

REUBEN: THE PREDICAMENT OF THE FIRSTBORN

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Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob, is not the leader of his brothers. As we read in Genesis, he seems troubled, vacillates, and offends his father. His descendants, the Reubenites, also act in problematic ways. For example, in Numbers 30:2–32:34 they decline to settle in the Promised Land. They explain to Moses that the grazing land east of the Jordan River is suitable for their flocks and herds, and they prefer to remain there. Moses accuses them of disloyalty and of lack of confidence in God's promises. The Reubenites, along with the Gadites and half of the tribe of Manasseh, who also wish to remain east of the Jordan, assure him of their commitment to their fellow Israelites, and promise to send soldiers across the Jordan to help the other tribes conquer the land. Moses accepts the offer, but he is irked by their priorities: They say that once they are settled they will build shelters for their animals and then shelters for their children. Moses pointedly reverses the order.

In the Book of Joshua, the Reubenites keep their promises to Moses; their troops fight under the leadership of Joshua to conquer the land before they return east of the Jordan. Later, however, they build an altar east of the Jordan like the altar the Israelites build. The other Israelites fear the Reubenites will use it to worship some foreign deity (Josh. 22:10 - 20). The redoubtable Phinehas goes to investigate. The Reubenites explain to him that the purpose of the altar is not for sacrifices. It is a replica of the altar built by the Israelites in the Promised Land as a symbol of devotion to Israel; it is also a witness of devotion to the one God (v. 22:34). They say they feel solidarity with Israel and want the other tribes to consider them as kith and kin. The explanation satisfies Phinehas.

According to the Book of Judges, their commitment to Deborah and Barak in the battles against the Canaanites circa 1100 BCE is less resolute. The implication in the Song of Deborah is that Reubenites were hesitant to help (Jud. 5:16), possibly because outside the Israelite heartland the Reubenites were vulnerable.

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Frank Moore Cross asserts that they disappear "no later than the eleventh century BCE,"¹ but there must have been some Reubenites still living east of the Jordan in the ninth century BCE, because the Book of Kings reports they were attacked by the Aramean King Hazael during the reign of Jehu, King of Israel 842–815 BCE. There may not have been many of them, however, because the text also says: *The Lord began to reduce Israel* (II Kgs. 10:33). Ezekiel speaks about the territory of Reuben, but this reference may have been only geographical. In other words, there is no proof from his remarks that any Reubenites were still living there by the sixth century BCE (Ezek. 48: 6,7).

Both Jacob and Moses understand the problematic history and future of the Reubenites. In his last words to his sons, Jacob accuses Reuben of being *unstable as water*, meaning that "just as water follows its own direction and flows without respecting boundaries or borders, so was Reuben's behavior unbounded."² Jacob predicts rather cruelly *you shall not excel* (Gen. 49:4). It is difficult to believe that this is a father speaking to his child.

Moses is gentler in his last words to the tribes, but implicit in them is a prediction of trouble ahead for the Reubenites. Moses says: *Let Reuben live, and not die* (Deut 33:6). In other words, Moses senses a threat to the Reubenites maybe because of their own unpredictability, their "unbounded behavior." Perhaps the problems of Reuben and the Reubenites originate in the fact that although Reuben was the firstborn, his father, Jacob, did not really accept him or treat him as such.

Psychologists attach great importance to the birth order of siblings. According to one author, "most individual differences in personality . . . arise within the family."³ He says firstborns are "jealous of their status . . ."⁴ They tend to be more conservative and self-confident than their younger siblings: they identify with their parents; they defend the order established by the parents.

If firstborns are rejected by their parents, their behavior patterns change. They may rebel against a parent and against family order. At the very least the rejected first-born child becomes confused and loses self-confidence and acts in problematic – even self-destructive – ways. This description seems to fit Reuben.

Maybe Reuben was condemned even before his birth because his conception was based on deceit – his father was tricked into marrying Leah. One sage of the Talmud asserts that when the husband or wife is thinking about someone else during moments of marital intimacy – Jacob must have been thinking about Rachel – the resulting child is the product of a kind of "mental adultery" (Nedarim 20b).⁵ It is no secret that Jacob loves Joseph more than any of his other children and implicitly considers him the firstborn because he was the first child of his beloved Rachel. The love between Reuben and his mother Leah is strong, but it cannot compensate for Jacob's disdain for them both.

The name Leah chooses for her first son proclaims her happiness to Jacob. In its simplest form it means "Re'eh [look] ben [a son]." But, Jacob does not seem to respond to his wife. As a child Reuben wants to protect and promote his mother, and, like his mother, he hopes desperately to please his father. On one occasion, he brings *dooda'im* [mandrakes] to his mother.⁶ This plant was known as an aphrodisiac.⁷ He brings the mandrakes to help his mother improve her relationship with Jacob. This bond between mother and child is strong, but it will eventually get Reuben in trouble.

After Rachel's death Reuben thinks that Jacob wants Bilhah, the concubine who was previously Rachel's maid, to take the place of Rachel. That would be a great insult to Leah. Reuben either sleeps with Bilhah himself, or he fixes her bed to give the impression he has been intimate with her. The Sages defend him in Shabbath 55b. Reuben wants to disqualify Bilhah as Jacob's new favorite. Jacob deeply resents Reuben's action. In an interesting third-century CE Christian or Judaeo-Christian document called *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* Reuben explains to his own sons that he was 30 years old at the time of his alleged affair with Bilhah and that he repented for seven years.⁸ Jacob never forgives him and refers to Reuben's act on his deathbed.

Reuben's role in the sale of Joseph is troubling for different reasons. After the brothers seize Joseph, the consensus is to kill him on the spot. Reuben prevents them from murdering Joseph, suggesting that they put him into a pit. Reuben intends to rescue him (Gen. 37:22). Despite his bitterness, Reuben does not want to cause his father to suffer over the loss of Joseph.⁹ But, Reuben is inconsistent. Instead of remaining with his brothers to prevent them from disposing of Joseph, Reuben inexplicably disappears. During his ab-

sence, Joseph is sold to itinerant traders. When Reuben returns, he thinks Joseph is dead; he rends his clothes and wails: '*What am I to do?*' (v. 37:30). His ineffectiveness is there for all to see.

Years later, ten of the brothers go to Egypt for food during the famine, and Joseph, then vizier of Egypt, asks them to bring their brother Benjamin when they come again. When they must embark on a second mission to Egypt for food, Jacob is reluctant to let Benjamin go. In a very clumsy effort to play the role of leader, Reuben says that Jacob can kill his – meaning Reuben's – own two sons if Benjamin does not return from Egypt (v. 42:37). This shocking offer is rejected out of hand. Judah speaks up; he simply offers to guarantee Benjamin's safe return. Jacob accepts Judah's offer (vv. 43:8-9).

Reuben's descendants are as confused as their ancestor. In the wilderness, two of their leaders, Datan and Abiram, join with Korach in the attempted coup against Moses and Aaron. Ibn Ezra says that one of their motives is to assert the rights of the firstborn.¹⁰ But, when they admit their lack of confidence in God's promises and talk with nostalgia about Egypt, they obviously disqualify themselves for any leadership role and become more dangerous than Korach who is merely jealous of Moses and Aaron (Num. 16:12-14). The Almighty destroys the Reubenite rebels.

Reuben has suffered through no fault of his own. Jacob undermines what should have been the self-confidence and strength of the firstborn. But, all the children of Leah suffer from the disdain or indifference of a father who seems to have loved only Rachel and her two sons Joseph and Benjamin. Jacob's cruel prediction that Reuben is *unstable as water* seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reuben's biography shows he cannot overcome the insecurity instilled in him by his father's disdain for him. His descendants share the same disability. The contrast with Judah and Levi is striking: These two younger brothers mature and reshape themselves by the force of their intellects and personalities. When given the opportunity to dispose of Benjamin in Egypt, Judah instead offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. He has learned about the need for family solidarity; he understands the importance of repentance. The descendants of Judah, the largest and strongest tribe, establish their kingdom in the southern part of the Promised Land. From them God chooses David to rule all of the descendants of Jacob. The hot-tempered Levi also

changes. As a young man he charges into Shechem to kill the residents as revenge for the abuse of his sister Dinah; his descendants, the smallest tribe, transform their passion into devotion for God and for the larger family of Israel. Moses is the best example of this change. God chooses the Levites for Temple service. Together, the descendants of Judah and Levi consolidate and strengthen Israelite identity through the monarchy and the priesthood. Judahites and Levites thrive while the Reubenites disappear from the lands they have chosen.

What is the flaw in Reuben and the Reubenites? Reuben represents the person who is unable to free himself or herself from negative family influences arising out of birth order, parental preference, and sibling rivalry. Judah and Levi sublimate their feelings of anger and hostility because they understand emotionally and intellectually the need to change. These two younger brothers demonstrate a basic principle in Judaism: individuals have the capacity for personal growth and self-healing. To guide us toward an understanding and an application of this principle to our own lives we have the entire Bible and all of Jewish history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Yosef Green, Dr. Shimon Bakon, Editor, and Dr. Morris Levitt for their helpful suggestions. Rosh Yeshiva Pesach Schindler gave me a Talmud reference.

NOTES

1. Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998) p. 54, n.6.
2. James Kugel, "Reuben's Sin with Bilhah in the *Testament of Reuben*," in David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, Avi Hurwitz, eds., *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies . . . in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995) p. 529.
3. Frank J. Salloway, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives* (New York: Pantheon, 1996) p. xiii.
4. Salloway, p. xiv
5. Hillel Goldberg, "Re'uven and Hoshea: Architects of Repentance," *Jewish Thought*, 4,2, (5756) p. 51.
6. Ovadia Seforno, in Eliyahu Munk, translator and annotator, *Hachut Hameshulash: Commentaries on the Torah, Vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Lambda, n.d.) p. 592.
7. Francis Brown, ed., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Based on the Lexicon of William Gesenius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906, reprinted 1951) p. 188. The significance of mandrakes in the *Song of Songs* is clear: *If the pomegranates are in bloom, There will I give my love to you. The mandrakes yield their fragrance* (8:13-14).

8. H. W. Hollander and M. De Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985) p.88.

9. Yehuda Kraut, "Reuben's role in the sale of Joseph: A textual conundrum," *Le'ela*, 52 (December 2001, Tevet 5762) p. 14.

10. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch – Numbers*, translated and annotated by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (New York: Menorah, 1999) p. 126.