

Reuven and Bilhah

Introduction

Missing Details

The Torah discusses Reuven's actions with Bilhah in but half a verse (Bereshit 35:22):

וַיְהִי בְשָׁכְנוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הַהוּא וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה פִּילגֶשֶׁת אָבִיו וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי
בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר.

And it came to pass, while Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve:

These words reveal almost nothing of the incident, sharing only the bare minimum: that Reuven had relations with his father's concubine. They discuss neither Reuven's motives nor what Yaakov did after hearing of the fact. What prompted Reuven, ostensibly a righteous figure, to commit such a deed? How is Yaakov's reaction to be interpreted? Finally, why does the Torah decide to end the episode with the statement, "וַיְהִי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר"? Is this fact somehow relevant to Reuven's actions, or should it be viewed as an independent unit, disconnected from our story?¹

Rebuke

In contrast to Yaakov's silence here, on his deathbed he does chastise Reuven, saying (Bereshit 49:3-4):

(ג) רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אַתָּה כַּחַי וְרַאשִׁית אוֹנִי יִתֵּר שְׂאֵת וַיִּתֵּר עָז. (ד) פָּחַז כַּמִּים אֶל תּוֹתֵר כִּי עָלִית
מִשְׁכְּבִי אָבִיד אֶז חִלְלֵת יְצוּעֵי עֲלָה.

(3) Reuben, thou art my first-born, My might, and the first-fruits of my strength; The excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. (4) Unstable as water, have not thou the excellency; Because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; Then defiledst thou it — he went up to my couch.

The phrase, "כִּי עָלִית מִשְׁכְּבִי אָבִיד" would seem to be a clear reference to Reuven's actions with Bilhah. The rest of Yaakov's words, though, are more ambiguous. What does "יִתֵּר שְׂאֵת וַיִּתֵּר עָז" mean? Who is the referent of the verb "עָלָה" in the phrase, "אֶז חִלְלֵת יְצוּעֵי עֲלָה"? What light can this whole passage shed on the initial affair?

Punishment

Elsewhere, too, there is an allusion to the episode. Divrei HaYamim I 5:1 shares:

(א) וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי הוּא הַבְּכוֹר וּבְחִלּוֹ יְצוּעֵי אָבִיו נִתְּנָה בְּכֹרֶתוֹ לְבְנֵי יוֹסֵף בֶּן
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא לְהַתִּיחֵשׁ לְבִכְרָה. (ב) כִּי יְהוּדָה גָּבַר בְּאַחֲיוֹ וּלְנִגִּיד מִמֶּנּוּ וְהַבְּכֹרָה לְיוֹסֵף.

(1) And the sons of Reuben the first-born of Israel — for he was the first-born; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel, yet not so that he was to be reckoned in the genealogy as first-born. (2) For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came he that is the prince; but the birthright was Joseph's —

According to this passage, Reuven did actually get punished for his sin, losing his birthright to Yosef and kingship to Yehuda. Why is this specific punishment chosen? Why is it not mentioned in Bereshit 35?

"כל האומר ראובן חטא אינו אלא טועה"

In Bavli Shabbat, R. Yonatan declares Reuven's innocence with the well known words: "כל האומר ראובן חטא" ("All who say that Reuven sinned must be mistaken"). Can this statement be reconciled with the simple sense of the verses? Is it motivated simply by a desire to exonerate Reuven or are there any textual reasons to take such a position? Finally, if Reuven was in fact innocent, why don't the verses reflect this?²

¹ The Masoretic tradition disagrees as to whether the phrase ends verse 22, and hence our story, or if it begins a new unit.

² See the similar discussion regarding David's actions with Batsheva and Uriah in David and Batsheva.

Reuven and Bilhah

Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

Commentators dispute both whether or not Reuven had relations with Bilhah and what motivated his actions. Jubilees reads the verses according to their simple sense, claiming that Reuven did in fact sleep with his father's concubine, having been overcome by desire for her. R. D"Z Hoffmann concurs regarding the nature of Reuven's actions, but suggests that they had an ulterior motive. He claims that Reuven's deed was an attempt to put facts on the ground and assert himself as the rightful heir to take over from his father. Finally, opinions in Bavli Shabbat exonerate Reuven, suggesting that he acted out of concern for his mother. They claim that Reuven did no more than rearrange his parents' sleeping arrangements so as to prevent his father from having relations with Bilhah.

Sexual Desire

Reuven's deed was a sexual act, prompted by lust for Bilhah.

SOURCES: Jubilees, Testaments of the Patriarchs, R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua in Bavli Shabbat, Bereshit Rabbah, Ibn Ezra, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Radak, Ralbag¹

"וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה" – These sources read this phrase simply to mean that Reuven had relations with Bilhah.

Why now? According to both Jubilees and the Testaments, Reuven happened to see Bilhah while she was bathing and was overcome by desire.² This scenario is an addition to the Biblical text which provides no background to the act, and it is likely influenced by the similar story of David and Batsheva where this context is explicit.³

Rape? Both Jubilees and the Testaments portray Reuven as raping Bilhah, with the latter suggesting that she was drunk and asleep throughout.⁴ It is possible, though, to suggest that the relations were consensual. The verse's choice to use the verb "וַיִּשְׁכַּב" rather than "וַיַּעֲנֶה" (used by Shekhem's rape of Dina and Amnon's rape of Tamar) might support this possibility.⁵

"וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר" – There are differing Masoretic traditions regarding whether this phrase closes verse 22 (and the story of Reuven and Bilhah), or if it begins a new verse and topic:

- **Closing of story** – Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bekhor Shor, and Radak all suggest that the phrase comprises Yaakov's reaction to having heard of Reuven's deed. Ibn Ezra explains that after Reuven's actions, Yaakov no longer had relations with any of his wives, as Bilhah had been tainted, Rachel had died, and Leah and her maidservant Zilpah were abhorrent due to their connection to Reuven. Therefore, the verse tells us that Yaakov had only the twelve sons who were born prior to Reuven's deed.⁶
- **Unrelated fact** – Ralbag, instead, disconnects the phrase "וַיְהִי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר" from the story. According to him the episode ends with Yaakov's silence. Though Yaakov was aware of Reuven's

actions, he did not immediately express his anger and waited to punish Reuven, lest he push Reuven away totally.

"כִּי עָלִית מִשְׁכְּבִי אֲבִיךָ אֶז חִלְלָת יְצוּעֵי עֵלָה" – According to these sources, Yaakov's words on his deathbed, "כִּי עָלִית מִשְׁכְּבִי אֲבִיךָ," refer to Reuven's sleeping with Bilhah, while the phrase "אֶז חִלְלָת יְצוּעֵי עֵלָה" refers to the consequences of the action: either Reuven's defiling of himself,⁷ of Yaakov,⁸ or of Yaakov's bed,⁹ resulting in Yaakov refraining from further relations with Bilhah.¹⁰ In his rebuke, Yaakov chooses not to state the act explicitly, preferring the euphemistic language of "עָלִית מִשְׁכְּבִי" or "יְצוּעֵי עֵלָה".¹¹

"פָּחַז כַּמִּים אֶל תּוֹתֵר" – According to Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Ralbag the phrase "פָּחַז" refers to Reuven's reckless and impetuous personality¹² which led him to sin, and therefore lose any advantages that his firstborn status would otherwise have bequeathed.¹³

Punishment – As a result of his sin, Reuven lost his firstborn status to Yosef and his kingship to Yehuda. One might have thought that such a grievous sin should have led to a harsher punishment, and perhaps to Reuven's total rejection from the family.¹⁴ This leads some to suggest that Reuven must have repented of his deed,¹⁵ resulting in his father's forgiveness.¹⁶

Ramifications – According to this approach, it is possible that Reuven's rejection and replacement by Yosef paved the way for the strife and sibling rivalry evident in the Yosef narratives. Yosef's promotion to firstborn status might have been what entitled him to the cloak which became the source of so much jealousy and ultimately led to Yosef's sale.¹⁷



Power Play

Reuven's deed was a power play, intended to protect Reuven's status as firstborn.

SOURCES: Ramban #1,¹⁸ R. David Zvi Hoffmann, R"Y Medan¹⁹

"וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה" – R. D"Z Hoffmann takes the phrase at face value to mean that Reuven slept with Bilhah. Ramban is ambiguous, but might instead understand that Reuven simply rearranged the beds²⁰ so as to prevent his father from having relations with her.²¹

Purpose of act – These sources differ in their understanding of Reuven's specific motives:

- **Ensure inheritance** – Ramban suggests that Reuven did not want Bilhah to bear any more children lest it affect his inheritance. As a firstborn, he was supposed to get a double portion, and would have been most affected by any added progeny.²²
- **Rebellion** – R. D"Z Hoffmann, instead, views Reuven's act as a rebellion against his father's authority,²³ comparing the deed to that of Avshalom sleeping with David's concubines.²⁴ It is possible that by sleeping with his father's concubine,²⁵ Reuven wanted to demonstrate that Bilhah was not a full wife (and, thus, that her sons were not contenders for the birthright),²⁶ enabling him to eliminate competition and solidify his rights as the firstborn who was to inherit the mantle of leadership from his father.²⁷

Why now?

- It is possible that it is only after Rachel, Yaakov's favorite wife, dies that Reuven, a son of Leah, dared act to assert his position as firstborn.

- R"Y Medan, instead, suggests that Reuven's rebellion stemmed from Yaakov's submissive stance in his meeting with Esav. R. Medan claims that after Yaakov submitted himself to his brother, bowing down and calling himself his servant, his children lost faith in their father's authority and several looked to replace him.²⁸

"וַיְהִי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר" – Though these sources agree that the verse serves to close the unit, they disagree regarding its intent:

- **Bore only twelve** – According to Ramban,²⁹ the phrase comes to share that, as Reuven planned, Yaakov did not have any other children after his deed. The verse tells us that Yaakov had twelve, and not any more, children.
- **A full twelve** – Alternatively, according to R. Hoffmann's reading of the story, it is possible that in reaction to Reuven's act, Yaakov ensured that Bilhah and Zilpah attained full wife status,³⁰ and now viewed their children as equal to those of Rachel and Leah. Thus, the text shares that the sons of Yaakov were twelve (and not eight).³¹

Punishment – Reuven receives a measure for measure punishment, losing the very firstborn status he hoped to ensure. R"Y Medan suggests that it is possible that he is not rejected outright due to his repentance. In trying to save Yosef, the very son who had been given the birthright in his place, Reuven proved that he had repented of his deeds.³²

"רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אַתָּה" – At the end of his life, Yaakov opens his blessing to Reuven with the words, "you are my firstborn," perhaps to chide him that though he had been firstborn, and could have maintained that status, his reckless actions caused him to lose it.

"כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבִי אֲבִירָאֵז חִלְלָתָ יְצוּעֵי עֲלֵה" – This position assumes that Yaakov is speaking of Reuven's relations with Bilhah, but that he chose to soften his language by referring only to his bed rather than explicitly speaking of the sexual act itself.

Ramifications

- According to this approach, it is possible that the fact that there are twelve tribes is a direct result of this story. Until Reuven's deed, it was possible that the children of the maidservants were not to share this status.
- In addition, the leadership vacuum created by Reuven's loss of favor set up competition among the brothers as to who would take his place. See Yosef's Treatment of his Family, that it is likely that the brothers might not have known that more than one brother was to be chosen to continue the line. Reuven's rejection, thus, opened new rivalries between the next two most likely contenders,³³ Yosef, son of the beloved Rachel, and Yehuda, the next in line.³⁴

Moshe's blessing: "יְהִי רְאוּבֵן וְאֵל יִמָּת" – Ramban connects Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Reuven with Reuven's sin, suggesting that Moshe blesses them that they should not be punished for their father's deed.



Concern for Mother's Honor

Reuven prevented his father from having relations with Bilhah, but he did not sleep with her himself. He was motivated by concern for his mother's honor.

SOURCES: R. Shimon b. Gamliel in Sifre Devarim, opinions in Bavli Shabbat, R. Shimon b. Yochai in Bereshit Rabbah, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Rashi, Netziv, R"Y Medan³⁵

Reuven's motivations – According to all these sources, Reuven's motives were pure. After Rachel's death, Leah had hoped to gain the attentions and love of Yaakov. When Reuven saw that Yaakov had other intentions and planned to have relations with Bilhah rather than his mother,³⁶ he decided to rearrange the sleeping arrangements so as to spare his mother further pain.³⁷

"וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה" – This verse is difficult for this position as it seems to explicitly declare that Reuven did have sexual relations.³⁸ The commentators explain it in a number of ways:

- **"מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשה"** – According to most of these sources, the text attributes a sexual act to Reuven even though he never slept with Bilhah to highlight that his sin was nonetheless severe.
- **Slept in Bilhah's tent** – The Netziv, instead, suggests that the verse is saying that Reuven slept, not with Bilhah, but in Bilhah's tent (thereby preventing his father from having intercourse with her).
- **Yaakov's perspective** – According to R. Medan, the verse is written from Yaakov's perspective, who mistakenly thought that Reuven did actually sleep with Bilhah.³⁹

"כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבִי אֲבִיךָ אֲזַ חֲלַלְתָּ יְצוּעֵי עֵלָה" – This position could point to Yaakov's emphasis on his bedding ("מִשְׁכְּבִי" and "יְצוּעֵי"), rather than speaking of the act of relations itself, as support that the sin revolved around sleeping arrangements.

"וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר"

- R. Shemuel b. Nachmani uses this verse to support the position that Reuven had not engaged in sexual behavior, as it shares that even after the act, he was considered equal to his brothers.
- R"Y Medan, however, explains that since Yaakov actually thought that Reuven had slept with Bilhah, upon hearing the news he refrained from further relations,⁴⁰ and so the verse shares that his children numbered only twelve and not more.⁴¹

Leah's role – According to most of these sources, Leah was probably totally unaware of Reuven's plan. R"Y Medan, however, suggests that Reuven had not only forcibly removed Bilhah from Yaakov's tent, but had replaced her with Leah. When Yaakov entered the tent, he went about his business in his usual modest ways and realized only in the morning that whom he had thought was Bilhah was really Leah. He awakened appalled, especially as this was the second time he had been duped in the same exact manner. He was disgusted with Leah, whom he naturally assumed played a role in the duplicity. Reuven's plan totally backfired on him, as his actions served to distance Leah even further from Yaakov, who now decided never to sleep with her again.

Punishment – If all Reuven did was rearrange Yaakov's sleeping arrangements it is not clear why he is punished in losing his firstborn status,⁴² and why his father was still angry at him on his deathbed. After all, the action had no long term consequences and was easily fixed.⁴³

Biblical parallels

- **"כל האומר ראובן חטא אינו אלא טועה"** – This story is but one example of several in which R. Yonatan in Bavli Shabbat exonerates Biblical characters whom the Biblical text appears to portray as sinning. Another famous and somewhat similar case to ours is David's action with Batsheva. See David and Batsheva for various readings of the deed.

- **Morality of the Avot** – There are many other examples in Tanakh where, on an initial reading of the text, the Patriarchs or Matriarchs appear to engage in questionable behavior, yet commentators suggest that their actions were justified or had positive motives. For several examples, see Endangering Sarai in Egypt, Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael, Sale of the Birthright and Rachel's Stealing of the Terafim.

¹ Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bekhor Shor, Radak, and Ralbag don't say explicitly that Reuven was motivated by desire for Bilhah, but since they do not bring any other explanation, it seems that this is how they are reading the story.

² R"Y Medan, in his article, "כל האומר ראובן חטא" in "כי קרוב אליך - ספר בראשית" (Tel Aviv, 2014): 309, points out that Bilhah was a generation older than Reuven, making it strange that Reuven should be overcome by desire for her (leading to the alternative suggestion below that his act was not motivated by lust, but was rather a rebellious ploy).

³ See J. Kugel, "Reuben's Sin with Bilhah in the Testament of Reuben" in Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom (Indianna, 1995): 525-554, who suggests that both Jubilees and the Testament might be drawing off Yaakov's words, "פָּחַז כַּמִּים אֶל תּוֹתֵר". The metaphor of being "wanton like water" might have been understood as an allusion to the fact that Reuven had sinned due to water. Cf. the opinion in Bereshit Rabbah 98:4 who say, "אַתָּה חֲטָאתָ בְּמִים".

⁴ This motif might be borrowed from the story of Lot's daughters who have relations with their father when drunk.

⁵ The same question applies in the case of David and Batsheva, where it is also unclear whether David engaged in both adultery and rape, or only the former. See David and Batsheva.

⁶ R"Y Bekhor Shor explains similarly, pointing out that with Reuven's transgression, Yaakov in effect lost two wives, Rachel who had just died, and Bilhah who had been defiled. He, however, claims that the phrase "וַיִּהְיוּ לְיָאקֹב שְׁנָיִם בָּנִים" teaches that, nonetheless, Yaakov did not lose out on any offspring as he had already borne twelve.

⁷ See Ibn Ezra, one opinion in R"Y Bekhor Shor, and one opinion in Ralbag. R"Y Bekhor Shor suggests that the clause reads, "you defiled ("חִלְלָתָהּ") he who went on my bed ("וַיֵּצֵא עָלָהּ"). Yaakov intentionally blurred the identity of Reuven (referring to him only as the one who rose onto his bed and not naming him directly) so as not to explicitly declare Reuven contaminated. Ibn Ezra, instead, splits the clause and suggests that only the word "חִלְלָתָהּ" refers to Reuven's defiling of himself, while the rest of the clause ("וַיֵּצֵא עָלָהּ") means that from then on, Yaakov's bed "departed", as he never again slept with Bilhah.

⁸ See the second possibility brought by R"Y Bekhor Shor, who has Yaakov say "and you defiled he who normally rises onto my bed" (i.e. Yaakov).

⁹ See Radak and one opinion in Ralbag. According to them, Yaakov is saying, "You, (Reuven) defiled (חִלְלָתָהּ) the bed which you had lain upon (וַיֵּצֵא עָלָהּ). Though the word "עָלָהּ" is in third person, it should be read as if it is in second person (עלית) like the verbs in the earlier part of the clause.

¹⁰ This is how some of these sources understand the phrase "וַיֵּצֵא עָלָהּ". Pointing to the root "עלה" in Tehillim 102:25, Ralbag suggests that the word can mean "cut off" and that Yaakov is saying that his bed was cut off from him. Ibn Ezra and Radak, instead, say that Yaakov's bed "was stopped", perhaps understanding "עלה" to mean "departed". [See the gloss in R"Y Bekhor Shor who explains Ibn Ezra in this manner.] Either way, the connotation is that Yaakov refrained from further relations.

¹¹ See, though, the above notes that some of these exegetes explain the phrase "וַיֵּצֵא עָלָהּ" differently.

¹² Ibn Ezra and Ralbag point to the parallel description of Avimelekh's men as "גִּיקִים וּפְחָזִים" in Shofetim 9:4. Radak defines "פְּחָז" as to "hasten", presumably connecting it to the word נִחָז (with the letters reversed).

¹³ R"Y Bekhor Shor, instead, thinks that "פְּחָז" is a verb, and the phrase refers to Reuven's punishment – that his deed caused all his advantages to quickly slip away from him like water.

¹⁴ See the Testaments which has Reuven plagued with a near fatal disease of the loins (presumably as a measure for measure punishment) from which he is saved only due to his father's prayers. [This addition to the story might be influenced by Moshe's blessing to the tribe, where he says "יְחִי רְאוּבֵן וְאֶל יָמָת". Jubilees also suggests that the crime should have merited him death, and he was saved only due to the fact that the relevant laws dealing with sleeping with one's father's wife had not yet been revealed.

¹⁵ See, for example, R. Yehoshua in Bereshit Rabbah and the opinion of the Sages in Sifre Devarim. See also Sforno who more explicitly connects Reuven's repentance and Yaakov's decision not to reject him: "אָף עַל פִּי שְׁשָׁמַע לֹא הִפִּילוּ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּנָיו, כִּי לֹא הָיָה סָפֵק אֲצִלוֹ שְׁעָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה לְאַתֵּר".

¹⁶ See Radak who quotes his father as explaining that "יִתֵּר שְׁאֵת" refers to atonement and forgiveness, and that in his final words to his son, Yaakov forgives him for his sin. Cf. Ibn Ezra who suggest that in Yaakov's words "אֵל תּוֹתֵר" there was an implicit blessing: though Reuven would not get an advantage over his brother, he would still be included in the twelve.

¹⁷ Perhaps, if Reuven had not acted as he did, Yosef would never have been sold, and the nation's descent to Egypt would have not occurred as it did (or not at all).

¹⁸ He also brings the opinion below that Reuven was concerned for his mother's honor.

¹⁹ See (Tel Aviv, 2014): 306-314. "כי קרוב אליך - ספר בראשית" in "כל האומר ראובן חטא".

²⁰ See opinions in Bavli Shabbat and the position below.

²¹ This is implied by Ramban's wording, "שבבלב ראובן יצועי בלהה". However, in his comments to Bereshit 49, he writes, "כי ראובן נתכוון לפסול את בלהה מאביו" which would suggest that Reuven did an act which would permanently invalidate Bilhah.

²² Ramban posits that Reuven was not worried about Leah or Zilpah bearing more children since Leah was likely already older, and Zilpah had perhaps already died.

²³ To support the possibility that Reuven's act was not simply sexual in nature, R. Hoffmann points to the episode's introduction: "וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן". These otherwise unnecessary words suggest that something of import was about to happen.

²⁴ Other examples where having relations with another's concubines constituted an act of rebellion (and an attempt to assert one's own authority) include Avner's sleeping with Rizpah b. Aya and Adoniyahu's request to sleep with Avishag.

²⁵ This motive might be supported by the fact that this is the only place where Bilhah is referred to as a concubine. In earlier stories she is described as a maidservant.

²⁶ It is possible that Reuven's attempted rejection of the sons of the concubines played some role in Yosef's allying himself with them ("וְהָיָה נָעַר אֶת בְּנֵי בִלְהָה וְאֶת בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה") in the preface to the story of the sale.

²⁷ Though he was biologically the firstborn, Reuven's lack of confidence in attaining the position was born out of both his knowledge that Leah was not Yaakov's preferred wife and the fact that in previous generations, being the oldest never ensured selection, as both Yishmael and Esav were rejected.

²⁸ Shimon and Levi act against their father in Shekhem, massacring the entire town. Yosef's dreams of grandeur include visions of his father bowing down to him. Finally, Yehuda initiates the sale of Yosef, despite knowing the pain it will cause his father.

- ²⁹ In his comments to Devarim 33:6 Ramban gives an alternative explanation that the verse is sharing that despite his sin, Yaakov did not banish Reuven, but still counted him among the tribes.
- ³⁰ After our story, Bilhah and Zilpah are never again referred to as maidservants or concubines, but are called "the wives of Yaakov" (see Bereshit 37:2).
- ³¹ See below, that according to this reading, had Reuven not sinned, perhaps there would have been only eight tribes.
- ³² In addition, if Bilhah had only concubine status at the time of the deed, Reuven's action would not have been considered adultery, and was somewhat less severe.
- ³³ Though the reader knows from Divrei HaYamim that Yosef was chosen in Reuven's stead, it is not clear when this became obvious to the brothers. In addition, even if they knew that he was to gain a double inheritance, this did not necessarily mean anything as far as continuing Avraham's legacy and receiving the Promised Land.
- ³⁴ Shimon and Levi were rejected due to their role in the Massacre of Shekhem.
- ³⁵ See "כי קרוב אליך - ספר בראשית" in "כל האומר ראובן חטא אינו אלא טועה" (Tel Aviv, 2014): 315-320.
- ³⁶ According to R. Shimon b. Yochai in Bereshit Rabbah (followed by Rashi), Reuven was aware of this because Yaakov had moved his bed from its usual place in Rachel's tent to Bilhah's tent (and not to Leah's tent as she might have hoped).
- ³⁷ See Dr. M. Emanuelli, ספר בראשית הסברים והארות (Tel Aviv, 1978): 469-470, who ascribes the same motives to Reuven but suggests that he actually had relations with Bilhah, as a simple reading of the text would imply. Reuven thereby prevented not just this one instance of his father hurting Leah's feelings, but ensured that Yaakov would never again sleep with Bilhah.
- ³⁸ See above note, that this prompts Dr. Emanuelli to offer a variation of this position in which Reuven does sleep with Bilhah.
- ³⁹ R"Y Medan proposes that Reuven did not just switch the mothers' beds, but actively stole Bilhah away from Yaakov's tent. As he did so, Yosef saw Reuven with Bilhah and came to the mistaken conclusion that Reuven took her with the intent of having relations with her. Yosef then shared this observation ("וַיֵּבֶא יוֹסֵף אֶת" with his father ("וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל") who had no reason to doubt Yosef's conclusion, that "וַיֵּלֶךְ" "רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה".
- ⁴⁰ See next bullet regarding why Yaakov never again had relations with Leah either.
- ⁴¹ Cf. Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bekhor Shor and Radak above.
- ⁴² This might be another reason that Dr. Emanuelli (see notes above) suggests that Reuven did actually have relations.
- ⁴³ This, in part, is what leads R. Medan to suggest that Reuven's actions did have repercussions; Yaakov accidentally slept with Leah while thinking she was Bilhah. This is already much more problematic.

