

Parashat Vayigash 5773, 2012:

Understanding Yehudah's Greatness

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya, and in honor of the engagement of Tanya Wertentheil to Natan Farber.

Yehudah ben Yaakov and Leah, the fourth-born son of the *shiftei kah* (Tribes of Hashem), was a multidimensional individual to whom many of us can relate. Like all other great Torah personalities, he was truly human, in that he was not perfect. Nevertheless, and this is perhaps the essential link between Yehudah and ourselves, he demonstrated the potential for, and actualization of, tremendous spiritual growth and leadership throughout the course of his life. Yehudah's ability to overcome his faults was, perhaps, the major factor in his achieving *malchut* (kingship).

Tosefta Berachot, 4:17-18 asks: “*Mipnei mah zachah Yehudah l'malchut?*” (“Why did Yehudah merit kingship?”) no less than four times. It responds with three different answers:

1. Because he admitted his culpability in reference to his daughter-in-law Tamar (*Sefer Bereishit* 38:26)
2. Because he saved his brother Yosef from death (*Sefer Bereishit* 37:26)
3. Because of his humility (*Sefer Bereishit* 42:33)

Let us analyze each one of these reasons for Yehudah's ascendancy to kingship, based upon some seminal passages that appear in the Midrashic Literature.

The Incident of Yehudah and Tamar

Midrash Shemot Rabbah 30:19 asks a parallel question to that found in the above-quoted *Tosefta*: “Why did the Holy One Blessed be He give the crown to Yehudah?” It notes that he was not the only heroic and powerful figure among the brothers. Certainly Shimon, Levi, and the other brothers were as well. The reason offered in the Midrash is that he “issued an honest halachic decision in reference to Tamar,” i.e., he found her innocent. As the Midrash notes, this was no small matter:

The case of Tamar came before him and he initially declared that she should die by fire for her seemingly licentious behavior. Subsequently, he declared her to be innocent because he found contradictory evidence of her innocence [even though it directly implicated him in the matter.] What exactly transpired? Yitzhak and Yaakov were sitting in front of him, and all of his brothers surrounded him. At that point, [even though he was, in fact, the father of Tamar’s unborn children and therefore about to be publicly embarrassed] he recognized the truth of Hashem’s presence, stated the truth, and declared: “She is more righteous than I am!” As a result, the Holy One Blessed be He designated him as the monarch [for all time].

Imagine the pressure that Yehudah must have felt. His holy and beloved grandfather and father were watching him render judgment, as were all his brothers. By declaring Tamar innocent, he was forced to reveal exactly what took place between them. By doing so, Yehudah truly answered to a higher authority, and thereby transformed and transcended himself to become the authentic leader of the Jewish people. In short, Yehudah’s singular pursuit of truth, even when it necessitated his total and complete embarrassment before his entire family, earned him the kingship of our people for all time.

Yehudah as Yosef's Savior

Yehudah's act of saving Yosef's life was, in reality, an act of *pesharah*, of arbitration, compromise and concession. As the verses in *Sefer Bereishit* 37 (19-27) make crystal clear, the brothers desperately wanted to kill Yosef. They surely would have done so without Yehudah's bold intervention:

So they said one to the other, "Behold, that dreamer is coming. So now, let us kill him, and we will cast him into one of the pits, and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him,' and we will see what will become of his dreams." But Reuben heard, and he saved him from their hand[s], and he said, "Let us not deal him a deadly blow." And Reuben said to them, "Do not shed blood! Cast him into this pit, which is in the desert, but do not lay a hand upon him," in order to save him from their hand[s], to return him to his father. Now it came to pass when Joseph came to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his shirt, of the fine woolen coat which was upon him. And they took him and cast him into the pit; now the pit was empty - there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat a meal, and they lifted their eyes and saw, and behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spices, balm, and lotus, going to take [it] down to Egypt. And Judah said to his brothers, "What is the gain if we slay our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but our hand shall not be upon him, for he is our brother, our flesh." And his brothers hearkened. (This, and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The *Midrash Tanchumah, Ki Tisa: II*, tells the story behind the story in the following manner:

So they said one to the other, "Behold, that dreamer is coming. So now, let us kill him..." The tossed him into the pit and they said: "Let us eat and drink and afterwards we will take him out and we will kill him." They ate and they drank and they prepared to say Grace After Meals. Yehudah said to them: "We want to kill someone and we are going to bless our G-d! We are not blessing [Him], instead we are blaspheming [Him!]...Let us go [instead] and sell him to the Arabs"

Yehudah's valiant act of *pesharah* is considered, according to the halachically-accepted opinion in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 6b, to be highly meritorious:

R. Judah b. Korha says: Settlement by arbitration is a meritorious act, for it is written, "Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates." [*Sefer Zechariah* 8:16] Surely where there is strict justice there is no peace, and where there is peace, there is no strict justice! But what is that kind of justice with which peace abides? — We must say: Arbitration. So it was in the case of David, as we read, "And David executed justice and righteousness [charity] towards all his people." [*Sefer Shmuel* II, 8:15]. Surely where

there is strict justice there is no charity, and where there is charity, there is no justice!
But what is the kind of justice with which abides charity? — We must say: Arbitration.
(Translation, Soncino Talmud)

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), explained the superiority of *pesharah* over strict judgment in the following fashion:

In *pesharah*, however, social harmony is the primary concern of the *dayyan* [judge]. The fine points of the law and the determination of precise facts are of secondary importance. The goal is not to be juridically astute but to be socially healing. The psychology of the contenders, their socio-economic status and values, as well as the general temper of society, are the primary ingredients employed in the *pesharah* process. These considerations are evaluated within the broad halachic parameters of the *Hoshen Mishpat* [section of the Code of Jewish Law that deals with judges and the legal process], and the final resolution of the conflict is a delicate and sensitive blending of both objective legal norms and subjective humanistic goals. For this reason, *pesharah* is the preferred alternative. (Rabbi Abraham Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, Volume I, page 54)

In light of the Rav's analysis, it is little wonder that Yehudah's heroic and righteous act of *pesharah* was so often emulated by the greatest of all of our kings, *David Hamelech* (King David).

Yehudah's Humility

In Judaism's view, the true leader places his or her needs second to those of the people he or she represents, and paradoxically, remains subservient in word and deed to the community, the *klal*, that he or she leads. Yehudah demonstrated this manner of humility in both this week's and last week's *parshiot*. At the end of *Parashat Miketz*, the Torah relates the brothers' words to Yosef in light of their reaction to the discovery of the regent's royal cup in Binyamin's sack. Significantly, the spokesman is none other than Yehudah: "And Judah said, "What shall we say to my master? What shall we speak, and how shall we exonerate ourselves? G-d has found your servants' iniquity in both we and the one in whose possession the goblet has been found." (44:16) Herein, Yehudah calls

all of the brothers Yosef's servants. In the beginning of our *parasha*, however, he labels himself a servant four times before Yosef:

Then Judah approached him and said, "Please, my lord, let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh." For your servant assumed responsibility for the boy from my father, saying, "If I do not bring him to you, I will have sinned against my father forever." So now, please let your servant stay instead of the boy as a slave to my lord, and may the boy go up with his brothers. (44:18, 32-33)

Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 13:3, focuses upon Yehudah's humility (*anivut*), as demonstrated in these verses, and declares this to be the cause of his tribe's subsequent position of glory and honor:

Rabbi Berechyah the Kohan, the son of Rabi, said in the name of Rabbi Levi: "The Holy One Blessed be He said: 'Yehudah, since you have lowered yourself before your younger brother [in order to rescue him from servitude,] when the *Mishkan* (portable Sanctuary in the desert) will be erected and all of the tribes will come to offer [sacrifices]; there will be no tribe that will offer before you. Rather, they will all demonstrate respect before you and you will have [the honor] of being the first to bring [the sacrifices].'" Therefore the Torah states: "And the one [of the tribal princes] who brought sacrifices on the first day... from the tribe of Yehudah..."

Anivut, therefore, emerges as one of Yehudah's outstanding qualities, and an ethical characteristic that made him particularly suited to receive the mantle of kingship for all time.

In summary, Yehudah represented three major qualities that are fundamental for true Jewish leadership:

1. He pursued *emet*, truth, regardless of the personal consequences that might obtain.
2. He was a master of compromise and arbitration (*pesharah*).
3. He was humble and grew to become a *baal anivut* (a master of humility).

From time immemorial we have been called *Yehudim* (Jews) after Yehudah, the progenitor of nearly all Jewish kings. May we be *zocheh* (merit) to emulate the qualities

that he personified: *emet*, *pesharah*, and *anivut*. By achieving this lofty goal, with Hashem's help, may we hasten the coming of Yehudah's most beloved heir, *Mashiach Tzidkeinu*, the Righteous Messiah. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My **new** audio *shiurim* for Women on *Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.

*** Interested in 21st Century Jewish Education? See my new blog:
<http://21stcenturyjewisheducation>