

שבט שבטי ישראל

Paul Scham

B'reshit Chs.XLIX and L: Parshat Va'y'chi

On reading the parshah, I started thinking about tribes. I think most of us don't know much about them except what's in Torah or Judges. but I think the tribal concept is relevant to us today, which I'll get to.

See the map. It is based on verses in Joshua; and it is highly dubious that it represents any reality at any time.

As we all know the sons of Jacob were transformed into tribes. Joseph got two for his sons; were the largest (Manasseh) and most central

It's pretty clear who was in favor (Judah & Joseph's sons) and who wasn't (Reuven and the violence-prone brothers, Shimon & Levi). Question: Why did Levi get to be the ancestor of the priests..

Levi & his bro Shimon are definitely the bad boys of the Jacob's sons. They were the ones who persuaded Sh'chem, Dinah's rapist, to join with the Israelite family (you take our daughters and we'll take yours). And by the way, circumcision is mandatory for all your males. Then on the 3rd day, when they were in pain, Shimon & Levi murdered them all. (Remember Sh'chem's name; we'll come back to it)

At the very end of the Torah: we have a similar listing in Moses' mentioning all (except Shimon) and showing similar preferences.

The map purports to show the tribes, based on descriptions in the book of Joshua. It looks very tidy, Simeon is tucked into Judah



Image from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg

to keep an eye on them. Levi of course was off being Levites,.. Some scholars view the Torah as projecting the origins of the Levites into the past to explain their role as landless cultic functionaries.

What do we learn from this? I asked Sandra (my wife, who happens to be a Mideast archaeologist) and was told that archaeologists now believe there was no united monarchy i.e., Saul, David, and Solomon) and there was never a reality to this map. They think there was a northern Kingdom of Israel that was continually at war with the new Kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital. However, the tribes maybe did, maybe didn't exist, but were perhaps clans that re-formed after a generation or two.

And where was the capital of Israel? At a city (a real one; we have the ruins) called Sh'chem, just like Dinah's rapist. The city existed, we have no doubt about it. As for Sh'chem the rapist we (only) have the words of the Torah. Sh'chem ceased to exist in 722 BCE, when the Assyrians destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel. One dares to think that this was a case of backward projection: Shimon and Levi killed Sh'chem and the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel, which became the so-called "lost 10 tribes." Of course they weren't lost, most of them remained and are almost certainly among our ancestors. They also became the Samaritans (Shomronim), those who reputedly married foreign wives during the Babylonian exile and were cast out by Ezra and Nechemiah. Their temple was located there. They were considered non-kosher by the Rabbinic Jews (that is, us) and were widespread in eastern Europe and the Middle East. There are only about 750 of them left; split between the West Bank and the Israeli city of Holon. The Rabbinit has finally accepted them

The Romans later built a city near there which still exists, Nablus. The area around it is called Samaria (Shomron), the northern part of the West Bank today.

Tribal inheritance ended by 722, when the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed.

There are various iterations of tribes. We are unlikely to have any remotely comprehensive idea of what roles the tribes played in ancient Israel.

Judah of course was the origin of "Jew" (with some admixture of Benjamin, in both of whose territory Jerusalem stands).

What is more important is that Judaism has remained tribal as well as a religion. Unlike its sister monotheistic religions, it retains the fiction that all Jews are descended from Abraham. We have some more idea of that tribal origin through DNA

Only a few modern nations have an identity between religion and nationality; e.g., Armenian = Armenian Christian; Greek = Greek Orthodox.

What is more important regarding the concept of tribes is its relationship to the Jewish people. We call ourselves a tribe, and in some ways we really are, with both the community and the clannishness that implies. Traditionally it has been hard to get in, but that has softened considerably in the last century. But anyone who does will also have been back there with all of us at Sinai.

Reuven Rivlin, the best President of Israel, famously talked in 2015 about the 4 "tribes" of the modern Israeli state: Haredim, national or modern orthodox, secular, and Israeli

Palestinians. That's a rather different idea of tribe (or is it?). Israeli society has fragmented much more since then.

Last thought: Our Torah and tradition say the Land of Israel was given to all the children of Abraham. Perhaps the concept of tribes can be useful. DNA shows Palestinians have very similar ancient Canaanite DNA, very much like Mizrachi/Sephardic Jews (Ashkenazim have somewhat less). Almost certainly they are descended from the northern kingdom of Israel, as well as from the many other groups that have sojourned in Israel/Palestine, and thus our cousins. And, of course, there are the 750 Samaritans, who probably have the purest inheritance by "blood." We might as well recognize that both of them "belong" there by ancestry, as much as we do.

Jan. 11, 2024