

Fragmentation of a Merchant's Mind (Vayechi)

Merchants have no country. The mere spot they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gains. -Thomas Jefferson

After a very long and tumultuous life, the patriarch Jacob is on his deathbed. He convenes his twelve sons and proceeds to give them his last words which include cryptic personalized prophecies and blessings.

For his ninth son, Zevulun, Jacob declares the following:

“Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a shore for ships, and his flank shall be upon Zidon.” Genesis 49:13

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the *Kli Yakar* (1550-1619) states the maxim, based on this verse, that the Tribe of Zevulun was destined to become merchants, sailing to far-off destinations to make a living. Furthermore, he states the famous partnership that existed between the Tribe of Zevulun and the Tribe of Yissachar; the Tribe of Yissachar became a bastion of Torah scholars, dedicating themselves exclusively to full-time study, enabled only by the generous support of Zevulun.

However, according to the *Kli Yakar*, Jacob's prophecy contains a warning as well. The verse has Zevulun in three distinct places. Zevulun shall live in one place ('shore of the sea'), travel to a second place to conduct business ('shore for ships'), and his merchandise will be in a third place ('Zidon' – a commercial center of the ancient near east). The *Kli Yakar* explains that having one's mind on three (or more) geographic locations fragments the mind, reduces performance, and increases anxiety.

He thus claims that Yissachar has a better quality of life and peace of mind. Nonetheless, the reward of Zevulun is greater due to their support of their Torah-studying brothers, hence their being placed ahead of Yissachar in the blessings.

May those merchants amongst us enjoy greater peace of mind and less fragmentation, whether mental or geographical and may those blessed with the portion of Yissachar appreciate the sacrifice.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To British actor, Stephen Fry, on his important and courageous message of Jewish pride.