

# Reclaiming Uncle Levi: Facing Homegrown Misanthrop y

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Text and the City | VaYechi 2015

For a few weeks now I've been meaning to write about my ancestor, Levi. The mythical father of my own tribe of Levites, he's been rearing his head a lot lately. Together with his brother, Shimon, Levi is the first Child of Monotheism who unsheathed the indiscriminate sword of vengeance. In the [killing of all the men of Shechem](#), Levi is the mascot of twisting the demand for justice and security into an isolationist and vengeful approach. He trademarked the claim, in avenging the rape of his sister Dina, that deceit and butchery are justified in the name of brotherly solidarity ("[Should our sister then be treated like a whore?](#)"). Together, Levi and Shimon hold the patent on turning Abraham's covenant into a veil for violence.

And they've been accruing quite a lot of royalties lately. Each week Levi's fingerprints appear on more and more news stories: in the religiously justified violence and extremism from various children of Abraham, but also in the increasingly [isolationist approach of populist politicians](#). You know it's a Levite isolationism when it condones butchering in distant camps while keeping the home camp closed and pure... Finally, for those following [the latest wedding fashions in extreme-right-wing Israel](#), in the appalling – but not unfamiliar – call for revenge and violence from my own relatives.

As I've been trying to figure out what I can do amid this tidal wave, I've been thinking about Levi's father, Jacob. Grandpa Jack's weak response to his children's misdeeds is infamous. First, his

lack of response upon Dina's rape by Shechem, then his tacit approval of Levi and Shimon's request that all of Shechem's town circumcise themselves, and finally his repudiation of their actions, which is focused on the political ramifications with would-be allies and neighbors ("*You make me reek among the settled-folk of this land!*"), and not confronting the actual violence and lying involved.

At the end of his life, from the safety of his deathbed, he returns to Levi and Shimon's actions. In the midst of this week's Torah portion's blessings to all his other children, Jacob issues the following curse:

*Shim'on and Levi - such brothers.  
Wrangling weapons are their ties-of-kinship!  
To their council may my being never come,  
In their intimacy may my person never unite!  
For in their anger they kill men,  
In their self-will they maim bulls.  
Damned be their anger, that it is so fierce!  
Their fury, that is so harsh!  
I will split them up among Jacob,  
I will scatter them throughout Israel. ([Genesis 49:5-7](#))*

שִׁמְעוֹן וְלֵוִי – אֲחָיִם! כְּלֵי חֶמְסִים מְכַרְתִּיהֶם. בְּסֹדֶם אֵל תְּבֹא נַפְשִׁי, בְּקִהְלָם אֵל תִּסַּד כְּבֹדִי. כִּי בְאַפָּם הִרְגוּ אִישׁ,  
וּבְרִצְנָם עִקְרוּ שׂוֹר. אֲרוּר אַפָּם כִּי עָזוּ! וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשָׁתָהּ! אֲחַלְקֶם בְּנִעְלָב וְאֶפְיָצֵם בְּיִשְׁרָאֵל

*A Star of David and the Hebrew word 'Revenge' are spray-painted on the walls of a Palestinian home which was burned down by arsonists on July 31, 2015 in the Palestinian village of Duma, near Nablus (Zacahria Sadeh/Rabbis for Human Rights)*

[Nachmanides](#) explains that Jacob's resounding curse functionally cuts them out of Abraham's inheritance, giving Shimon and Levi no independent share in the land of Israel (probably reflecting the fact that neither tribe had their own land in Biblical Israel). They are to be kept scattered among their brothers due to their "fierce anger", "harsh fury", and their "*Hamas*"-like ways ("Hamas" חַמָּס in Hebrew, "deceitful wronging", is the same verb used to describe the crimes of the generation of the Flood). For they "caused the name of God himself to be desecrated as people will claim that a prophet of God caused such *hamas* and robbery".

But Nachmanides also zeroes in on the first word of the curse: Brothers. אחים:

*"[Simon and Levi – Brothers](#)" – Some understood this as Jacob at first seemingly giving them credit, describing them as brothers to the core, believers in fraternity. For their hearts were passionate over the fate of their sister.*

I imagine Shimon and Levi's ears perking up as they hear their father honor them with the title which they self-identify with so strongly. "Yes, we are brothers indeed. In a family where solidarity fell apart time and again – we were the loyal ones, weren't we?" But then his compliment turns into repudiation: if that is brotherhood, may my legacy have nothing to do with it; may my being never become associated with this version of fraternal intimacy.

Today, I hear Jacob's curse as a desperate plea. Please, may these powers that I have unleashed into the world not take over what the name of Jacob/Israel will become. May the family that I fathered not become smothered in brotherly fundamentalism. May such "Brotherhood" (Islamic, Jewish, Christian, GOP, DNC) not become synonymous with the project of Abraham. Jacob's curse is not a prescribed destiny, it is a charge to the rest of his children: make sure that Levi and Shimon's ways do not come to define what being a Child of Israel means. In a twist, he turns the fraternal charge from one of violent protectionism and vengeance into one of watchful moderation, engaged repudiation, brotherly

intervention to mediate the fury and anger when they arise.

Why do I return to Levi in confronting these dangerous, disgusting and disheartening trends? Precisely because Levi is my relative, he's my backyard, the symbol of homegrown extremism. Framing this violence as coming from my own family is a way of taking responsibility for it. Not liability, but responsibility. Levi symbolizes the challenge of confronting homegrown hatred and homegrown violence.

So much of the discourse in response to recent events has focused on *othering* those we disagree with, *distancing* ourselves from any relationship with those who take the name of our religion/nation/story in vain and desecration. This discourse ignores the fact that there are values at the core of this hatred that must be engaged and countered. Hiding behind words such as "radicalization", "fundamentalism" or "populism" is a way of creating a chasm between ourselves and those "others", and in so doing washing our own hands from any association. Levi reminds me that what we must repudiate while engaging. Study the motivations and implications, then truly rival their ideology, from up close and personal. Not let them claim the values, dreams and names which are actually our inheritance. Not let them define what Jacob's path is in our eyes.

As one Bronfman Fellow said to me this week at the end of our joint Mifgash Shabbaton of Israeli and American Bronfmanim: This weekend I understood how for my parents and grandparents the mission statement of the Jewish People was "*I am seeking for my brothers*". In response to the Holocaust, the plight of Soviet Jewry, the insecurity of Israel, they felt that fraternity called upon them to fight for Jews against their joint enemies. But today we live in the opposite reality, not of Jewish disempowerment, but in deep Jewish privilege and power. For me, she said, "*I am seeking my brothers*" means that I must not be silent - for my brothers faces have changed. I must seek them out and call them out – and I must do it first, for they are my brothers.



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