

Yehuda's Finest Hour

R. Daniel Fridman

VaYigash

Yehuda, from whom we all derive our national identity as *yehudim*, is cast in a 'split screen' narrative with Yosef starting in Bereishit Chapter 38. The text of the Torah toggles back and forth between Yosef's travail in Egypt and Yehuda's own tragic life. The language of the Torah in drawing our attention to the parallel journeys is unmistakable: *va'yered Yehuda me'et echav* is matched by the opening verse of the next chapter, *V'Yosef hurad Mitzraimah*. The unfolding story of Yehuda and Yosef leads to the *denouement* at the beginning of our sedra, when Yehuda confronts Yosef, and literally demands mercy for Binyamin. It is instructive to trace the arc of Yehuda's character through the final thirteen chapters of Sefer Bereishit.

In truth, the analysis begins 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, and he is recognized by his brothers, and by his father, as such.

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 excommunicate him, noting that he was their leader and should have directed them to a more noble course of action.

The Yehuda of *mechirat Yosef* is a largely transactional figure. He formulates his argument in favor of selling Yosef with the term "ma betza", as Onkelos renders, *ma mammon*, what have we to gain from killing our brother? We can rid ourselves of this problem, Yehuda contends, in a way that enables us to profit. In fairness, in the summation of his proposal, Yehuda does note that killing Yosef would be morally objectionable, *ki acheinu vesarenu hu*. And yet, one cannot help but be astounded by the dissonance in Yehuda's own words: if one truly believes that a brother is indeed a brother, of one's own flesh, is selling him into slavery, a *de facto* death sentence, any less morally objectionable?

The scope of Yehuda's failure is highlighted by Reuven's own actions in the context of the sale. The Torah tells us that Reuven pleaded with his brothers not to lynch Yosef, as they were about to do, with the specific intent, "*l'ma'an hatzil oto mi'yadam, la'hashivo el aviv*." Reuven's noble intent was two-fold: first, he recognized the need to save Yosef, *l'hatzilo*. Second, despite the extent to which Yosef

had displaced Reuven as the natural bechor¹, Reuven was determined to restore Yosef to his father, *l'hashivo el aviv*. This is all the more impressive given that it was Yaakov's singular relationship with Yosef which triggered the brothers' enmity, jealousy, and even hatred.

Yehuda's transactional response, *ma betza*, pales in comparison with Reuven's noble attempt. Even more tragically, according to the mainstream view in the commentaries², that it was in fact the brothers' who, embracing Yehuda's crass transactionalism, sold Yosef, the unspeakable reality is that Yosef would have been saved by Reuven had Yehuda never said a word. The brothers' would have continued to eat their meal, every bit as cruel as it sounds, and Reuven would have saved Yosef, and his father, from over two decades of horrific suffering.

II.

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. Whether or not one believes that Yehuda eventually intended to marry off Tamar to Shelah, his third son, as Ramban contends contra Rashi, his treatment of her in the interim, despite the enormity of her suffering, and the desperate nature of her plight, is one of seemingly complete apathy.

The details of the entire chapter loom large for Yehuda's future, and his redemption. To begin with, Yehuda's eldest, Er, as Chazal explain, is punished with death for degrading his wife, and objectifying her beauty. While Tamar, naturally, yearns for a child, Er thinks in transactional terms, and notes that pregnancy might come at the expense, at least in his own mind, of his own personal pleasure.

Similarly, Onan, Yehuda's second son, when presented with the opportunity to perform the pre-Sinaitic version of yibbum, thinks in purely transactional terms. The Torah notes, *va'yeda Onan ki lo lo yihiyeh ha'zara*, and this awareness that a child would be for deceased brother's legacy, as opposed to his own, drives Onan to repeat the same offense as his brother, albeit for a different reason. Onan is also a wholly transactional figure, who does not see any legitimate reason to carry on his brother's legacy, with no clear benefit to himself. Of course, one need hardly wonder how these brothers developed such a transactional mentality.

In the ensuing narrative, Yehuda's own initial interactions with Tamar are, of course, entirely transactional. Yehuda approaches Tamar with a purely transactional proposal, *hava na avo elayich*, and

¹ See Talmud Bavli Berachot 7b.

² Contra Rashbam, who asserts, persuasively, that it was in fact the midyanim who pulled Yosef from the pit and sold him before the brothers had the opportunity to do so.

what could only be described as a marketplace discussion ensues, involving arrangement of payment, and collateral, the *eravon*.

The critical turning point in Yehuda's life, ironically, emerges from this most transactional of all symbols, the *eravon* itself. As the *eravon* mysteriously disappears, along with the erstwhile *kedesha*, Yehuda first only considers himself, noting to his friend Chira that an ongoing search for his signet, staff and petil would bring shame to him. And yet, when the *eravon* reappears, just before Yehuda is set to have Tamar executed for allegedly betraying her commitment to the family, Yehuda is forced to reconsider not only his behavior towards Tamar, but of course, the underlying mentality.

In a sign of true greatness, Yehuda acknowledges not only Tamar's innocence, but his own moral failure: *tzadkah mimeni, ki al ken lo nitatiba l'shelah beni*. Yehuda recognizes that the *eravon* that has been missing from his life is not merely the threefold collateral he presented Tamar, but, far more significantly, the sense of *areyvut*, of fraternity, of mutuality, of consideration, that has been so sorely absent from his judgments. *Areyvut* is the very antithesis of transactionalism, heretofore Yehuda's guiding principle. It demands that we all deeply consider the needs of the other, be it Yosef, Yaakov, Tamar, or anyone else.

III.

Yosef's parallel descent to Egypt, providentially, provides Yehuda with the rarest of gifts in life: an opportunity for redemption. When Yaakov hesitates, with the family on the brink of starvation, to send Binyamin with the brothers on a desperate mission to retrieve sustenance and recover Shimon, Yehuda introduces the singular language of *areyvut*, of halakhic and moral responsibility for Binyamin, *anochi e'ervenu mi'yadi tevakshenu*. If Yehuda failed to protect Rachel's eldest son when he had the chance, he would not make the same mistake twice. As noted by our Sages, Yehuda is prepared to stake his entire spiritual future on his ability to successfully protect Binyamin.

Yaakov is immediately moved by the apparent change in Yehuda, *im ken efo zot asu*. Yaakov's language, *im ken*, need not be understood merely as a reference to Yehuda's "offer" to be considered a sinner unto his father in perpetuity, but rather, by the remarkable change in Yehuda's persona. The transactionalism of *ma betza* has evolved into the fraternalism of *anochi e'ervenu*. The loss of Yehuda's own two sons has sensitized him to ensure that his father does not lose both Yosef and Binyanim. *Im ken*, says Yaakov, if you have indeed changed in this fashion, *zot asu*, then you may go down to Egypt. You, Yehuda, have earned my trust anew.

When things go amiss in Egypt, 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 collectively returned to the house of Yosef, but rather, *va'yavo Yehuda v'echav beta Yosef*, Yehuda is the unquestioned leader. Yehuda pleads with Yosef, and then confronts him, offering himself as a slave to save his brother.

Once again, Yehuda appeals to the concept that has become the very polestar of his moral existence, *areyvut*, telling the Egyptian viceroy, *ki avdikha arav et ha'na'ar*. As such, Yehuda makes the gesture that is the diametric opposite of transactionalism: he offers himself as a slave in place of Binyamin. He is prepared to consign himself to grinding suffering, if it will spare Binyamin, and by extension Yaakov, of pain. Yehuda has come full circle. Yosef, deeply moved by Yehuda's personal transformation from the orchestrator of his sale two decades before to the heroic protector of Binyamin, finally breaks down, and reveals himself to his brothers.

IV.

Rarely does life afford us the opportunity to directly correct a moral failing of the magnitude of mekhirat Yosef and Yehuda's treatment of Tamar. In this sense, Yehuda was surely fortunate. Yet, the fact that Yehuda had prepared himself for that moment by undertaking the painful personal steps to live up to his name, literally meaning to admit or confess the truth, is entirely to his credit. By taking a hard, deep look into the mirror, Yehuda was able to acknowledge the painful truth of his own life, that the *eravon* was in fact missing. Yehuda's subsequent actions demonstrate nothing short of the capacity for full personal redemption.