

Yehuda's Finest Hour

Yehuda, from whom we all derive our national identity as *yehudim*, is cast in a split screen narrative with Yosef starting in Genesis Chapter 37. The text of the Torah toggles back and forth between Yosef's travails in Egypt and Yehuda's own tragic life, all leading to the *denouement* at the beginning of our sedra, when Yehuda confronts Yosef, and literally demands mercy for Binyamin. It is instructive to try and trace the arc of Yehuda's character through the final thirteen chapters of Sefer Bereishit.

In truth, the analysis really has to begin with Yehuda's older brothers. In different ways, Yehuda's three elders have disqualified themselves from leadership of the family. Reuven's inappropriate activity with one of Yaakov's wives, coupled with Shimon and Levi's massacre of Shechem, have effectively invalidated them from leadership. Yehuda is the natural choice.

Yet, in his first opportunity to demonstrate clear leadership and moral authority, Yehuda sins grievously. He suggests the sale of Yosef rather than ensuring Yosef was returned to his father. For this, our Sages note, the brothers would later excommunicate him, noting that he was their leader and should have directed them to a more noble course of action.

In his second opportunity to act with moral courage, Yehuda fails once again, and neglects the needs of his daughter in law Tamar. Following the tragic death of his own sons, Yehuda simply exiles Tamar, with no regard for her personhood or future.

The turning point comes when Yehuda, in a public setting, owns up to being the father of Tamar's unborn child (who turn out to be twins). Yehuda has demonstrated the capacity to take responsibility for himself. Yet, this is not yet a qualification for leadership, which, in essence, is the courage to take responsibility for *others*.

The Binyamin episode provides Yehuda with precisely such an opportunity. Yehuda introduces the singular language of *arvut*, of halakhic and moral responsibility for Binyamin. If he failed to protect Rachel's eldest when he had the chance, he will not make the same mistake twice. He assures his father that he will not let anything happen to Binyamin, אנכי אערבנו מידי, תבקשנו אם לא הביאותיו לפניך והצגתיו לפניך וחטאתי לך כל הימים. As noted by our Sages, Yehuda is prepared to stake his entire spiritual future on his ability to successfully protect Binyamin.

When things go amiss, and Binyamin is alleged to have stolen Yosef's silver goblet, Yehuda seizes the moment he had so badly fumbled twenty two years earlier. The Torah does not say that the brothers returned to the house of Yosef, but ויבא יהודה ואחיו ביתה יוסף. Yehuda pleads with Yosef, and then, confronts him, offering himself as a slave to save his brother. Yosef, so deeply moved by Yehuda's personal transformation, redemption of character, from the orchestrator of his sale two decades before to the heroic protector of Binyamin, finally breaks down, and reveals himself to his brothers.

Rarely does life afford us the opportunity to directly correct a moral failing of the magnitude of the total abandonment of one's brother. In this sense, Yehuda was fortunate indeed. Yet, the fact that Yehuda had prepared himself for that moment, had undertaken the painful personal steps to live up to his name, literally meaning to admit or confess the truth, is entirely to his credit. When Binyamin's life was on the line, Yehuda was ready to act with great moral courage, to lead by taking responsibility for his brother. It was his finest hour.