

Josh Jackson's D'var Torah for Va'eira

In Parshat Va'ayra, Moshe is reassured by Hashem after his initial failure with Pharaoh that he will be successful. The ten plagues are about to start! However, before beginning to tell about the plagues, the Torah takes a break and says these verses which trace the lineage of Yaakov's three oldest sons

"אֵלֶּה רָאשֵׁי בֵּית־אֲבֹתָם בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל...וּבְנֵי שִׁמְעוֹן...וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־לֵוִי...וּבְנֵי קֵהַת עַמְרָם...
וַיִּקַּח עַמְרָם אֶת־יֹכֶבֶד דִּדְתּוֹ לֵוִי לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־מֹשֶׁה..."

*"These [following] are the heads of the fathers' houses: The sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn...
The sons of Simeon... These are the names of Levi's sons...The sons of Kehath were Amram...
Amram took Jochebed, his aunt, as his wife, and she bore him Aaron and Moses..."*

Following the lineage of the first three tribes, the Torah returns to the story of the Exodus. The lineage of the other nine tribes are not listed. Why not? Here is what Rashi says:

"מתוך שהוזקק ליחס שבטו של לוי עד משה ואהרן, בשביל משה ואהרן התחיל ליחסם דרך תולדותם מראובן."

"Since [Scripture] had to trace the lineage of the tribe of Levi as far as Moses and Aaron, because of Moses and Aaron, it began to trace their [the Israelites'] lineage in the order of their births, starting with Reuben."

Rashi explains that the pasuk had to write the lineage of Levi because the Exodus story revolves around Moshe and Aharon. Presumably, the Torah wants to give Moshe and Aharon's ancestors some credit for how their descendants turned out. Rashi also says that the Torah can't start with Levi. It must first write the lineage in birth order which would start with Reuben. But, Rashi doesn't explain why. Ramban explains that had the Torah skipped over Reuven and Shimon we would have thought that because the nation's leaders came from Levi, Reuven no longer had the status of "firstborn". After listing the generations of Reuven it would be confusing (or hurtful) to skip over just Shimon before writing about Levi. But once Levi was covered there is no reason to continue with the other tribes.

Rashbam has another approach:

"מפרש במכילתא אלו שלשה שבטים שגינה אותם יעקב בעת צוואתו, ייחסם עתה הכתוב להודיע שחשובים הם."
"It explains in the Mekhilta: these are three tribes whom Yaakov belittled when he criticized them (when he blessed them before his death). The verse now gives their lineage to inform us that they are important."

Rashbam explains that these are the three tribes to whom Yaakov gave constructive criticism when he blessed all his sons before his death. The verses show the significant individuals who were members of Reuven, Shimon and Levi to offer some balance and to let us know that they are still of high quality and worthy to be part of the Jewish People.

When you criticize someone, it is best for you to also tell him positive things so he doesn't just focus on the negative. This will give him the confidence he needs to absorb the criticism and do better. If you are criticized by someone who doesn't know this idea and tells you nothing positive, it is important for you to give yourself some compliments. If the Torah adds verses for this purpose, it must be pretty important.