

Yehudah's Leadership

Shabbat Vayeishev 5781

Ma'aseh Avot Siman Levanim. "The deed of the parents is an signpost for the children." This famous principle arti the Ramba"n (Nachmanides) says effectively that in Tanakh as in the rest of life-- children follow in their parents footsteps. Just as Avraham went down to Egypt during famine, only to leave with riches, so too his descendants went down to Egypt to during a famine, and escaped with riches. Similarly, certain personality traits in Tanakh seem to be passed from parents to children-- Yosef inherits not only his mother's beauty, but also her habit of keeping quiet about crucial information, Rachel failed to tell Yaakov that her father was arranging for him to marry her off to her sister instead of her, and hears later she neglected to mention to her husband that she had in fact stolen her father's idols. Yosef, following in his mother's footsteps kept his true identity secret when his brothers stood before him. By contrast Levi's religious zeal and violent temper are passed along not only to his descendants Moshe and Pinechas, but to the entire tribe of Levi, who take up arms against their fellow-Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf. Hundreds of years later, the Talmud records that Kohan, descendants of Levi, are known to be quick-tempered.

Given that the tribes tend to take after their founders and follow in their footsteps, following the principle of ma'aseh avos siman levanim, a cursory read of the book of Bereishis, would lead us to expect Yosef's descendants, the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, to become the future leaders of the Israelite nation. Of all the children of Yaakov, Yosef is the obvious hero. He's handsome, wise, his father's favorite. Yosef is a dreamer with prophetic insight, whose dreams tell him that he is destined for greatness. And if his brothers hate him for this and throw him into a pit, the violence of their hatred only makes him seem more noble by contrast. He is known as Yosef Hatzadik, Yosef the Righteous, primarily for resisting the advances of his boss's wife, at the price of his freedom and good name.

Given that Yosef is clearly a wunderkind, the golden child in the family light of the brothers, and that he does rule over his brothers in his lifetime, I would expect his descendants to rule Bnei Israel, following the principle of Maaseh Avot Siman Levanim. Instead, as foretold in Jacob's deathbed blessings, leadership, in the form of the Davidic dynasty, will come from the tribe of Yehudah, not Yosef. Yosef might receive two portions of inheritance, but his descendants are not the leaders. The northern kingdom of Israel, under the leadership of Ephraim, one of Yosef's sons, are ensnared by idolatry, are exiled and ultimately disappear from Jewish history. Why is it Yehudah, and not Yosef, whose descendants merit the crown? Why does the tribe of Yehudah survive in us, while the heirs of Yosef the righteous have disappeared from the stage of Jewish history?

Yehudah at first did not seem like the heir apparent. He was the fourth son out of twelve, neither the firstborn nor the favorite. Nor is Yehudah a particularly effective leader in the beginning. When the brothers decide to kill Yosef, rather than stand up to them directly, Yehudah suggests a compromise position that they sell Yosef into slavery instead. This precipitates a fall from grace. Right after Yosef's sale into slavery we read that Yehudah went down from his brothers. "Vayered Yehudah Me'et Echav." Rashi explains that this does not refer merely to a geographic relocation to a place of lower elevation, but that Yehudah's brothers deposed him from his previously elevated status in their ranks: "horiduhu echav mikedulato"--they took him down a peg for his failure to stand up for Yosef. "You told us to sell him," Rashi has the remorseful brothers saying to Yehudah, "if you'd said to return him home we would have listened to you."

Although his three older brothers have all disqualified themselves from leadership with their poor judgment and impetuosity (Re'uven by sleeping with his father's concubine, his own stemother, and Shimon and Levi by massacring the people of Shechem), Yehudah, next in line by birth order, seems too blundering and venal to be an effective leader.

His first disqualification is the fact that he is the one who suggests selling Yosef into slavery.

Even if we want to read this in the most charitable possible light and assume that he, like his older brother Re'uvein, was trying to save Yosef's life, we have to ask why he wasn't able to stand up to his brothers directly. Then, he marries a Canaanite woman, a member of the nation we regard as the most cursed on earth, their name a byword for immorality and idolatry. Then when his two eldest sons die childless, after displeasing God, he sends his poor daughter-in-law Tamar away, neither releasing her to remarry nor marrying her to his youngest son, as he was obligated to do. Tamar of course takes matters into her own hands, posing as a prostitute to get the newly widowed Yehudah to lie with her. Worse yet, when Yehudah hears that his estranged daughter-in-law Tamar, whom he sent away, is pregnant out of wedlock, not realizing that he is the father of the child, he demands that she be executed. So far nothing in Yehudah's actions has led us to see him as a fit leader, far from it. But something happens to him, which will ultimately make him fit to be the leader among his brothers. After Tamar secretly sends Yehuda with proof that he is the father of her child, he does perhaps the first noble thing he has done in his life: he publicly acknowledges his guilt and Tamar's righteousness.

The first trait of a true leader is not guiltlessness, but the ability to admit fault. This trait is hinted at in Yehudah's name. His mother Leah had so named him saying she now would give thanks - odeh- to G-d. But the Hebrew verb to give thanks in Hebrew "Lehodot", comes from the same root as "Lehitvadot" to confess, to admit fault. They say there is an element of prophecy in names: Yehudah's name hints that he was someone destined to sanctify God by admitting his faults and accepting responsibility for his actions.

In the parshiot to come, Yehudah will demonstrate other qualities that make him fit to be a leader, but it all starts, with his choice to acknowledge his own failings and shortcomings. This is the sine qua non of leadership. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how brilliant or charismatic or talented or hardworking someone is, if they don't have the humility and the courage to admit when they are wrong, they are unfit for leadership. We don't have to be perfect, but we do have to be able to admit that we

aren't perfect. Yehudah provides us, his descendants, an example of a someone who for all his personal mistakes and flaws, manages to sanctify G-d's name simply by admitting his failings. Following the principle of Maashe Avot Siman L'vanim, that the acts of the ancestors provide a signpost for the children, May we Yehudah's descendants have the same courage to admit when we are wrong. Doing that, can be the turning point in bringing salvation into the world.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah!