

Shimon and Levi are brothers. (49:5)

In the context of the *pasuk*, the word “*achim*,” which is usually translated as “brothers,” is interpreted as “comrades.” Shimon and Levi are paired together as comrades

in arms, who conspired together to commit a violent act against the people of Shechem. From the fact that Yaakov calls them “*achim*,” we may infer that he viewed them as equals, neither one having any distinction over the other. Interestingly, this equality did not last very long. In the end, they went different ways. Levi went to the extreme right, serving as the symbol of *Torah*. Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, the leaders who shepherded *Am Yisrael* during its formative years, are descendants of Levi. Shimon’s descendants had a derogatory reputation. Zimri, who openly defied Moshe and cohabited with a pagan princess, initiated the rebellion that was the cause of the deaths of twenty-four thousand Jews. It was Pinchas, a descendant of Levi, who had the zealous response which quelled the ensuing plague.

The tribe of Shimon was small in number, because many of them perished as a result of their sins. *Shevet* Levi’s numbers were also small, but that was due to their constant exposure to the sanctity of the *Aron Hakodesh*. Neither received an official portion in *Eretz Yisrael*. The reason for the individual exclusion of each, however, was different. Levi did not inherit a portion because Hashem is considered to be his portion. He is to be totally dedicated to the sacred, not involving himself in the mundane. Shimon, on the other hand, did not receive land as a punishment for his transgression.

Where did they differ? How did two brothers, seemingly equal in nature and temperament, uniform in their attitude and observance, separate and go in different directions? **Horav Shimon Schwab, zl**, suggests that while Yaakov apparently rebuked both brothers equally, Levi applied himself, corrected his error and adjusted his attitude considerably. He devoted himself whole-heartedly to the study and dissemination of *Torah*. The two brothers started out the same way. One, however, listened and accepted the mussar - reproach - that he received, to a greater degree. Levi listened to the point that his descendant, zealous for the honor of Hashem, killed the prince of the tribe of Shimon as he was committing a repugnant act. It is not one’s sin that destroys an individual as much as his unwillingness to correct and mend his ways. One’s character is reflected most deeply in his sincere *teshuvah*.