

Parashat Vayigash, 5779, 2018:

## *Yehudah, Humility and Kingship*

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 bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our Sages, in *Tosefta Berachot* 4:17-18, ask a very fundamental question: “Why did Yehudah merit kingship?” After all, each of the brothers was great in his own way; why, then, was Yehudah and his tribe permanently given the mantel of leadership? One answer offered by the Tosefta is, “Because of his humility (*anivut*).” This is demonstrated in *Sefer Bereishit* 44:18, 32-33, wherein Yehudah calls himself a “servant” no less than four times, and even offers to become Yosef’s slave – all in an effort to save Benjamin from that role:

Then Judah approached him [Yosef] 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.” (This, and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:3 focuses upon Yehudah’s *anivut*, as reflected in these verses, and declares this to be the rationale for 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...’” (Translation and brackets my own)

We live in an age wherein arrogance (*ga'avah*) is the rule, and humility is the exception. In truth,

the single greatest barrier to authentic *anivut* is *ga'avah*, since it blinds us to the consequences of our actions and beguiles us into believing we are superior to others. As such, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his famous *Iggeret HaRamban (Letter of the Ramban)*, strongly warns us against this negative *middah* (character trait): “And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the Kingship of Hashem, because he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written, ‘Hashem reigns, He wears clothes of pride.’” (*Sefer Tehillim* 93:1). Next, the Ramban notes that whether it is wealth, honor or wisdom – everything is a gift from the Almighty:

Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? Hashem makes one poor or rich (*Sefer Shmuel* I:2:7). Is it because of honor? It belongs to Hashem, as we read, “Wealth and honor come from You.” (*Divrei Hayamim* I:29:12) So how could one adorn himself with Hashem's honor? And one who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that Hashem “takes away the speech of assured men and reasoning from the sages.” (*Sefer Iyov* 12:20) So we see that everyone is the same before Hashem, since with His anger He lowers the proud and when He wishes He raises the low. (Translation, <http://www.pirchei.co.il/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>)

Herein the Ramban is teaching us that greatness comes from G-d, and G-d alone. How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of *ga'avah*, and, like Yehudah, live lives infused with *anivut*? We are fortunate that the Ramban addresses this fundamental question:

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His *Schechinah* [Divine Presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a slave standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master. (Ibid.)

In short, when we truly feel ourselves to be in G-d's presence, we naturally act with humility before Him – and with restraint and dignity toward others. In my estimation, Yehudah had an extremely powerful sense of the Almighty's presence in his life, and very often felt the gentle “touch” of the *Schechinah* upon his shoulder. As such, *anivut* came quite naturally to him. Little wonder, then, that his descendant and future king of Israel, *Dovid HaMelech* (King David), would one day

proclaim to the world: “*Sheviti Hashem l’negdi tamid!*” (“I have placed the L-rd before me constantly...,” *Sefer Tehillim* 16:8)

With Hashem’s help, may each of us try to emulate Yehudah and recognize the Almighty’s unceasing presence in our lives, so that we, too, may reject *ga’avah*, embrace *anivut*, and act with abiding respect toward each other. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

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 <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.