

The central figure of this week's reading, *parashat Vayeshev*, is Joseph. Major roles are also played by Judah and by Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar. However, the relatively minor appearance by the eldest of Jacob's offspring, Reuben, draws the attention of two important modern commentators, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the past Chief Rabbi of the British Empire; and Rabbi Yissocher Frand, of the Ner Israel Rabbinical College of Baltimore.

Let's briefly recall from today's reading. Joseph, the spoiled and favored son of Jacob, provokes extreme jealousy among his brothers. One day, Joseph approaches his brothers in an isolated rural setting. The brothers determine to kill Joseph. Reuben protests. We read (Gen. 37:21 – p. 230 in the *Etz Hayim*) "when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them." But that's not what the Hebrew says; a more literal translation: "he saved him." Yet, clearly Reuben did not save Joseph. What are we to make of this inaccurate statement?

The text tells us, in verse 22, that Reuben advised that they just throw Joseph into a pit; that he intended to return, extract Joseph, and take him safely home. We know it didn't work out that way.

Rabbi Sacks writes:

Commenting on this episode, the midrash states:

If Reuben had only known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would write of him, "And Reuben heard and saved him from their hands," he would have picked him up on his shoulders and carried him back to his father.

This is a deeply puzzling comment. Did Reuben really need the endorsement of Heaven to do the right thing? Did he need G-d's approval before rescuing his brother? Yet, as we will see, it holds the essential clue about Reuben's character. It tells us what stands between what might-have-been and what was.

Reuben ... is a person of good intentions. He cares. He thinks. He is not led by the crowd or by his darker instincts. He penetrates to the moral core of a situation. That is the first thing we notice about him. The second, however, is that somehow his interventions backfire. They fail to achieve their effect.

Attempting to make things better, Reuben makes them worse. The Torah clearly wants us to reflect on Reuben's character....

Let's recall that Reuben is not only the oldest son of Jacob, but his mother is Leah, and Joseph is the older son of Rachel, the favorite of Jacob's wives. Thus, Reuben can expect both the leadership of the family's next generation and the rivalry of Joseph for that position. Reuben is imprinted with his mother's pain at his birth: Gen. 29:32 (*Etz Hayim* pp. 173-174) tells us "Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben [a reference to sight]; for she declared, 'It means the Lord has seen my affliction; it also means, now my husband will love me.'" But the next verse tells us that her hope was unrealized: "She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, 'This is because the Lord heard that I was unloved...' so she named him Simeon [a reference to hearing]."

We read of Reuben (p. 176, v. 14) that during a wheat harvest, he found mandrakes. The ensuing verses make clear that these were regarded as aphrodisiacs and as fertility aids. Rabbi Sacks writes:

His first thought is to give them to his mother Leah. This tells us something about Reuben. He is not thinking about himself but about her. He knows she feels unloved, and identifies with her anguish with all the sensitivity of an eldest son. He hopes that, with the aid of the mandrakes, Leah will be able to win Jacob's attention, perhaps even his love.

It is a strikingly mature and thoughtful act. Yet it has negative consequences. It provokes a bitter row between the two sisters, Leah and Rachel....

We later read (Gen. 35:22 – p. 215) "... Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine ...." Incidents in the lives of Kings David and Solomon teach that to sleep with the king's concubine was political treason, a step in claiming the throne, as if to declare, "He can't stop me." Yet some of our sages – e.g., the Midrash, Rashi - understood the verse differently – that Jacob thought Reuben was guilty of this act, but what Reuben really did was to remove Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent and place it in Leah's. Rabbi Frand summarizes the Midrashic tradition:

... after Rochel ... died, Yaakov moved his bed, which had been in Rachel's tent into the tent of Rachel's maidservant, Bilhah. Reuven, offended at the insult to his mother Leah, moved his father's bed from

Bilhah's tent into Leah's tent. "It is bad enough that my mother should have been treated as a second class wife compared to her sister Rachel, but that she should also be treated as a second class wife even in comparison to Rachel's maid servant is intolerable!"

Rabbi Sacks writes:

... Reuben carries with him a lack of confidence... that at critical moments robs him of his capacity to carry through a course of action that he knows to be right.... Returning with the mandrakes he might have bided his time until Leah was alone. After Rachel's death he might have spoken directly to his father instead of moving the beds. In the face of his brothers' murderous intentions toward Joseph he might... have simply carried him home. Instead he hesitated, choosing to put off the moment until the brothers were elsewhere. The result was tragedy. It is impossible not to recognise in Reuben a person of the highest ethical sensibilities. But though he had conscience, he lacked courage. He knew what was right, but lacked the resolve to do it boldly and decisively. In that hesitation, more was lost than Joseph. So too was Reuben's chance to become the hero he might and should have been.

If Reuben had only known – says the midrash. If only he had known that the Torah would write of him, "And Reuben heard and saved him from their hands" – meaning that his intention was known and valued by God as if it were the deed. Knowing this, he might have found the courage to carry it through into action. But Reuben could not know. He had not read the story. None of us can read the story of our life – we can only live it. The result is that we live in and with uncertainty. Doubt can lead to delay until the moment is lost. In a moment of arrested intention, Reuben lost his chance of changing history.

Rabbi Sacks urges us to consider a verse from Psalm 27: "Though my father and mother may forsake me, the Lord will receive me." He writes:

G-d, not being human, loves each of us, and that is our greatest source of strength. G-d heeds those not heard. He loves those whom others do not love. Reuben, still a young man, did not yet know this. But we, reading his story and the rest of Tenakh, do.

We are here for a reason, conceived in love, brought into being by the One who brought the universe into being, who knows our innermost thoughts, values our good intentions, and has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. That, if only we meditate on it, gives us the strength to turn intention into deed, lifting us from the person we might have been into the person we become.

Sources

R. Yissocher Frand, The Danger Of Not Realizing When One Is A "Nogeah B'Davar", <http://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5777-vayeshev/>

R. Jonathan Sacks, Vayeshev (5768) – Reuben: The Might-Have-Been, <http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-vayeshev-reuben-the-might-have-been/>