּוּ לְרֵב בְּקִרְבַּ הָאָרֶץ.

(Gen. 48:16)

~~~

In loving memory of my grandfathers

Nachman Shimon ben Tuvia Moshe HaLevi  
and  
Nosson ben Moshe

After surviving the Holocaust,  
they proudly defined themselves by their Jewish identity.

Each one filled his life and the lives  
of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren  
with the study and values of Torah.





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Certain individuals in our generation have enhanced our community's appreciation for sophisticated study of Tanakh. For me, Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, whose *parasha* sheets I read for many years, serves as one of those individuals. As the years went on, I was also influenced by the writings of Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, Rabbi Yonatan Grossman, and others who publish their Torah on Yeshivat Har Etzion's Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash (VBM).

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Much of the material found in this book comes from a course I teach at SCW. The students of SCW and GPATS have been a sounding board for many of the ideas in this book. Their sharp insights forced me to refine and review many key concepts in this book. It is an absolute pleasure to learn Torah with you.

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It is impossible to use this platform to properly thank my husband, Jonathan. However, a small expression of my gratitude is in order. Thank you for spending *endless* hours editing this book. Every idea and every word of this volume benefits from your care and attention. This book and whatever opportunities I have to spread Torah are a tribute to your absolute belief in me. Your support, boundless love, and encouragement motivate me always. May we continue to grow together, to spread God's Torah and His values to our children, our family, students, and community.

Lastly, I thank *HaKadosh Barukh Hu* for all of His blessings, including the opportunity to be a member of the Beit Midrash, learning and teaching His Torah. I pray that I am a worthy receptacle for His bounty and that He continues to bless me with the ability and privilege to continue on this path.



## *Introduction*

When studying the narratives in the book of Genesis, some of the most captivating stories appear in conjunction with the tribes of Israel. While these brothers often act together, and collectively beget what we know today as *Benei Yisrael*, it is clear that each of our patriarch Yaakov's sons has a specific role within the family, as well as a distinct personality shaped by stories that describe his particular fears, desires, and talents.

This book focuses on each of Yaakov's sons as individuals – who they are as people and who they strive to be. Following an in-depth analysis of the stories found in the text of the Torah, we will turn to the rich rabbinic teachings about the distinctive character embodied by each son. After developing these personalities – as expressed in the proclivities, choices and experiences of each one – we will follow the lives of their descendants and the experiences of their tribes, which will enable us to identify many of the same personality patterns that were etched when the founding fathers of our nation, the people of Israel, were known simply as Yaakov's twelve sons.

Traditionally, the stories of Genesis are studied in the order presented in the Torah. Certain rabbinic sources prefer to study these stories topically (e.g., to uncover moral themes). This book is presented

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somewhat differently, focusing on each son's individual personality and story, according to the order of his birth. Therefore, the first chapters are focused on Reuven (and his descendants), then Shimon (and his descendants), and so on.

My preference for this style of analysis began during my post high-school years in Israel. For the first time in my life, I delved into the study of each of the tribes as separate individuals displaying distinct perspectives within the stories of the Torah and the profound lessons culled from Hāzal, the talmudic Sages. I wondered whether it might be possible that these personalities and perspectives are reflected in their descendants. Over the past two decades, this idea evolved from a single lesson, a *shiur* I taught, to a series of three and then six *shiurim*, to a course at Stern College for Women, and now to this book.

Throughout the years, I have found myself so immersed in their stories that at times I feel as though the sons of Yaakov are people in my life, with multi-layered lessons to teach me. I hope that through this volume, you too will derive inspiration from each of Yaakov's sons as you discern their humanity and complexity of character. Perhaps each of the tribes will remind you of someone you know, or you might even find yourself identifying with a tribe or a mixture of tribes. Understanding the sons of Yaakov and their descendants in such an intimate way motivates us to appreciate the beauty of the Torah and the lessons from all its holy stories. I pray that you enjoy the journey, one that I have been on for two decades and am now privileged to share with you.



## *Chapter 1*

# Rahel and Leah: The Mothers of the Tribes of Israel

**B**efore closely studying the sons of Yaakov and their future shared destiny as the twelve tribes of Israel, it is worthwhile to consider certain precursors to their stardom, namely the background and the environment into which they were born. A fundamental component for understanding their upbringing is an appreciation for the nature of the relationship between their parents. What are the characteristic elements and the emotional dynamic of Yaakov's relationship with each of his wives? As is true for all children, each of Yaakov's twelve sons is influenced by his parents' relationship, or more pointedly, by his father's treatment of his mother. Therefore, sensitivity to these relationships is critical for understanding the tribes of Israel. After studying the relationships between Yaakov and Rahel, and Yaakov and Leah, respectively, it will become apparent that there is a notable

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correlation between how much each wife is loved and how much each son is thereby loved by Yaakov.<sup>1</sup>

### **RAHEL**

Yaakov loved Raḥel. He said, “I will serve you seven years for Raḥel, your younger daughter.” (Gen. 29:18)

Fact: Yaakov loves Raḥel, as the Torah describes numerous times (Gen. 29:18, 20, 30).<sup>2</sup> Because of this love, Yaakov acquiesces to seven years of servitude at the home of Lavan for the right to marry her. For most men, working in the field for seven years would be considered arduous, overly demanding, and time-consuming, but this is not how Yaakov feels about the experience. As a man in love, these seven years of labor fly by effortlessly: “It was in his eyes like only a few days out of love for her” (Gen. 29:20).

While the affection that he feels for Raḥel is clear, it is worthwhile to explore the nature of this love. Does the Torah offer guidance or evidence to suggest that the love that developed in the early stages of their relationship is deep and meaningful? Alternatively, might there be evidence that the love described in these early years is merely the immature passion of a first love?

### **Superficial Love**

After successfully executing his mother’s (Rivka’s) plan for receiving the blessings of the firstborn from his father, Yitzḥak, Yaakov is urged by her to flee their home for fear of reprisal from his brother, Esav.

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1. Yaakov’s relationship with each of the maidservants, Bilha and Zilpa, will be discussed in Chapter 10.
  2. It is very rare for the Torah to document the nature of the love between a husband and wife. Except for this instance, the only other occurrence is between Yitzḥak and Rivka (Gen. 24:67). Since the Torah does not convey the love between Avraham and Sarah, or Moshe and Tzipora, or other husband-wife relationships, our attention is rightfully focused on deciphering the unique meaning of the love between Yaakov and Raḥel, as it is repeatedly mentioned in Gen. 29.

Yaakov is terrified and homeless. Raḥel is the first family member whom he encounters when he follows Rivka's directive to go to her brother Lavan. She is his first reminder of home and the warm feeling of a secure environment. His anxiety overcomes him, and he becomes overwhelmed with the excitement of seeing a family member. Before even exchanging words with Raḥel, he loses his composure, kisses her, and breaks down in an emotionally charged moment.<sup>3</sup> At this point, Yaakov must have become aware of Raḥel's exceptional beauty (Gen. 29:17).<sup>4</sup> The combination of the excitement due to reconnecting with family, his renewed sense of security, and Raḥel's physical beauty evidently causes him to fall in love momentarily. However, this is a love born out of passion and the emotional high of finding a new home. He doesn't even know her yet! This love could not yet be rooted in the mature love of a couple who intimately understand and appreciate each other.<sup>5</sup>

If this encounter is seen as the foundation for their relationship, then over time this love may not provide the grounding that is necessary to endure the vicissitudes of life. This may provide insight into Yaakov's outburst at Raḥel many years later when he loses patience in the face of her pressing desire for children (Gen. 30:2). Certainly, it offers us a context to understand the future development of the relationship between Yaakov and Raḥel.

3. "Yaakov kissed Raḥel, and lifted up his voice, and wept. Yaakov told Raḥel that he was her father's brother, and that he was Rivka's son. She ran and told her father" (Gen. 29:11–12).
4. Yaakov's mother, Rivka, is also described as quite beautiful (Gen. 24:16). Raḥel's beauty might have reminded Yaakov of his mother, thus giving him a greater sense of comfort and familiarity after the stresses of escaping from Esav.
5. The Torah usually informs us about a husband's love for his wife by using the root *alef, heh, beit*, meaning love. Interestingly, many of these instances are cases of seemingly superficial affection, as found in the case of Shekhem loving Dina (Gen. 34:3), King Shlomo loving his non-Jewish wives (I Kings 11:1), and Aḥashverosh loving Esther (Esther 2:17). Even the verse using the root *aleph, heh, beit* to describe Yitzḥak's feelings towards Esav (Gen. 25:28) can be understood as superficial love, as Esav tricks Yitzḥak into thinking he was a good man (see Rashi on Gen. 25:27).

### **True Love**

Conversely, the early stages of the Yaakov-Raḥel relationship may show possibilities of a rock-solid foundation for their future. If this is true, why does the Torah focus on Raḥel's beauty? Perhaps the Torah does not describe her beauty to imply superficiality, but rather to show her righteousness: her inside matches her outside. The Torah writes about the physical beauty of many righteous women – Sarah (Gen. 12:11, 14), Rivka (Gen. 24:16, 26:7), Avigail (I Sam. 25:3), Batsheva (II Sam. 11:2), and Esther (Esther 2:7). In all of these cases, their virtue is reflected by their beautiful outer appearance.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Raḥel's inner beauty as reflected by her external beauty is partly what attracts Yaakov to Raḥel.<sup>7</sup>

The bond between them continues to strengthen due to their common experiences and values. Both Yaakov and Raḥel are the younger children in their respective families, where the elder siblings (Esav and Leah, respectively) are their fathers' favorites. While it is fairly straightforward in the Torah that Yitzḥak loves and favors his elder son, Esav (see Gen. 25:28), this seems true regarding Raḥel's home, too. Recall that Raḥel's father, Lavan, tricks Yaakov into marrying his older daughter, Leah, in place of Raḥel. Why would Lavan do this, and what does it say about his concern for the implications this might have for Raḥel's future? Evidently, Lavan is concerned about his elder daughter's matrimony and wellbeing to the extent that his actions compromise Raḥel's future! Furthermore, Lavan's preference for Leah is reflected in his appointment of Raḥel to serve as the shepherd of the family sheep (Gen. 29:9),

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6. Admittedly, each of these instances of beauty could be interpreted as superficial aesthetics: Avraham focuses on Sarah's beauty out of fear that it may attract the men in Egypt and Gerar. Yitzḥak is likewise afraid that Rivka's beauty may attract the men of Gerar. Naval, an evil man, marries the intelligent Avigail because of her beauty. David takes Batsheva, a married woman, because of her beauty, which he observed from his rooftop while she was bathing. Aḥashverosh marries Esther because of her superficial beauty, just as he focused on the physical beauty of Queen Vashti.
  7. The root *alef, heh, beit* is also found in a number of sincere and genuinely loving relationships, including those between Yitzḥak and Rivka (Gen. 24:67) and Elkana and Ḥana (I Sam. 1:5). It is also used to describe the loving bonds between Yaakov and Yosef (Gen. 37:3), and between David and Yonatan (I Sam. 18:1).

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which is the lowest position in the family.<sup>8</sup> Later on, in reaction to discovering some missing idols, Lavan suspects Raḥel and searches her tent more thoroughly than the others. He seems sure that Raḥel has taken his precious gods in revenge for his mistreatment of her (Gen. 31:33–35).

Yaakov and Raḥel's relationship also has the advantage of years of shared experiences. When Yaakov agrees to shepherd Lavan's sheep for seven years, he surely realizes he would either be relieving Raḥel, the family shepherd, of her lowly occupation, or working alongside her. Therefore, it is possible that for seven years they spent many hours together every day, forming the foundation of a powerful bond.

In summary, Yaakov and Raḥel share a sense of being less favored by their fathers, as well as their experience as shepherds (individually and together).<sup>9</sup> These experiences undoubtedly create a backdrop for a bond that could grow into a meaningful relationship. This could realistically explain why the verse tells us that the seven-year period of Yaakov's servitude passes so quickly.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Gen. 29:9 states that she is “the shepherd of the family” to make clear that this is her assigned role. In fact, *Hizkuni* (29:9) explains that Lavan gave this job to Raḥel in order to give honor to Leah.

This is consistent with a pattern in Tanakh of having the shepherd role assigned to the unfavored child of every family, as is the case with Yaakov, Raḥel, and David (see Chapter 7 for a fuller assessment of David). Alternatively, in cases where the job is not given to a family member, it is assigned to a “pity case,” such as a runaway who receives sanctuary in exchange for performing a job, as we see with Moshe in Yitro's house and Yaakov in Lavan's house. Both men are designated as shepherds in exchange for a secure place to live (and, eventually, they both earn the right to marry “up” into the family).

9. See previous footnote with regard to Raḥel. Similarly, Yaakov is described as his family's shepherd (Gen 25:27). See Radak on Gen. 25:27, who states that this is the literal understanding of the text that Yaakov “sits in the tent.” (The talmudic Sages famously add a layer of meaning to this phrase by explaining it to mean that Yaakov sat and studied Torah all day.) In addition to serving as the shepherd in Yitzḥak's home, we know that he was Lavan's shepherd for twenty years (Gen. 31:38).
10. This picture of a beautiful and strong relationship is captured in Rabbi Yaakov Medan's article “Yaakov's Love for Raḥel” (<http://etzion.org.il/en/yaakov's-love-Raḥel>). He supports this approach based on stories later in Genesis. Specifically, he points to at least two key plot points:

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### **LEAH**

The increasingly strong relationship between Yaakov and Raḥel can serve as a foil to understand Yaakov and Leah's relationship. First, the extent to which the Yaakov-Raḥel relationship is rooted in love, depth, and shared values indicates that there is little room to nurture the Yaakov-Leah relationship. As a "third wheel," the one who gets in the way of Yaakov and Raḥel's true-love relationship, Leah's position is nearly impossible to overcome. However, if Yaakov's love for Raḥel is superficial – based on the passions of its beginning – then with the passage of time we might find space for the Yaakov-Leah relationship to gain traction.

Of course, it is necessary to recognize that Yaakov does not intend to forge a relationship with Leah prior to Lavan's deceit. Lavan tricked Yaakov into marrying Leah although Raḥel was the presumptive bride. This could have caused Yaakov to struggle to love his first wife, Leah, and thereby weigh heavily on their relationship. Yaakov may not have been privy to the extent to which Leah was involved in the plan to deceive him. Was she a pawn, forced to be complicit, or did she volunteer? Even if she was not an active participant, why didn't she speak out on her wedding night and reveal her true identity? The degree of resentment and blame Yaakov harbors against Leah could also directly correlate to the extent that he loves Raḥel, the woman he was unable to marry on his wedding night because of her father's deceit.

There are three primary approaches to understanding Yaakov's relationship with Leah:

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- (1) Yaakov situates Raḥel at the back of the group in order to protect her when meeting up with Esav.
  - (2) Yaakov shows clear favoritism towards Raḥel's two sons (as we will discuss throughout this volume). Even the other sons acknowledge that this favoritism reflects Yaakov's love for Raḥel. This is evident in Yehuda's speech in Egypt where he states, "And he alone is left of his mother; and his father loves him" (Gen. 44:20), highlighting that the love Yaakov has for Binyamin stems from his love for Raḥel.

### **Absolute Hatred**

Yaakov blames Leah for conspiring against him<sup>11</sup> and hates her.<sup>12</sup> The Torah presents his hatred towards Leah as a fact: “God saw that Leah was hated and therefore opened her womb” (Gen. 29:31). This hatred is so noticeable that Leah names her second child Shimon “because God heard that I am hated” (Gen. 29:33).

Added to this may be Yaakov’s lack of attraction to his first wife. The Torah compares the physical appearance of Raḥel and Leah. Raḥel is described as beautiful, while Leah is described as having “*einayim rakot*,” “tender eyes” (Gen. 29:17). The commentaries discuss what this means: it could mean that her eyes are beautiful,<sup>13</sup> possibly implying that every feature other than her eyes is unattractive,<sup>14</sup> or it could imply that her eyes are sensitive to the outside world and that she is sickly (or suffers from allergies).<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, it could imply that she cries all the time, which causes her eyes to be red, puffy, and unattractive.<sup>16</sup> Common to each explanation is that Yaakov may not have been attracted to Leah in the way that he was to Raḥel, the striking beauty.

### **Inferior Love**

There is a second perspective, based on the verse “And Yaakov loved Raḥel *also* from Leah” (Gen. 29:30), implying that Yaakov *does* love

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11. See Genesis Rabba 70:19, which explains that when Yaakov realizes in the morning that he married the wrong sister, he yells at Leah, asking her why she didn’t reveal her identity to him that night and let him know that she was an imposter. She answers him that she learned this trait of trickery from him. He was her teacher! He pretended to be his brother and stated to his father: “I am Esav, your eldest son” (Gen. 27:19). So too, she pretended to be her sister, and responded to his calling her sister’s name. It is understandable that reminding Yaakov of the lowest moment of his life, which caused him to run away from home and never return, could truly cause him to hate her.
  12. This view is found in the Abarbanel on Gen 29:31, which states that Yaakov hates her so much that his hatred is obvious to all in the way he treats her and in how he speaks to her.
  13. Rav Saadia Gaon on Gen. 20:17.
  14. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch on Gen. 29:17.
  15. *Hizkuni* on Gen. 29:9.
  16. Rashi on Gen. 29:17 writes that she cries all the time because she believes that she is destined to marry Yitzḥak’s oldest son Esav, while Raḥel is to marry the younger son, Yaakov.

Leah. Radak explains that Yaakov's love for Leah is overshadowed by the incredible and overwhelming love that he has for Raḥel. Since his love for Leah is so inferior, she *feels* hated. Therefore God opens her womb because she *feels* hated and not because she truly is hated.

It is also possible that Yaakov does not blame Leah for the trickery, since Yaakov yells only at Lavan after the wedding and not at his new bride, Leah (Gen. 29:25). He was familiar with the cultural norm of his time: If a father tells a daughter to marry someone, she has no choice in the matter. Therefore, he could not earnestly blame her for following the command of her father.

### **“I Love Her, I Love Her Not,” or: Utter Confusion**

But there is a third perspective, found in Ramban on Gen. 29:30, that Yaakov feels *both* emotions towards her, simply because he is confused about how he feels. Sometimes he feels love towards Leah as his first wife, but at the same time he also feels hatred towards her for her actions of trickery and for her intrusion into his life with Raḥel.

Yaakov and Leah also have some things in common. Both disguise themselves as their siblings to get what they want, as directed by their parent.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, both take advantage of the emotional vulnerability of their sibling and offer an unfair deal in exchange for something they desire. Yaakov takes the birthright from Esav and in exchange gives him a bowl of soup; Leah gets a night with Yaakov in exchange for giving Raḥel a bunch of flowers (this incident will be discussed further in Chapter 2). These similarities could either kindle a bond or, conversely, deepen the hatred. Seeing one's own flaws in someone else might evoke negative feelings and could further explain Yaakov's hatred of Leah. He sees in her everything he dislikes about himself.

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17. Yaakov disguises himself as Esav in order to receive the blessing from his father, as instructed by his mother, Rivka. Leah pretends to be Raḥel on her wedding night, in order to marry Yaakov, as ordered by her father, Lavan. According to the Talmud in Bava Batra 123b, she acts based on the instructions of her sister, who sought to save her from humiliation on her wedding night.



## CONCLUSION

This discussion is only about Yaakov's original relationship with his wives after their weddings. Upon analysis of each of the brothers and their individual roles within the family, it will become evident how Yaakov's relationship with his wives continually evolves and how it affects each of the children differently. Every emotion that a person feels, be it love or hatred, evolves over time. Feelings can change, as other emotions and life challenges interweave with the original feelings and blur the lines of love or hatred. Eventually, Raḥel and Leah identify less as Yaakov's wives and more as the mothers of his children and the mothers of the Jewish nation.<sup>18</sup> All of these developments create a more nuanced picture that will be further developed throughout this book.

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18. The poetic ending of this love triangle is the location where each person in it is buried. Raḥel is buried far away from Yaakov, in Raḥel's tomb, located near Efrat. Leah is buried in the Cave of Makhpela in Hebron, right next to her husband Yaakov, who actually requests to be buried next to her (Gen. 49:31). Leah, who struggled her entire life for Yaakov's attention and love, lies next to him permanently in death. On the other hand, Raḥel, who grappled with her desire for children and with her infertility, is in a location that would allow her to act as the mother of the entire Jewish people and plead on their behalf on their way into the diaspora.

In the book of Jeremiah, we are told about Raḥel's bravery and love for her children: "Thus says God: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Raḥel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Thus says God: Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says God; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy" (Jer. 31:14–15). *Metzudat David* on Jer. 31:15 relates this story to our story of Raḥel in Genesis as quoted in the *Midrash Aggada* (30:15): Raḥel turns to God and asks him to forgive the Jewish people in the merit of her giving over the signs to her sister, to teach her how to pretend to be Raḥel on the night of her wedding to Yaakov. Raḥel sacrifices her hopes and dreams to allow her sister to avoid mortifying embarrassment. In this merit, God promises to save the Jewish people from the exile following the destruction of the holy Temple, and to return them to Israel.

In the end, both women are rewarded with everything that they most desired. Leah's permanent residence is next to the husband she always wanted to love her back, and Raḥel's permanent residence allows her the ability to mother the entire Jewish nation. Foremost, however, all of their children join together to form the chosen nation of Israel. Everyone is chosen; no one is rejected!



## *Chapter 2*

# Reuven in Genesis: The Rejected Oldest Child of Yaakov

**R**euven is the first child of Yaakov, born to his first wife, Leah. During the biblical period, it was assumed that the firstborn, the eldest son, would become the next leader of his family, the heir to his father's position or throne.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the eldest is pledged

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1. This observation may offer context to many details in the Torah. As illustration, consider these four examples:

- (1) Esav: Yaakov intended to bless Esav, "his oldest son" (Gen. 27:1).
- (2) Menashe and Ephraim: Yosef appears upset with his father, Yaakov, for switching his hands and not putting his right hand on the oldest grandson, Menashe, when he was blessing him and his brother (Gen. 48:17–18).
- (3) Elazar: Aharon's oldest son after the deaths of the two who preceded him (Nadav and Avihu) is selected as the high priest (Num. 20:26).
- (4) Shlomo: King David felt compelled to announce that his successor for the monarchy was Shlomo, as he was not the eldest child and therefore was not the obvious choice (I Kings 1:33).

## Tribal Blueprints

material possession in keeping with his position, in the form of an enhanced portion of his father's estate.<sup>2</sup> Despite the presumption of the oldest son's leadership, however, we often encounter a contrary situation in the Torah. In fact, many of our greatest leaders are *not* the eldest of their families, as in the cases of Shet,<sup>3</sup> Yitzḥak,<sup>4</sup> Yaakov,<sup>5</sup> Yehuda,<sup>6</sup> Moshe,<sup>7</sup> Otniel,<sup>8</sup> Gidon,<sup>9</sup> David,<sup>10</sup> and Shlomo.<sup>11</sup> With this background, we question the role and eventual destiny of Reuven, the firstborn of the tribes of Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Is Reuven destined for greatness as a function of his birth order? Will it automatically make him the accepted leader of his family? Or is he doomed to fail like so many other eldest children in the Torah? What is the role of Reuven in his family and throughout Jewish history?

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2. Deut. 21:15–17. Even if the oldest son is born to the hated wife, he is assured his right to the birthright and receipt of the double portion.
  3. Shet is Adam's third son, born after Kayin and Hevel (Gen. 5:3).
  4. Yitzḥak is Avraham's second son, born after Yishmael (Gen. 21:2).
  5. Yaakov is Yitzḥak's second son, born after his twin, Esav (Gen. 25:26).
  6. Yehuda is Yaakov's fourth son, born after Reuven, Shimon, and Levi (Gen. 29:35).
  7. Moshe is Amram's third child, born after Miriam and Aharon (Ex. 2:2).
  8. It is stated twice that he is Kalev's *younger* brother (Judges 1:13, 3:9).
  9. Gidon tells the angel that he is the *youngest* in his family (Judges 6:15).
  10. David is Yishai's eighth son; seven older brothers are presented to Shmuel before him (I Sam. 16:10–11).
  11. Shlomo is born to David after his half-brothers, Amnon, Kilav/Daniel, Avshalom, Adoniyahu, Shefatya, and Yitre'am (II Sam. 3:2–4). His birth is recorded after the birth of these six sons of David (II Sam. 12:24).
  12. Interestingly, the birth-order status of many of our other leaders is ambiguous. As illustration, consider these two examples:
    - (1) Shem is listed first on numerous occasions (Gen. 5:32, 6:10, 7:13, 9:18). Possibly, this is due to age order. Alternatively, it is due to his greater status. In fact, the text is ambiguous regarding who is oldest – Shem or Yafet – as seen in the phrase, “*ahī Yafet hagadol*,” (Gen. 10:21), which can be translated as “the elder brother of Yafet” or “the older brother Yafet.” This might imply either that Shem is the older brother of Yafet, or that Yafet is the older brother of Shem.
    - (2) Avraham: The text is unclear about whether Avraham was listed first amongst his brothers because he is oldest or because of his unique role (Gen. 11:26). See this debated in Sanhedrin 69b.

## **BIRTH OF REUVEN**

And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuven, for she said, “Because God has seen my affliction. Perhaps now my husband will love me.” (Gen. 29:32)

Parents invest considerable time and forethought in selecting names for their children. Names have significance! This is a universal truth that is reflected in the Torah, where a given name carries special meaning for the parent or for the child, and often highlights his or her unique role.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, all of the twelve tribes are a reflection of their names and are affected by the circumstances that led to their naming. Each name given by their mothers<sup>14</sup> foreshadows the pathway and destiny of that child, starting with the status of the relationship of his parents at the time of the naming.

Reuven’s name is a combination of two Hebrew words, *reu* and *ben*, and literally means, “See, a son!” Leah is declaring to Yaakov, “We have a child together! Our rocky relationship can now improve.” However, it is God, not Yaakov, who sees and recognizes her affliction. “Perhaps my husband will love me” reveals her apparent longing for Yaakov’s love. Reuven’s name gives us a window into understanding his parents’ complicated relationship. The loneliness and sadness that his mother feels becomes an important part of Reuven’s personality and his life’s mission. As Leah’s oldest son, Reuven feels a strong sense of responsibility to improve her situation. In fact, each of the stories in the Torah about Reuven reflects his unique place in the family, his desire to fix his mother’s predicament, and his yearning for both of them to have the love and stature that he perceives as their right.

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13. Consider these examples. Hava: “Mother of all living creatures” (Gen. 3:20); Kayin: “I acquired a person from God” (4:1); Menashe: “God let me forget all of my toil” (41:51); Ephraim: “God caused me to be fruitful” (41:52); Moshe: “From the water, I drew you out” (Ex. 2:10), and many others.

14. Exceptions: According to Radak on Gen. 29:34, Levi is given his name by both his mother and his father. Binyamin is named Ben Oni by his mother, Raḥel, but his father subsequently changes his name to Binyamin (Gen. 35:18).

**STORY OF THE MANDRAKES**

Reuven went in the days of the wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother, Leah. Then Raḥel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” She said to her, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes, also?” Raḥel said, “Therefore he will lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes.” Yaakov came from the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, “You must come with me; for I have surely traded for you with my son’s mandrakes.” And he slept with her that night. (Gen. 30:14–16)

By the time we are introduced to the first narrative including Reuven, Yaakov’s family has grown; Leah has four sons: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehuda. Raḥel is barren, so she gives over her maidservant, Bilha, to marry Yaakov and have children on her behalf. Soon after, Bilha has two sons, Dan and Naftali. Now, Leah finds herself in a quandary, as she is unable to have any more children and fears that Raḥel’s maid may continue to reproduce (Gen. 29:35, 30:9). Leah copies her sister by giving her maidservant, Zilpa, to Yaakov as a wife, and she bears him two children, Gad and Asher. This situates our first story with Reuven soon after the birth of Yaakov’s eighth son.

Young Reuven goes to the field to pick flowers and proudly presents them to his mother, Leah. Raḥel desires the flowers and requests them from her sister. Leah agrees to transfer them to Raḥel only in return for one of Raḥel’s nights with Yaakov.

What a bizarre story! So many details are difficult to comprehend. Why did Raḥel want the flowers? What could be so special about these flowers that they are worth trading a night with Yaakov? And finally, what makes this story important enough to be included in the text of the Torah?

Broadly, there are two ways to understand this story, each of which will impact our analysis of Reuven.

**Token of Love**

This story could be the pure and innocent depiction of a sensitive young boy who recognizes his mother’s sadness and tries to cheer her up with

a bouquet of flowers. These flowers are a token of his love to make up for the lack of love and gestures of affection that she should receive from her husband. Moreover, Reuven may be aware of his parents' strained relationship, either because Leah talks to her eldest son about her predicament or just because it is something that he observes in their home. He watches Yaakov's treatment of her during the day and sees her crying at night. As her oldest son, Reuven may be the shoulder that Leah cries on. So too, he may know the significance behind his own name, his mother's desperate plea for love, and he wants to help her fill that void.

According to this line of thinking, Raḥel trades a night with Yaakov for these flowers because they embody a child's love for his mother. She is desperate to feel the tangible love of a child. Raḥel's anguish is passionately expressed only a few verses earlier, when she lashes out at Yaakov saying, "Give me children or else I will die" (Gen. 30:1). Clearly, to Raḥel, these flowers embody what she covets most in the world – the love of a child for his mother; she believes that acquiring them is worth relinquishing a night with Yaakov. The significance of this story is to display the level of extreme desperation that both Raḥel and Leah feel, and what they are willing to sacrifice.

### **Fertility Flowers**

Alternatively, a second possibility is that this story is about the physical struggle of infertility. Many commentators, including Ibn Ezra and Sforno on Gen. 30:14, posit that the mandrakes enabled conception, either through their impact on the male's ability to procreate or by providing an environment that enhances intimacy. If this is so, it explains why Raḥel, who struggles mightily with infertility, would trade a night with Yaakov to acquire them. Only with this understanding of the mandrakes does the trade seem fair to both women. Accordingly, this story fits into the context of the broader narrative, i.e., the race to have children who will become the tribes of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

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15. There are many commentators, including Ramban and Radak on Gen. 30:14, who reject this possibility. They argue that viewing these flowers as a fertility aid is implausible, as they have never heard of any flowers with this power. Furthermore, post facto, the woman who receives the flowers, Raḥel, is not the one who gets pregnant. Even Ibn Ezra – who quotes the view that the flowers help with fertility – questions the validity of this approach at the end of his commentary.

## *Tribal Blueprints*

Consistent with these two interpretations for the role of the mandrakes, two fundamentally divergent paths to understanding Reuven's role in the story emerge.

If the mandrakes are to promote fertility, then everything Reuven does is for the sake of his mother. He is acutely aware of her desire for more children.<sup>16</sup> He realizes that his father's love for his mother is based on her ability to have children, and he involves himself in his parents' personal matters. Our story reveals a young Reuven overstepping his boundaries by invading his parents' private affairs for his mother's sake.

However, if the mandrakes are a token of love, then the emergent picture is rather different. Even as a youngster, Reuven recognizes his mother's sadness. He gives her flowers as a token of *his* love. Perhaps, as she is occupied with trying to have more children and gaining her husband's love, she is not giving proper attention to her eldest son. Reuven feels left out and craves his mother's attention, hoping that she might find satisfaction in the love of her children. How tragically disappointing it must have been for him to come home and discover his flowers in his aunt's tent. His mother discarded this token of his love for her just to spend more time with his father.

### **MEETING WITH ESAV**

Then the handmaids came near with their children, and they bowed down. Leah also and her children came near and bowed down. After them, Yosef came near with Raḥel, and they bowed down. (Gen. 33:6–7)

The first time we see any hint to Yaakov's lack of acknowledgement of Reuven's elevated firstborn status by not treating him as the most valued child is in the context of the reunion between Yaakov and his brother Esav. Years earlier, Yaakov ran away from his father's home to escape from Esav, who swore to exact revenge on him for receiving the blessing of the

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16. Sforno on Gen. 30:14 states outright that Reuven recognizes her suffering associated with the cessation of her childbearing.



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firstborn from their father by pretending to be Esav (according to their mother's plan). Now, on his journey back to his father's home, Yaakov must face his brother. Terrified, Yaakov tries numerous plans to appease Esav's wrath, beginning with sending messengers to his brother. Next, he separates his family into two groups to travel separately, in order to ensure that at least half of the family will survive the encounter. He then sends presents to his brother as a bribe. In a last-minute desperate act intended to save the entire family, Yaakov tries to separate himself from the rest of them by running away, as Esav would not know that they belonged to him if he was not with them.<sup>17</sup> However, all of his plans fail when Yaakov is delayed by an unnamed "*ish*," "man," an anonymous individual who struggles with him and holds him back until morning. Under pressure, Yaakov devises his final plan and places his family in a specific order, putting the most treasured ones in the back for greater protection. In this setup, Yaakov clearly demonstrates to every member of his family who is the most precious to him: Yaakov places Yosef, the eldest son of Raḥel, at the very back, the most protected position, thereby demonstrating that Yosef is more valuable to him than Reuven, the eldest of Leah and the firstborn of Yaakov's progeny.

It should not be surprising that these two stories in Reuven's life lead us to the third story, the rebellion of Reuven against his father.

### **REUVEN AND BILHA**

It happened, while Yisrael lived in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine, and Yisrael heard of it. Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve. (Gen. 35:22)

This episode presents a shocking scenario: Reuven lies with Bilha, his father's third wife. What could have motivated Reuven to do this? What might he have intended to accomplish? This turn of events is baffling.

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17. See Rashbam on Gen. 32:25 for an explanation as to why "Yaakov was left alone" (Gen. 32:25). God sends the "*ish*" to fight with Yaakov to stop him from abandoning his family, thus forcing him to face his brother and come up with a new plan.

## Tribal Blueprints

There are two distinct interpretive approaches to Reuven's behavior, captured in the Talmud<sup>18</sup> and in the commentaries.<sup>19</sup> While one approach recognizes that the words of this verse – that Reuven engaged in sexual activity with his father's wife, Bilha – should be understood literally, there is an alternate view that interprets this verse non-literally, alluding to a different act of rebellion.

### Literal Understanding

“*Vayishkav et Bilha.*” (Gen. 35:22)

Throughout the Torah, the root *shin, kaf, bet*, which means “to lie,” is utilized to depict sexual relations between a man and woman. The literal explanation of the word *shakhav* is to lie with a woman.<sup>20</sup> Typically the phrase *shakhav et* is used to describe a situation of a man forcing himself on a woman,<sup>21</sup> which suggests that these words are telling us Reuven had sexual relations with his father's wife Bilha. The difficulty of this approach is in understanding his motive. How could Reuven think that this act might improve his relationship with his father?

In order to comprehend this episode, let us consider three similar stories in Tanakh where a man lies with his father's or leader's wife or concubine.

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18. The Talmud in Shabbat 55b quotes the opinion of R. Yonatan that if anyone says Reuven sinned, they are mistaken. However, R. Yehoshua says that Reuven “trampled on the law and sinned and acted lewdly,” implying that he believes that Reuven did lie with Bilha.
  19. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Abarbanel, and *Hizkuni* all interpret this verse non-literally. In contrast, Rashbam, Radak, and Sforno believe that the verse should be read literally and that Reuven did lie with Bilha.
  20. This same root – *shin, kaf, beit* – is used to describe the sexual relations of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:32–35), Yaakov and Leah before the birth of Yissakhar (Gen. 30:16), Shekhem with Dina (Gen. 34:2), Potiphar's wife's intentions with Yosef (Gen. 39:7), and Amnon with Tamar (II Sam. 13:14).
  21. This combination of words is used in two rape stories: Shekhem with Dina (Gen. 34:2) and Amnon with Tamar (II Sam. 13:14). It is also used to describe consensual relations (Lev. 15:24) and forbidden sexual relationships (Lev. 20:11, 12, 13, 18, 20, and Num. 5:13).

### **Avner and Ritzpa**

The first story occurs in II Samuel (3:7–11), immediately following the death of King Shaul. Shaul's son Ishboshet inherits the throne, thus leading the ten tribes of Israel, while David becomes king of the other two tribes. Due to Ishboshet's youth and inexperience, Avner, Shaul's military general and close relative,<sup>22</sup> manipulates him. One day, Ishboshet confronts Avner, accusing him of having sexual relations with Ritzpa, the concubine of the prior king, Shaul. Avner responds by abandoning Ishboshet for David, bringing with him the ten tribes. Ultimately, this helps unite the twelve tribes under David's rule. At first glance, it seems that Avner overreacts to the accusation. Why such a strident response? Simply because having relations with the concubine of a leader is much more significant than the act itself, due to the symbolism and message it sends, i.e., that this person is entitled to the rights of the king! Specifically, it proclaims that he is an heir to the throne. Ishboshet is actually accusing Avner of trying to usurp his rulership, an act of treason. His true intentions exposed, Avner has no choice but to abandon Ishboshet and flee to David's army.

### **Avshalom and David's Concubines**

The second story occurs later in II Samuel (16:21–22). David's son Avshalom rebels against his father and succeeds in overthrowing David from his palace.<sup>23</sup> To assert his newfound power, Avshalom ascends to the roof of David's palace and rapes ten of David's concubines.<sup>24</sup> This is not only a sexual act, but it also represents Avshalom's undeniable message to his father: that he deserves to be the king of the Jewish people.

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22. I Sam. 14:51.

23. Avshalom was removed from David's home after killing his older brother Amnon for raping his sister, Tamar. Years later, David permitted his return, but by then it was clear that Avshalom would not inherit the throne.

24. Ironically, this is the same location where David stood when he saw Batsheva bathing and sent his soldiers to bring her to him (II Sam. 11:2). This focus on the "gag," "roof," of the palace leads us to assert that the action of Avshalom was an act of punishment to David for lying with Batsheva, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

### **Adoniyahu and Avishag**

The third story occurs in I Kings chapter 2, when David is old and nearing death. Adoniyahu, a younger son of David, anoints himself as king. After David announces that the next king to inherit his throne will be his son Shlomo, Adoniyahu is forced to step down. As part of his desperate attempt to retain the throne, Adoniyahu beseeches Batsheva to request her son Shlomo's permission for Adoniyahu to marry David's concubine, Avishag.<sup>25</sup> Shlomo immediately detects his brother's true intentions – to usurp the kingdom – and sentences him to death for treason.<sup>26</sup>

Each of these episodes depicts a close relative – a son, brother, or uncle – staking a claim as heir to the throne. Each one attempts to assert his authority by having relations with the wife or concubine of the king. With this as background, Reuven's motivation becomes clear. Reuven is conveying to his father, the leader of the family, that he expects to inherit the leadership position. He is trying to show Yaakov that his first choice for this position, Yosef, was a mistaken decision, as was his favoritism of what is in his opinion the wrong wife, Raḥel. Reuven is standing up to his father, protesting his own mistreatment as well as that of his mother and all of the disregarded children of Leah.<sup>27</sup>

### **Non-Literal Approach**

The primary evidence, supplied by the Talmud and commentators, for why the verse is not intended to be understood literally is based on the last few words of our verse: “and the sons of Yaakov were twelve.” It is hard to believe – according to this interpretation – that Reuven would remain counted among the tribes of Israel after doing as reprehensible

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25. Avishag was the beautiful woman chosen to keep David warm during his older years. He laid next to her for warmth, but never had sexual relations with her (I Kings 1:3–4).

26. Shlomo compares Adoniyahu's request to a coup attempt: “Why do you request Avishag the Shunammite for Adoniyahu? Request for him the kingdom” (I Kings 2:22). Adoniyahu reveals his true intentions when he says to Batsheva as a preface to his request, “You know that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel set their faces on me, that I should reign: however, the kingdom is turned about, and become my brother's...” (I Kings 2:15).

27. See Rabbi Yaakov Medan, “Anyone Who Says Reuven Sinned...” <http://etzion.org.il/en/anyone-who-says-reuven-sinned>; and Rabbi Alex Israel, “Reuven: Cover Up or Peshat?” <http://etzion.org.il/en/reuven-cover-or-peshat>.

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an act as having relations with his father's maidservant.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the words "and Yisrael heard" imply that he did not actively respond to his son's action. Yaakov's passive reaction would be extremely challenging to understand if Reuven had truly slept with his wife.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, even though Yaakov does not respond to Reuven immediately when the story is told in Genesis 35, he does react at the end of his life. Yaakov states that Reuven loses his status as firstborn "because you went up to your father's bed, then defiled it. He went up to my couch" (Gen. 49:4). These words show that Yaakov was profoundly disturbed by Reuven's desecration of his bed. However, neither our verse nor Yaakov's deathbed statement provide much clarity as to the exact nature of Reuven's actual transgression. Commentators speculate about what the specific transgression was. Did he move his father's bed into a different tent? Perhaps he removed his father's bed from the tent of Raḥel's maid after her death, and placed it in its rightful space, in his mother's tent?<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, maybe Reuven did something to Bilha or to her bed to prevent his father from having relations with her or bearing more children on behalf of Raḥel?<sup>31</sup> There does seem to be a

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28. It is also difficult to fathom that one of the tribes of Israel would commit such a heinous act against his father.

29. Admittedly, it is possible that the lack of reaction by Yaakov is just a function of Yaakov's character. Other instances of Yaakov's muted reaction include the following:

(1) In response to Shekhem's rape of his daughter Dina, the verse states "*veheherish Yaakov*," "and Yaakov was quiet" (Gen. 34:5)

(2) In response to Shimon and Levi's justification for murdering the inhabitants of the city of Shekhem, when they say that they couldn't allow Shekhem to treat their sister as a prostitute, Yaakov is silent (Gen. 34:31).

(3) When he senses the jealousy of the brothers towards Yosef, the verse says: "*ve'aviv shamar et hadavar*," "and their father observed the matter" (Gen.37:11), but did nothing about it.

30. Shabbat 55b; Rashi on Gen. 35:22.

31. *Midrash Tanhuma (Vayehi 11)* records that Reuven lay in Bilha's bed at the moment Yaakov was about to come lie with her, to force Yaakov to leave Bilha's tent and go to Leah's bed instead.

Ramban on 35:22 writes that Reuven's intention was to prevent Bilha from having additional children who might take away from his portion of inheritance. As the eldest child, Reuven was destined to receive a double portion, and had the most to lose if Yaakov had more children, each of whom would also receive a portion of the inheritance.

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common denominator among these suggestions: Reuven is doing this act to help his mother by removing the competition, Bilha, and at the same time he is helping himself by negating the possibility of future competition, in the form of siblings, challenging his own leadership and right to inheritance.

According to the non-literal approach, Reuven's behavior is not primarily about his own status in the family, but rather about defending the honor of his mother. Just as he did in his younger years when he brought her flowers, now as an adult he looks out for his mother. Reuven intends to communicate to his father the injustice of his mother's treatment after the death of Raḥel. Yaakov's elevation of Bilha's status over his mother is insulting, wrong, and hurtful. Reuven again inserts himself

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Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg in his Torah commentary *Haketav Vehakabbala* on 35:22 writes that the intention of Reuven's act was to publicly declare that Bilha was not a true wife of Yaakov, but rather was only a concubine. He explains that we are to read the verse "and Reuven defiled Bilha with his words and his father heard his words," with emphasis on "words." By publicly calling her a concubine, a lower level wife, he embarrassed her and Yaakov and caused Yaakov to never have relations with her again. Rabbi Mecklenberg supports this approach by observing that this is the only time in the text that Bilha (or Zilpa) is referred to as a concubine instead of a full wife.

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch on Gen. 35:21–22 actually attempts to interpret Reuven's behavior in a positive light. After the death of Raḥel, Yaakov had separated himself from all of his remaining wives, pitching his tent a distance away from the rest of the family. By lying in Bilha's bed, Reuven was trying to show his father that his separation from his wives was hurting the family. He was hoping his father would realize his mistake and come back to all of his wives, including Leah. Unfortunately, Yaakov does not heed the message and remains separate, leading to the reality that "and the children of Yisrael were twelve": i.e., he had no more children.

Rabbi Yaakov Medan in "Anyone Who Says Reuven Sinned..." presents both sides, and posits that Reuven might have tied up Bilha, removed her from Yaakov's tent, and replaced her with his own mother. Yaakov again slept with Leah, while believing he was with a different wife. Yosef saw Reuven tie up Bilha and drag her away. He reported to his father that he believed Reuven did this in order to rape her. Rabbi Medan finds support for this narrative in the verse, "Reuven lay with Bilha ... and his father heard." Yaakov heard, i.e., was told by Yosef, that this is what Reuven did. However, Rabbi Medan recognizes that Reuven would never have actually had relations with Bilha; he hated her and everything she represented to him and his mother.

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into his parents' complicated relationship, overstepping a line, but possibly with good intentions.

This story offers us insight into the bigger picture of Reuven's personality that will continue to be revealed in the rest of his stories. He struggles with his position within the family, as he believes that he, the oldest, should lead. But his growing resentment of his father's treatment of him and his mother causes him to act hastily. Thus, the reaction caused by his behavior with Bilha does not end where he intends. He wants to be recognized as the leader of the family, but after his stunt with Bilha, his father disregards him completely.<sup>32</sup> Reuven never considers the implications of his actions; thus, inevitably, they don't succeed as he would like.

However, Reuven never forsakes his dream to become the leader of the family. In future stories, Reuven will try to prove to his family that he is deserving of the role. Unfortunately, he will fail in every attempt.

### **REUVEN – THE FAILED LEADER OF THE BROTHERS**

The tragedy of Reuven is the disconnect between his belief in his capabilities and the impact of his actions. He genuinely believes that he can resolve every problem in the family. Regrettably, whenever an opportunity arises for Reuven to prove himself, his solutions are inappropriate, ignored, or rejected. We see this pattern emerge in the final three stories recorded about his life.

### **Sale of Yosef**

Reuven heard it, and delivered him out of their hand, and said, "Let's not take his life." Reuven said to them, "Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" – that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. (Gen. 37:21–22)

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32. In fact, this may explain why Yaakov is silent in reaction to Reuven's action. This is the ultimate punishment for Reuven. Yaakov purposely ignores the son who desperately seeks his father's attention and approval.

## *Tribal Blueprints*

Beginning in Genesis 37, Yaakov expresses a clear preference for Raḥel's oldest son, Yosef. He presents Yosef with a distinctive coat to wear in his brothers' view, thus signifying his unique love for him and Yosef's elevated status. Concurrently, Yosef has visions of leadership that he divulges to his brothers, arousing their jealousy about his special treatment and their animosity due to his dreams.<sup>33</sup> These emotions reach a tipping point when Yaakov sends Yosef to check on his brothers while they are shepherding his sheep. As he approaches them, the brothers plot his murder. It is at this moment that Reuven steps up to lead.

Reuven instructs his brothers not to murder Yosef; rather, he suggests, they should throw him into a pit and leave him at the mercy of nature. While we, the readers, know that Reuven plans to save Yosef, the brothers are unaware of that stage of his plan. He feels forced to hide his desire to save his brother, perhaps because he is afraid the other brothers will thwart his plan or because he fears they will ignore him and shatter his belief that he is the leader. It seems Reuven has good intentions that are not realized because of his flaws and insecurities.

In fact, on inspection, there are numerous elements of this plan that seem lacking. First, how could Reuven have not been aware of other things in the pit that could endanger Yosef's life?<sup>34</sup> Second, how was Reuven comfortable leaving the scene instead of remaining near the pit to keep watch? How could he be so sure that Yosef would still be there when he returned? Why did he leave? Lastly, how does Reuven intend to explain to the brothers that Yosef is still alive?

It seems that because Reuven believes he is the leader of the family, he assumes that his brothers would not swerve from his plans, and that even if he leaves the scene, Yosef would still be there when

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33. These feelings of hatred and jealousy of the brothers are described in the text of the Torah after specific events: "And they hated him" (Gen. 37:4) after seeing the special coat; "And they continued to hate him" (Gen. 37:5) after hearing the first dream; "And they were jealous" (Gen. 37:11) after their father doesn't get angry about Yosef's second dream wherein the entire family, including Yaakov, bow to him.

34. The Talmud in Shabbat 22a posits that the verse writes "And the pit was empty, it had no water," using repetitive language, to emphasize that the pit was only empty of water but did have snakes and scorpions inside.



he returns. He probably does not anticipate having to explain Yosef's survival to the brothers because he expects they would respect his decision to save him.

Of course, Reuven's blind spot is that his brothers do not consider him as their leader; therefore, they do not feel compelled to listen to him. Consequently, immediately after he leaves, Yehuda suggests a new plan: Sell Yosef! All the brothers listen to him, in spite of Reuven's plan.<sup>35</sup> It is unclear what transpired after this point in the story. Either the brothers sell Yosef to the Yishmaelites, or alternatively, Midianite merchants discover him in the pit and sell him.<sup>36</sup> Whichever story is correct, Reuven's plan has failed. Therefore, when Reuven returns to the scene, he is shocked that Yosef is no longer inside the pit!

We are plagued by the following question: Why did Reuven want to save Yosef, his biggest rival for the attention of his father? Why did he not step aside and allow his brothers to murder Yosef? What were his true intentions in this story?

One approach: Reuven's intentions to save Yosef were pure. In his mind, as the leader of the family, it was his responsibility to save Yosef. Said another way, while he may have wanted to help his mother

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35. Many commentators attempt to explain where Reuven went after Yosef was thrown in the pit. Rashi and Radak on 37:29 write that he went home to help his father. In their understanding, the brothers shared responsibility in caring for Yaakov, and that day's duty was Reuven's. Otherwise, it is possible that Yosef, the "*ben zekunim*," i.e., a child born in his parents' later years, had the responsibility to take care of their father at all times. However, now that Yosef was in the pit and not able to tend to their father, Reuven felt a need to go home and check on him. This reinforces the message that Reuven's primary concern is his father's approval. Rashi posits an alternative explanation: Reuven was fasting and repenting for his actions with Bilha. After throwing Yosef into a pit, the brothers all left to eat. Reuven, who was fasting, separated himself from his brothers. (This explanation allows Rashi to connect this story with the prior one.) Radak also offers a second explanation: Reuven simply went off to shepherd sheep. Not all the brothers could sit down to eat at the same time, as they had to take turns watching the sheep. Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam on 37:29 writes that Reuven intentionally slipped away from his brothers to prepare his plan for rescuing Yosef.

36. See Rashbam, *Hizkuni*, and Bekhor Shor on Gen. 37:28.

and himself gain favor with Yaakov, he would never resort to murder. For once, his actions are completely selfless.

An alternative approach: His behavior is another example of his selfish motives. He strategizes that being Yosef's savior by bringing him home to Yaakov will create hero-status for himself. By saving the favorite son, he might gain his father's recognition as leader of the family. Therefore, while he felt no urgency to stop the brothers out of a sense of sincere altruism, he utilized their motivation to harm Yosef as an opportunity to differentiate himself. An alternate possibility is that his motivation to save Yosef merely stems from his fear of being the target of his father's blame, which he assumes will be directed at him because he is the oldest child.<sup>37</sup> This fear is evident in Reuven's own words when he comes to the empty pit: "The boy is missing, what will be of me!" (Gen. 37:30).<sup>38</sup>

The common theme that runs through these various explanations for his behavior is clear: Reuven perceives that he is the family leader and is thus expected to be responsible for his brothers, both Yosef and the others, but he fails to protect Yosef, who is sold to Egypt. He proves to be unable to manage his brothers and continues to disappoint his father.

### **Blaming his Brothers**

Reuven answered them, saying, "Didn't I speak to you, saying, 'Don't sin against the child,' and you wouldn't listen? Therefore also, behold, his blood is required." (Gen. 42:22)

Nine years after the sale of Yosef, a famine forces the brothers to descend to Egypt in search of food. There, unbeknownst to them, they are face to face with their brother Yosef. During these intervening

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37. *Hizkuni* on Gen. 37:30 adds that especially because his father knows that Reuven is upset about Yosef's elevated status in the family, Yaakov would certainly blame Reuven for Yosef's disappearance.

38. These words could also be support for the first way of explaining Reuven's reasoning according to the non-altruistic approach, i.e., that Reuven believed that saving Yosef was his opportunity to improve the way his father viewed him, but once his plans went wrong and Yosef has disappeared and therefore Reuven is not the hero, he now worries, "What will be of me!"

## *Reuven in Genesis: The Rejected Oldest Child of Yaakov*

years, Yosef has grown into the second most important member of the Egyptian government. He recognizes his brothers but they do not recognize him. Yosef puts them through a series of trials: he accuses them of spying, jails them for three days, keeps Shimon in jail, and then releases the rest to return home, but only after he instructs them not to return for more food without their youngest brother, their father's new favorite son. The brothers recognize the cosmic connection between these events and their treatment of Yosef – God must be punishing them.

At this point, Reuven again attempts to lead the brothers. The role of a leader during a crisis is to keep his constituents calm and to fashion a plan to help them prevail. However, Reuven does the opposite. Instead of taking any responsibility for the events that have befallen them, he pointedly blames them for their current predicament. Reuven directly accuses them of being at fault for what they did to Yosef and for disregarding his words to leave Yosef alone.

Of course, Reuven's reaction is bizarre and seemingly out of place. First, it seems that Reuven is not even telling the truth, as he never said outright not to hurt Yosef.<sup>39</sup> During that prior episode, Reuven did suggest that instead of actively murdering Yosef, the brothers should abandon him in a pit. How can he now claim that he said to leave Yosef alone? Second, and more importantly, even if he did make those comments earlier, mentioning it at this point is extremely inappropriate. Why point fingers about a prior event when the group is now in trouble? That is not effective leadership; a leader should accept responsibility and plan

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39. There is a hint in the words of the Torah that Reuven did tell his brothers not to touch Yosef. Verse 21 states that Reuven said, "*vayomer... lo nakenu nafesh,*" "and he said ... let us not take his life." But in verse 22, there is a second "*vayomer,*" "and he said," implying a second speech. In this verse, Reuven provides his idea to throw Yosef in the pit. The repetition of "*vayomer*" could imply that there is a pause between his two speeches. This would mean that his first statement to his brothers was simply "Don't hurt Yosef," thus matching what he is claiming he said in chapter 42. Only after they did not listen did he speak up a second time, suggesting they throw Yosef in the pit (Malbim on Gen. 37:21). For a further analysis of instances of "*vayomer*" repetition in the Torah see Rabbi Elchanan Samet, "Reuven's Attempt to Save Yosef," <http://etzion.org.il/en/reuven-attempt-save-yosef>.

the next move. This story clearly depicts Reuven's continued inability to serve as a suitable leader for his brothers.

### **Protector of Binyamin**

Reuven spoke to his father, saying, "Kill my two sons if I don't bring him back to you. Deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him to you again." (Gen. 42:37)

The brothers return home from their trip to Egypt without Shimon and tell their father that the leader of Egypt refused to allow them to return for more food without their youngest brother, Binyamin, the remaining child of Raḥel.

Reuven tries again to prove himself to his father by instantly volunteering to be the protector of Binyamin. However, in his swiftness to speak, he doesn't fully consider the implications of his offer. He proposes to his father that if he is not able to safely restore Binyamin to Yaakov, Yaakov can kill both of his (Reuven's) sons. The idea that a grandfather would want to kill his grandchildren in revenge for losing a son is ludicrous.<sup>40</sup> His words display a lack of forethought and help explain why Yaakov would obviously refuse his proposal.

Ramban on 42:37, however, presents a different approach. He writes that Reuven's offer wasn't outrageous at all but should be understood as Reuven's inarticulate way of saying that he would take responsibility if anything happens to Binyamin. But, Ramban writes, Yaakov simply didn't trust Reuven. Yaakov knows from past experience that Reuven is not trustworthy or responsible, and therefore he would never

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40. Rashi on Gen. 42:38 labels Reuven as "a stupid firstborn" for proposing this deal. Other commentators find it impossible to conclude that Reuven could have meant what he said literally. Sforno on 42:37 says that Reuven only meant that if he loses Binyamin his sons would be cursed, but not that Yaakov would murder them. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his commentary *Haketav Vehakabbala* on 42:37, writes that Reuven's intention was that his children would not inherit land if he was unsuccessful in his mission. Of course, no matter the exact details of his proposal, Reuven is willing to negotiate a plan that could have very negative effects on his own children if he fails to protect Binyamin.

## *Reuven in Genesis: The Rejected Oldest Child of Yaakov*

entrust his favorite child into his hands, regardless of the offer. In this incident, Yaakov rejects his eldest son once again.

Considering the landscape of Reuven's life, one observes the tragedy of a man who never aligns his vision with reality. He spends his life chasing an impossible dream. Reuven would never be the head of his family, not because he is a son of Leah, the non-favored wife, but because he lacks the traits that are imperative for leadership. Reuven lacks dependability, persistence, patience, and control, and therefore does not command respect. He is too quick to blame others for his mistakes and desperately wants his father's approval.

### **THE BLESSING OF YAAKOV**

“Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the pre-eminence of dignity, and the pre-eminence of power. Unstable as water, you shall not have the pre-eminence, because you went up to your father's bed and defiled it. He went up to my couch.” (Gen. 49:3–4)

Reuven's lack of leadership qualities is captured in Yaakov's deathbed message to his oldest son. Yaakov's message to Reuven is concise and to the point. He tells his son that he had all the potential in the world but squandered it.<sup>41</sup> Yaakov's meaning is clear: Reuven's fall is not because of his mother's status as the unfavored wife; rather, it is because of his own failure to lead and his recklessness in his action of defiling his father's bed. Yaakov declares outright: “You do not deserve the honor of the firstborn!”

Reuven will of course always be the oldest of Yaakov's sons, and will continue to hold the title of firstborn, as the eldest tribe of the Jewish people. Because of this, he receives certain honors: he is given a blessing first by his father in Gen. 49, and is listed first many times in the Torah, each time identified as the firstborn,<sup>42</sup> but he loses his right

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41. Rashi on 49:3 points out that Reuven should have received the priesthood and kingship.

42. Gen. 35:23, 46:8, 49:3, Ex. 6:14, Num. 26:5, I Chr. 5:1.

## *Tribal Blueprints*

to the double inheritance. The double portion is given to Yosef, who has both his sons, Ephraim and Menashe, inherit separate pieces of land in Israel (Gen. 48:22, Josh. ch. 16 and 17).<sup>43</sup> Reuven loses his leadership role in the family during his life and then throughout history to his younger brothers, Yehuda and Yosef. The book of Chronicles states:

The sons of Reuven the firstborn of Yisrael, for he was the firstborn; but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef the son of Yisrael; and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright. For Yehuda prevailed above his brothers, and of him came the prince; but the birthright was Yosef's. (I Chr. 5:1-2)

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43. Rabbenu Bahya on Gen. 36:23 observes an obvious point: It is impossible to change the birth order or biological status of being the oldest child. It is a fact; either you are born first or you are not. However, that does not protect the honors that come along with that biological status. Reuven loses all of those honors. Sforno on Num. 1:20 maintains that even being called firstborn is part of the honor and that Reuven is only called the firstborn because he repented and therefore deserved to keep his title.