

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat Yayechi – The Deer sent Forth

When Ya'acov blessed his sons – the holy tribes of Israel on his deathbed, he compared many of them to animals. For example, Yehuda is compared to the lion, Binyamin to the wolf, Yessachar to the donkey, Dan to the serpent and Naftali to a female deer (hind). I feel drawn to the gentle, sensitive and graceful deer. Where I grew up in Denmark I could climb over the hedge of our back garden into the famous deer-park, or take a seven minute walk through the proper gate. If anyone ever asks if I miss Denmark, I always answer that besides my family the main thing I miss is the deer-park. Whenever I visit Denmark, I always take a hike with my family in the deer-park. We usually find deer, yet we need to be extremely quiet and try very gradually to get closer, as the deer is so shy and timid and easily runs away. That is why I don't have any photos to share with you of the deer, as I was never able to come close enough to take photos that didn't come out blurry. You can understand, why from all the different tribes compared to animals in this week's parasha, I chose Naftali who Ya'acov blesses with the following words:

נַפְתָּלִי אֵילָה נְשִׁלְחָה הַנְּתִן אִמְרֵי שְׁפָר: (ספר בראשית מט:כא)

“Naftali is a hind let loose; he gives goodly words” (*Bereishit* 49:21). The word אֵילָה/*ayal* is also translated as hart, roebuck, gazelle and ibex (net-bible). What is it about the tribe of Naftali which resembles this nimble animal? Why is Naftali compared to specifically a female deer?

The Good Tiding Deer

The sons of Naftali were swift as the deer to run and give good tidings (Rabbeinu Bachaya). Therefore, Naftali was Ya'acov's favorite messenger. Whenever it states in the Torah, “Ya'acov sent,” without specifying whom he sent, he always chose Naftali as his emissary (*Agra D'Kala* 139a). To be a good messenger Naftali must also have been trustworthy and humble to carry out his mission. Before the times of email, telephone, fax and telegram, kings used to send messages to one another through the deer. The deer who were born in the north would be raised in the palace of a king in the south. The king would tie his message between its horns. The deer would then run quickly to return to where it was born. We learn from the second part of the verse, “who brings goodly words” that the deer was especially selected to bring good tidings (Ramban). Perhaps this was also because Naftali had a way of accepting his fate by sweetening the judgments. The word ‘Naftali’ is connected to turbulence and twistedness. No matter how much suffering and turbulence the *tzaddik* endures, he will still “give goodly words” and praise to Hashem about them (*Chatam Sofer*). This concurs with Targum Unkelos, “He will give thanks for his lot with pleasing words and praise.” Naftali was sweet by means of the good tidings he would share with Israel. “The goodly words” may also refer to the words of Torah that should always be sweet, beloved and new to us just like the hind who is always beloved to its mate as the very first time, due to its narrow womb (*Iruvin* 54b, *Kli Yakar*, *Bereishit* 49:21). The “hind sent forth” is the embodiment of femininity and refers to the *sefirah* of *malchut* described as, “The voice of Hashem



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makes the hinds give birth” (*Tehillim* 29:9). King David called *malchut* “Ayelet ha-Shachar” (the morning glow, or the hind of the dawn) (*Tehillim* 22:1), for it is let lose (*meshareret* from the word *shachar*) like the dawn (*shachar* in Hebrew) to seek her beloved during exile (*Magen David* 7). Likewise, the congregation of Israel is compared to the deer, which is beloved to its mate, for Israel is sent forth from the upper source and “gives goodly words” – prayers to Hashem (The *Rekanti* on the Torah). These prayers are messages sent to Hashem by means of his faithful messengers, the angels (Rabbeinu Bachaya).

In praise of Swiftness

“...One must run as a deer... (*Pirkei Avot* 5:20). Being excited about life makes us run. Actually the Hebrew word for run, רץ/*ratz* shares the same root as רצון/*ratzon* – will. I try to run, or at least walk swiftly, wherever I have to go anywhere, except if I have just eaten. This way I accomplish two goals in one, both getting needed exercise from always sitting at the computer as well as saving time. Tiferet Yisrael explains that we should not investigate the mitzvot of the Torah through the human intellect, but rather we must run like a deer from its pursuers in order to avoid falling into heresy. The main praise of Naftali is his wholeheartedness with which he would walk in Hashem’s way of Torah. It is known that Torah scholars have no rest neither in this nor in the coming world. A person should always run from strength to strength like Naftali, and never fall into becoming old and complacent (Rav Tzaddok of Lublin, *P’ri Tzaddik*, *Rosh Chodesh Adar* 11).

Swiftly Return with the Title-Deed of Machpelah

As Ya’akov’s sons were about to bury Ya’acov in the Cave of Machpela, Esau came to stop them as he claimed the cave of Mahpelah for himself. The burial assembly were compelled to delay the burial while they sent Naftali to run rapidly back to Egypt and bring the deed of the property to prove that only Ya’acov had burial rights to the cave (*Sotah* 16a), (Rashi, *Bereishit* 49:21). While they were waiting for the deed, Chushim, son of Dan asked, “What’s the delay? Shall our grandfather lay here unburied in a state of disgrace until Naftali arrives?” He hit Esau on the head, causing his death. Esau’s head was then severed and rolled into the cave (*Pirkei D’rabbi Eliezer* 38). As a side point, this is the story of how Esau’s head ended up being buried in the Machpelah. Esau, the father of the Western Civilization, which separates head and heart as symbolized by the necktie worn by Westernized men, did not merit to have his entire body buried in the Machpelah. Only his head, wherein holy sparks are trapped, merited burial in the second holiest place in the world.

The Children of Naftali Saving Israel from Sisera

Naftali was also “sent forth” to wage war with Sisero many generations later, during the time of the Judges. “Take with you ten thousand men of the people of Naftali...” (*Shoftim* 4:6). There too, the expression “*shalach*” is used “into the valley they rushed (*shalach*)” (verse 15), as they marched rapidly. The second part of our verse can also be applied to the war with Sisero. “He gives goodly words” as the ten thousand men of Naftali gave rise to the song of praise that Devorah and Barak sang (*Shoftim* chapter 5). Naftali is compared to a female rather than a male deer, in order

to allude to Devorah who descended from him. Even the word אִשָּׁה /*isha* – woman is hinted in the initials of the words of our verse as follows: אַיָּלָה שְׁלֹחַת הַנֹּתֶן /*ayala shelucha hanoten* – “a hind sent forth that gives” (The Ritba on *Bereishit* 49:21). Thus on Ya’acov’s deathbed he prophesied about the salvation that would come about through a woman (Devorah) from the tribe of Naftali, who was swift on her legs as a hind (Radak).

The Fruits of Naftali’s Land are Quick to Ripen



Ya’acov’s praise of Naftali also pertained to his allotted land of Israel, the upper Galilee centering around the shores of lake Kineret (The Sea of Galilee). Of the 12 tribes of Israel, none received land more beautiful than Naftali. This tribe possessed the most fertile and productive region in all of Israel. The land includes hidden springs emanating from Mount Chermon, well watered by both the Jordan River, the lake Kineret and the springs of Chermon. The word ‘Naftali’ shares the root with the word *‘petil,’* which means string. Therefore, Naftali connects the house of Israel. His land, likewise, includes the Jordan River, which connects the northern and southern regions of the land of Israel. Rashi explains that the valley of Kineret (Gennesareth – ‘a garden of riches’) ripens its fruit very quickly just as a hind runs rapidly (*Midrash Rabbah* 99). “He gives goodly words” – they (the people of Naftali) will give thanks to Hashem and praise G-d for the fruits. This thanksgiving may also refer to the special recital (*Mikra Bikurim*) accompanying

the first fruits sacrifice (*Kli Yakar*). Naftali was always happy with his portion and filled with all kinds of goodness. From him the good tidings that his land brought forth an abundance of fruits spread to all of Israel (*Midrash Tanchuma, Vayechi* 13). Naftali’s fruits were so amazing that they would share them with kings who would give them “goodly words of praise” (Rabbeinu Bachaya).

The Legs of *Emunah* (Faith)

The “goodly words” are words of praising Hashem in song. When we are filled with *emunah* in the Creator we begin to sing and praise Hashem. Arizal teaches that the legs are connected with *emunah*. The meaning of “Naftali is a hind sent forth” is that he has strong legs, which enables him to run swiftly. This alludes to the fact that his *emunah* in Hashem is strong. Because of his great *emunah* “he gives goodly words” in songs and praises of Hashem. This concurs with Targum Yonatan’s translation of our verse: “The tribe of Naftali sings beautifully.” Because of their strong *emunah* in Hashem they always sing beautifully in praise of Him (*Kedushat HaLevi*). Naftali shares this ability to sing with the Levites. The word שִׁיר /*shir* – song means link. Both of these tribes serve as connectors in Israel. Whereas Levi connects Israel to their father in Heaven, Naftali’s faithful song also connects all of the tribes to one another. May we tune into Naftali’s *emunah* and merit to always see the good in our lives, and may we never stop singing!