Re-imagining Issachar

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Issachar and Zebulun are said to have founded an economic model that has become popular within a segment of Orthodox Jewish society. The model is commonly viewed as follows: Issachar “bore the yoke of Torah,” devoting himself exclusively to study, while Zebulun was a successful global merchant. Recognizing the benefits and deficiencies of their single-track careers, they contracted to share the rewards, if not the burdens, of their respective interests. Each brother received goods produced by the labor of the other. Lacking time for constant study, Zebulun financed his brother’s cerebrally pious lifestyle and, in return, was guaranteed a portion of Issachar’s metaphysical reward. Issachar avoided traditional work but, thanks to Zebulun, he could still put food on the table.

The paradigm just described turns out to be based on a superficial and incomplete reading of Issachar’s image in the Bible, in the traditional biblical commentaries, and in the literature of the Sages.

As with many midrashic themes, the Sages derived the concept of an Issachar-Zebulun partnership from cryptic but suggestive biblical language. The relevant biblical passages are below. The first is from Jacob’s poetic blessings of the tribes; the second, from the blessings of Moses. The final passage is from an account of King David’s coronation in the Book of Chronicles (translations from the New JPS version):

Issachar is a strong-boned ass,
Crouching among the sheepfolds.
When he saw how good was security,

And how pleasant was the country,
He bent his shoulder to the burden,
And became a toiling serf (Gen. 49:14-15).

And of Zebulun he said:
Rejoice, Zebulun, on your journeys;
And, Issachar, in your tents (Deut. 33:18).

Of the Issacharites, men who knew how to interpret the signs of the times, to determine how Israel should act; their chiefs were two-hundred, and all their kinsmen followed them (I Chron. 12:33).

To celebrate David's ascension to the throne, Chronicles reports, nearly all the tribes of Israel sent large delegations of their best soldiers to Hebron. The Issacharite team was unique; instead of fighters, they sent a small cadre of two-hundred men who were expert in reading the "signs of the times." This expression is ambiguous, and the precise nature of the two-hundred Issacharites is something of a mystery. Jewish translations and commentaries provide multiple explanations, including suggestions that they were astrologers, astronomers, or gifted policy makers with broad expertise on national issues. The Midrash identified them as legislators who were experts on the Hebrew calendar, specifically, the rules of intercalation (i.e., when and how to add a thirteenth lunar month to the year). Having mastered this highly technical area of the law, the Issacharite council was charged with determining -- for an entire people -- the proper days to observe the biblical holidays. This must have been a daunting responsibility, as both religious observance and national unity depended on it.

The central biblical source-text on Issachar is our passage from Genesis. However, the metaphors in Jacob's blessing, while detailed and colorful, are hardly transparent. Jacob compares the tribe to a crouching, toiling donkey, who willingly bears some sort of burden as "a toiling serf (mas 'oved)"; but it is unclear from the text whom Issachar serves and of what his service consists. Rashi, following the Sages, defines Issachar's burden as Torah study, and he adds Zebulun's supporting role to his portrait. On the surface, Rashi appears to promote the current paradigm, in which Zebulun goes to work and earns a living while Issachar "sits and learns." Read carefully, however, Rashi's description is nuanced and strikingly different from that paradigm.

The popular model assumes that by virtue of his single-minded dedication to Torah study, Issachar had a right to Zebulun's financial support. But Rashi himself underlines Issachar's responsibilities, rather than his privileges, and says nothing

at all about Issachar's rights to external subsidies. As a serf who "bent his shoulder to the burden," Issachar owed specific services, not only to his patron but, in Rashi's words, to "all of his Israelite kinsmen." For the privilege (not the right) of Zebulun's investment, Issachar was obligated, according to Rashi, "to provide [the nation of Israel] with religious instruction and with [decisions on] the intercalation of the calendar," i.e., setting the calendar and the holidays. Rashi's model essentially depicts Issachar as a utility, providing a real, if spiritual, commodity to the nation. Issachar's scholarship was only a means to satisfy the Jewish people's religious and cultural needs; it was not as an end in itself.

In Rashi's portrayal, as it happens, Issachar also brought a physical commodity to his partnership with Zebulun. On the words "he saw how good was security (va-yar menuha ki tov)," Rashi cites the view of the midrash and Onkelos that Issachar's land produced superior fruit, allowing him to spend minimal time at work in the orchard. A related midrashic opinion, not cited by Rashi, takes the expression "when he saw . . . how pleasant was the country" at face value; "this refers to his land," in the words of an alternate view (yesh omrim) in the midrash. But even Rashi's conception of Issachar includes an element of real labor. Rather than a completely passive recipient of charitable gifts from Zebulun, Issachar grew his own fruit and utilized his merchant brother to bring them to market. On at least some days, we would find Rashi's Issachar in the orchard, rather than the beit midrash.

Other exegetes on the pages of Mikraot Gedolot offer alternative views of Issachar that are worth considering in contrast to the currently popular model. Rashbam, following the midrashic thread mentioned previously, portrays Issachar as a farmer rather than a scholar. Seeing "how pleasant was the country," Issachar preferred an agrarian lifestyle, became highly successful and wealthy, but was also heavily taxed by the Israelite kings in the form of tithes from his vast produce. Much more harshly, Ibn Ezra suggests the Issacharites "lacked courage" and were thus assessed a draft-dodging fine or, to avoid conquest, they paid protection money to the surrounding powers. Ibn Ezra's portrait of a rather emasculated Issachar appears to be inspired by our passage in Chronicles; if they were able to fight, why would Issachar not send soldiers to King David's inauguration, like the other tribes? (Interestingly, Onkelos portrays Issachar in the very opposite light. Following another midrash, he says that Issachar achieved extraordinary military success against his enemies, turning them into "toiling serfs.") For the Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, Issachar was never dependent on the financial support of any other tribe. In fact, the reality was just the opposite; by establishing a mostly self-serving economy, Issachar -- not Zebulun -- was in debt

to his brothers. His books were regularly audited and he was forced to give up a substantial percentage of profits to the national treasury.

Moses' two-word blessing to Issachar is even more mysterious than Jacob's. How should we interpret a blessing of "rejoicing in tents"? The peshat (natural) approach, taken by several traditional commentaries, is straightforward and parallel to the previously cited explanations of Jacob's blessing. Represented by tents, the Issacharites were shepherds and farmers, in contrast to the merchant-marine Zebulunites. Again, midrashic exegesis takes a different approach. The Sages read "tents" as a symbol of Torah study; recall that Jacob is also called a "dweller in tents" (Gen. 25:27). Like Jacob's, Issachar's "tents" were taken to mean "tents of Torah study," i.e. batei midrash, financially maintained by Zebulun's profits. One may be tempted to say that the midrashic approach supersedes the natural one, and that in this case the popular Issachar-Zebulun model is in perfect agreement with the midrash. But peshat and derash are both legitimate and religiously significant layers of biblical interpretation. I believe that the Sages did not preclude the idea of Issachar being blessed with agricultural fruitfulness; rather, they added the additional element of scholarship to the more obvious peshat interpretation. When we imagine Issachar, we may picture both.

One additional biblical reference to Issachar must be included in this discussion. From Deborah's Song in the book of Judges, we get a view of Issachar's character during a period of national crisis:

And Issachar's chiefs were with Deborah;
As Barak, so was Issachar --
Rushing after him into the valley.
Among the clans of Reuben
Were great decisions of heart.
Why did you stay among the sheepfolds
And listen as they pipe for the flocks?
Among the clans of Reuben
Were great searchings of heart! (Judges 5:15-16)

Perhaps Ibn Ezra was correct and the Issacharites would have made poor soldiers. Still, when Barak and Deborah led Naphtali and Zebulun in battle against Sisera, Issachar enlisted voluntarily and served courageously. The neighboring tribe of Reuben, in contrast, sat out the war. The Reubenites themselves, of course, believed that their lofty contributions were necessary and sufficient: "Among the clans of Reuben were great decisions of heart," Deborah sang with bitterness and sarcasm. After all, the Reubenites were the (self-appointed) thought leaders of

Israel, who could count on thousands of their flock to attend spirited rallies at a moment's notice. At their conferences, they had "great searchings of heart," analyzing the issues of the day from all possible sides. But Reuben's meetings and pronouncements were irrelevant to the public, produced no meaningful action, and only highlighted Reuben's isolation; in the end, they "stayed among the sheepfolds," (bein ha-mishpetayim; ironically, the very same expression Jacob used with respect to Issachar) remaining on the nation's periphery. In an earlier era, Reuben had fought at the front lines with Joshua, to pay his debt for the patrimony Moses granted him east of the Jordan. But now, in the age of the Judges, the Reubenites were secure in remote villages far from the Canaanite armies, and they saw no personal gain from joining Barak's war. Issachar, in stark contrast, remained empathetic to their brothers, and fought alongside them when needed.

Orthodox Judaism promotes neither a single religious archetype, nor an ideal "Torah personality," nor a monolithic economic theory. Over the centuries, our religion has accommodated multiple paradigms for all aspects of life. There are many great and varied figures in our history and in our literature from whom we can draw inspiration. The Issachar most of us know -- the full-time scholar -- was never held up by our Torah or our Sages as the one and only model of authentic Jewish living. His image has taken on other, no less ideal, forms in biblical and rabbinic tradition, including that of a man who loves to work the soil under his feet and returns home daily soaked in the sweat of physical labor. That Issachar is no less a ben Torah than the one who has never left the beit midrash. With a sense of responsibility stretching beyond his own borders, the Issachar we have described is the one the Jewish people can look to for support and for leadership, on and off the battlefield. It is time to rethink our fixation on the two-dimensional Issachar, to the exclusion of all others. The others, on closer examination, may be even more inspiring.