**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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***Parashat Vayetze:***

**“Happy Am I! For Daughters Call Me Happy”**

**Introduction: The Birth of Asher**

Asher is the second son born to Zilpa, Leah's maidservant, the sixth son of Ya’akov on Leah's side. As opposed to the feelings of pain and unfulfilled hope for love from Ya’akov that find expression in the names that Leah gives to her first three sons, the names that she gives to the sons of her maidservant Zilpa radiate a sense of joy.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And Zilpa, Leah’s maidservant, bore Ya’akov a son. And Leah said: Fortune (*gad*)[[2]](#footnote-2) is come! And she called his name Gad.

And Zilpa, Leah's maidservant, bore Ya’akov a second son. And Leah said: Happy am I (*be-oshri*)! for daughters call me happy (*isheruni*). And she called his name Asher. (*Bereishit* 30:11-13)

The giving of Zilpa to Ya’akov marks Leah's transition from passivity to activity, which stems from her growing self-perception as she who merits giving birth to the majority of the twelve tribes. This consciousness is clearly expressed in the words that she utters at the time of the birth of Yissakhar, the son born after Asher: "And Leah said: God has given me my reward (*sekhari*), because I gave my maidservant to my husband. And she called his name Yissakhar" (*Bereishit* 30:18).

The happiness Leah enthusiastically gives voice to (expressed by way of the repetition of the root *asher* three times throughout the verse: *be-oshri, isheruni,* Asher) attests to her absolute reconciliation with her role and her life, finding its clearest expression in the name Asher.

This is the first instance of the root *asher* expressing happiness in the Torah; it appears one more time, at the end of Moshe's blessing of the tribes (immediately after concluding the last blessing, to the tribe of Asher) in *Parashat Vezot Haberakha*: "Happy (*ashrekha*)are you, O Israel, who is like you? a people saved by the Lord" (*Devarim* 33:29).

In both places, happiness involves belonging to a grand and valuable process that requires significant effort. In the Book of *Devarim*, this is stated at the outset of their journey back home, to Canaan. Moshe allows the people to see their unique value and purpose as God's people who are about to enter the Promised Land. At the time of the birth of Asher, Leah's words reflect the process of her personal growth in the house of Ya’akov.[[3]](#footnote-3)

"Happy am I! For daughters call me happy" embodies Leah's internal joy resulting from her reconciliation with her life and her purpose, which relates to the words "Happy am I," and also the external confirmation which she receives from those around her, which is expressed in the words "For daughters call me happy."[[4]](#footnote-4) Oftentimes society's reaction echoes a person's attitude toward himself or herself. The change in Leah's self-perception yields fruit on more than one plane.

**“Happy Am I! For Daughters Call me Happy” – Future Characteristics of the Tribe of Asher**

In *Bereishit Rabba,* Leah's words at the time of Asher's birth are expounded with regard to the future characteristics of the tribe of Asher:[[5]](#footnote-5)

"And Leah said: Happy am I" (*Bereishit* 30:13).

Rabbi Levi said:

Never in his life did Asher spend a night in a lodging house.

Asher possessed more residences (*gagei paltariyot* = high palaces) than Yehuda possessed districts.

This is what is stated: "The sons of Asher: Yimna, and Yishva… who was the father of Birzayit" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:30-31).

Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon [disagreed]:

Rabbi Levi said: Their daughters were beautiful, and they married priests who were anointed with olive oil.

Rabbi Simon said: Their daughters were beautiful, and they married kings who were anointed with olive oil. (*Bereishit Rabba* 71, 13, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 835)

Rabbi Shemuel Yafeh Ashkenazi, author of the *Yefei To'ar* commentary on *Bereishit Rabba*, divides this *derasha* into two parts, and explains the first part as follows:

(1) Never in his life did Asher spend a night in a lodging house — For he lived always in his house and did not wander from place to place on business. There is no hint to this in Scripture, but tradition tells us.

(2) Perhaps he learned the meaning of "Happy am I" from "Happy are they that dwell in your house" (*Tehillim* 84:5). The same is true of the residences: there is no hint to this in Scripture.

(3) It may further be suggested that he expounded the words: "For daughters (*banot*) call me happy," in the sense of Cheshbon and the towns thereof[[6]](#footnote-6) and he explained that he will be happy in the towns, that he will have and he will dwell in them in security and not wander from place to place.

And this is what he said: "He possessed residences (= high palaces)," because his towns and cities will be beautiful and elevated.

(4) That which is stated afterwards: "This is what is stated: 'The sons of Asher: Yimna…’" is a different explanation.

"For daughters call me happy" — He will be happy with daughters. This does not refer back to the words of Rabbi Levi.

According to what the *Yefei To'ar* says in the fourth part of his comment, the first part of the *derasha* is the statement of Rabbi Levi, which ends with the words: "more residences than Yehuda possessed districts." The second part of the *derasha* opens with the verse from *Divrei Ha-yamim*, which is interpreted by Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This division is puzzling, in light of the fact that verses are usually cited at the end of a statement as a proof to what was stated therein, and because the phrase, "this is what is stated" usually refers to a verse that is brought as a proof or substantiation for what has been stated earlier.[[8]](#footnote-8) The justification for this division seems to be the citation of the text in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (I 7:30-31):

The sons of Asher: Yimna, and Yishva, and Yishvi, and Beria, and Serach their sister.

And the sons of Beria: Chever, and Malkiel, who was the father of Birzayit.

It is difficult to reconcile this citation with the content of the first part of the *derasha*.[[9]](#footnote-9) On the other hand, the words of Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon in the second part of the *derasha* relate to the word *zayit*, "olive," contained in the name of Asher's grandson, Birzayit (according to the *keri*, theway the word is read, as if a *yud* were the penultimate letter rather than the *vav* which appears in our text.):

Rabbi Levi said: His daughters were beautiful and they married priests **who were anointed with olive oil.**

Rabbi Simon said: His daughters were beautiful and they married kings **who were anointed with olive oil**.

**The Home of the Tribe of Asher**

Let us go back and explain the first part of the *derasha* according to the *Yefei To'ar*. Rabbi Levi's first statement points to a characteristic feature of the members of the tribe of Asher, namely, that they did not have to travel from place to place in order to earn a living; instead they were at peace in the cities of their tribal territory. For this reason, "never in his life did Asher spend a night in a lodging house." The presence of this feature is not supported by any Scriptural verses, but rather it relies on a tradition: "He had a tradition about it." The statement relates to all of the words: "Happy am I! For daughters call me happy": "Happy am I" — that Asherites could always remain in their homes; "for daughters call me happy" — that their residences ("daughters") are high and beautiful.

It follows from the *Yefei To'ar’*s interpretation of Rabbi Levi's first statement that the tribe of Asher is characterized by domesticity and love for the fine architecture found in its territory. However, the wording of the *derasha* does not relate to the aesthetic realm. It would seem simpler to understand Rabbi Levi's statement as relating exclusively to the words "Happy am I," and not to the continuation, "For daughters call me happy." Thus, the sentence, "Asher possessed more residences than Yehuda possessed districts," can be understood as a continuation of the description of the happiness of the people of Asher: not only do they not have to leave their houses, but their tribal cities are filled with impressive architectural structures. We may read this into the text without connecting it to the words "daughters" or "call me happy" that appear in the continuation of the verse. Accordingly, the subject of Rabbi Levi's statement is the homes of the Asherites.

Let us consider the meaning of the tradition reported by Rabbi Levi. The inner logic of Rabbi Levi's statement may be explained against the background of the description of the process that Leah undergoes in Ya’akov's home at the beginning of the statement. Wandering expresses restlessness, a need to fill oneself up with far-off sights and places.[[10]](#footnote-10) Leah's happiness in her life in Ya’akov's house is reflected in the future essence of the tribe of Asher, being happy at home and in one’s place. Rabbi Levi expounds Leah's statement about herself in the context of Asher's birth, after all she has gone through, "Happy am I," as an imprinting of her mental state on a tribe in Israel, as a vital component of the building of the nation. A tribe will arise that will experience simple and deep joy in all the good that it will receive, a tribe whose inheritance is happiness.

The focus on the home in the words of Rabbi Levi also expresses the object of Leah's happiness: the home of Ya’akov. She has reached a state in which she focuses not on Ya’akov, but on the home she is building for him, and there she experiences deep peace, wholeness and happiness. This is reflected in the special affinity of the Asherites towards their home. The palaces express the resilience and stability of connection to one's home, in the sense of: "Peace be within your walls, and prosperity within your palaces" (*Tehillim* 122:7).

**The Olive Motif**

In the second part of the *derasha*, Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon present daughters of the tribe of Asher as outstanding in their beauty, and, as such, worthy of being married to high priests and kings.

As mentioned, the *derasha* is built on the motif of the olive. The tribal territory of Asher serves as a source of fine olive oil for the nation, and for the Temple in particular.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is described in the book of Tannaitic halakhic midrash, *Sifrei* 355, in connection with Moshe's blessing for the tribe of Asher prior to his death: "And of Asher he said: Blessed be Asher above sons; let him be the favored of his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil" (*Devarim* 33:24).

"And let him dip his foot in oil" — this teaches that Asher's land gushes oil like a spring.

It once happened that the people of Laodicea were in want of oil.

So they appointed a certain official[[12]](#footnote-12) over them.

They said to him: Go and purchase for us ten thousand *zuz* [the basic unit of Talmudic currency] of oil.

He went to Tyre and said to them: I need ten thousand *zuz* of oil. They said to him: Go to Gush Chalav.

He went to Gush Chalav and said to them: I need ten thousand *zuz* of oil. They said to him: Go to So-and-so [a Jew]…

When [the official] arrived at [the Jew's] house, the latter called to his maidservant, and said to her: Come, and wash our feet.

She filled a basin with olive oil and washed their feet, to fulfill that which is stated: "And let him dip his foot in oil."

[The host] placed before him some bread, and he ate and drank.

After he ate and drank, [the Jew] stood up and measured out oil for him, to ten thousand *zuz* of oil.

The abundance of oil in the territory of the tribe of Asher is mentioned already in the blessing given to him by Ya’akov: "As for Asher, his bread is fat (*shemeina*, literally: filled with oil), and he shall yield royal dainties" (*Bereishit* 49:20), which is expounded in *Bereishit Rabba* as follows: "'As for Asher, his bread is fat' — they would supply the anointing oil."[[13]](#footnote-13) Like the *derasha* under discussion concerning daughters of the tribe of Asher who are married off to kings and high priests, here too the *darshan* alludes to the special connection of this tribe to the pinnacle of spiritual and political nobility. We learn from this that it enjoys rare qualities that find expression in the oil extracted from the olives with which Asher's territory is blessed.

**The Beauty of Daughters of the Tribe of Asher**

However, it is still unclear from where it is derived that the daughters of the tribe of Asher are characterized by special beauty. Another *derasha* in *Bereishit Rabba* connects the beauty of these women to another verse:

"As for Asher, his bread is fat" (*Bereishit* 49:20) — that his daughters are beautiful.

As it is stated: "For daughters call me happy" (*Bereishit* 30:13).

And similarly it is stated: "Let him be the favored of his brothers" (*Devarim* 33:24) — with his daughters.

"And he shall yield royal dainties" — that his daughters will be fit for royalty.

As it is stated: "Who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights" (II *Shemuel* 1:24). (*Bereishit Rabba*, MS Vienna, 100, 20, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1282)

The key to understanding the *derasha*, "'As for Asher, his bread is fat' — that his daughters are beautiful," lies in a *derasha* of Rabbi Abbahu, an important Amora in Eretz Israel, a disciple of Rabbi Yochanan and contemporary of Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Levi. This *derasha* is also found in *Bereishit Rabba*:

Rabbi Abbahu said:

"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way" (*Bereishit* 28:20) — from evil talk…

"And will give me bread to eat" — from forbidden sexual relations.

As it is stated: "He knew not aught he had, save the bread which he did eat" (*Bereishit* 39:6), a euphemism.[[14]](#footnote-14) (*Bereishit Rabba*, 70, 4, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 801)

Rabbi Abbahu’s exposition of the word "bread" in the sense of a woman paves the way for reading the verse "As for Asher, his bread is fat" as referring to a woman. The connection between "fat" and beauty is found explicitly in the book of *Bereishit*: "And, behold, there came up out of the river seven cows, well-favored and fat-fleshed… And, behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ill-favored and lean-fleshed" (*Bereishit* 41:2-3).[[15]](#footnote-15) This is how the *derasha* "that his daughters are beautiful" is formed from the verse "As for Asher, his bread is fat."

Let us compare these *derashot* to the words of the Tannaim in *Sifrei Devarim*, no. 355, on the words: "Let him be the favored of his brothers" regarding the tribe of Asher:

"Let him be the favored of his brothers" — He would favor his brothers with olive oil, and they would favor him with bread.

Another explanation: "Let him be the favored of his brothers" — When Reuven did that deed (see *Bereishit* 35:22), Asher went and told his brothers, and they rebuked him, saying: This is the way you speak about our older brother? But when Reuven confessed to the deed, [Asher's] brothers reconciled with him. Therefore it is stated: "Let him be the favored of his brothers."

Another explanation: "Let him be the favored of his brothers" – When the tribes were tracing their genealogies, this one said: The Levitical office [and its tithe] is mine, and that one said: The Levitical office [and its tithe] is mine. Then [Asher] said: If Scripture traces genealogies from Reuven [in the order that the matriarchs first gave birth], then the Levitical office is mine [since I am the tenth son, being Zilpa’s second, reckoned after Leah’s six and Bilha’s two]. But if Scripture traces genealogies from Binyamin [in reverse order of birth], the Levitical office is Levi's [and I cede to Levi my right to the Levitical tithe]. At that moment, he appeased his brothers. Therefore it is stated: "Let him be the favored of his brothers."

Another explanation: "Let him be the favored of his brothers" — Of all the regions that release [their produce] in the sabbatical year, none compares to the territory of Asher.

Among the four explanations which the *Sifrei* brings as to why Asher is favored by his brothers, no mention whatsoever is made of the beauty of his daughters. This fact supports the conclusion that the matter of the beauty of the daughters of the tribe of Asher, which appears for the first time in *Bereishit Rabba,* is first proposed by the Amoraim of Eretz Israel.

In contrast to the *derashot* of Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon concerning "Happy am I! For daughters call me happy," the *derasha* concerning "As for Asher, his bread is fat" does not connect the beauty of daughters to the motif of oil, but rather it relates to their beauty as a matter that stands on its own.

Moreover, the beauty of daughters allows us to understand two very cryptic verses about the tribe of Asher. Leah’s “Happy am I! For daughters call me happy” presumes that daughters are a vehicle for joy, but we do not know why. Moshe’s “Blessed be Asher above sons; let him be the favored of his brothers” prompts us to ask why Asher deserves this privileged status.

Both verses are explained by the beauty of daughters. Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon make use of insights emerging from the *derasha* concerning "As for Asher, his bread is fat” to develop the idea; the key point is not the beauty of daughters, but rather their marriages to kings and priests, which bring happiness and honor to their tribe of origin.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Based on this, we begin to notice an interplay of ideas and *derashot* among the schools of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel. These ideas and *derashot* reverberate and reinforce each other, producing a symphony of Midrashic concepts.

**Leah’s Reward**

Thus far we have tried to understand the structure and development of the *derashot* concerning the daughters of the tribe of Asher. Let us now return and discuss the ideas that arise from these *derashot*.

First of all, let us consider the two parts of the *derasha* concerning "Happy am I! For daughters call me happy" — the unique connection of the Asherites to their houses, and their beautiful daughters who are married off to kings and high priests — as a single unit.

In one respect, the two qualities associated with the tribe reflect the essence of Leah's life and desires which ripen at the time of Asher's birth: her joy in her life with Ya’akov and the building of his home. They constitute a kind of reward for what Leah went through — her distress, her prayers and her faith — in her home. Everything that has been far from self-evident for her — her marriage to a righteous man, her sense of strong belonging in her home, her beauty — becomes a characteristic feature of her sons, and especially of her daughters. In another respect, the tribe unites within it the natural and healthy connection to home and the image of its daughters as they go out and connect with the nation's leadership. The stability, the joy and the resilience on the personal level create the foundation for a solid and lasting connection to the nation as a whole.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The turning point for Leah seems to be the birth of Yehuda, whose name expresses only positve and lofty feelings, making no references to Ya’akov's attitude toward her. Her reference to Ya’akov as "*ishi*," my husband, returns in the names given to Yissakhar and Zevulun, from a new place of strength and joy in her lot. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rashbam, *Bereishit* 30:11: "Good fortune has come to us." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to this, we can understand the connection between happiness (*osher*) and another meaning of the root *asher* in the Bible, i.e., a person's legs, as, for example, in the verse: "He brought me up also out of the tumultuous pit, out of the miry clay; and He set my feet upon a rock, He established my footsteps (*ashurai*)" (*Tehilim* 40:3). The legs or footsteps bring one to a desitnation, to realize one’s desires. See Rav S.R. Hirsch's commentary, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Radak, ad loc.: "For the women say about me that I am happy, for I had several sons, between me and my maidservant." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This characterizes the *derashot* on most of the names of the tribes in *Parashat Vayetze*, with the exception of Reuven, Dan and Zevulun. Particularly interesting is their *derasha* relating to the tribe of Naftali, which connects his name to the Torah center in Tiberias in the days of the Amoraim. See *Bereishit Rabba* 71, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Bemidbar* 21:25: "And Israel took all these cities; and Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in Cheshbon, and in all the towns thereof (*benoteha*)." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rabbi Levi bar Lachma is a third-generation Amora of Eretz Israel. Rabbi Simon is a second-third generation Amora of Eretz Israel, a disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and a colleague of Rabbi Levi. There were other Amoraim in Eretz Israel with the name Rabbi Levi in later periods (Rabbi Levi bar Chayuta, of the fourth-fifth generation; Rabbi Levi Tzanbaria, of the fourth generation). It is possible that the first statement in the *derasha* should be attributed to one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the Oxford manuscript of *Bereishit Rabba*,the words "this is what is stated" do not appear before the names of Asheriters from the Book of *Divrei Ha-yamim*. This supports the understanding of the *Yefei To'ar* that here begins a new part of the *derasha.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The *Mattenot Kehuna* commentary and the commentary attributed to Rashi, ad loc., expound the name Barzot, the way the name is written, as "Perazot," which refers to a form of settlement and building. However, this explanation seems far-fetched. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Note should be made of the inner connection between commerce and long-distance travel, which are intertwined. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The tribal territory of Asher is located in the western Galilee. See *Yehoshua* 19:24-31; *Atlas Da'at Mikra*, Jerusalem 5753, pp. 158-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *Sifrei Devarim*, ed. Horowitz (Jerusalem: 5768), p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 97, 20, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1223. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rashi uses this *derasha* in his commentary to the verse: "Save the bread which he did eat" (*Bereishit* 39:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See *Midrash Sekhel Tov* on *Bereishit* 41:2: "'Fat-fleshed (*beri'ot basar*)' — fat (*shemeinot*). As it is stated: 'Now Eglon was a very fat (*bari*) man' (*Shofetim* 3:17)." [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In *Bereishit Rabba,* we find another *derasha* that relates to daughters of the tribe of Asher who marry high priests, without referring to the issue of their beauty:

    "As for Asher, his bread is fat”' for his land is fat, and his bread is fat, and he begets those who wear eight garments (= his daughters who are married to high priests give birth to high priests who wear the eight priestly garments). (MS Vienna, 99, 12, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1282) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)