

## Yehudah's Merit Part II

### A hero emerges

Two weeks ago, in my drasha for Parshas Vayeishev, I discussed how surprising it is that Yosef, the wisest, most talented, most righteous and most beloved of Yaakov's sons, is not the ancestor of the kings of Israel, and that instead it is Yehudah, a man who makes mistake after mistake who ascends to dominance in time to come. In that drasha, I spoke about how one of the things that redeems Yehudah, for all his moral flaws, is his ability to acknowledge his mistakes. The ability to admit wrongdoing, and acknowledge one's fallibility is an essential prerequisite for leadership, which helps explain why Yehudah who does wrong, but is able to admit it, takes precedence over Yosef who is celebrated for not giving into temptation in the first place.

The ability to acknowledge our fallibility may be an indispensable quality of good leadership, but that alone does not qualify a person for a role of leadership or authority. This week, in Parshas Vayigash, in a single moment, Yehudah demonstrates three distinct moral virtues which prove his merit and cement his rise to preeminence among his brothers.

Already last week, we had begun to see how Yehudah was willing to stand up to people in power. He did this first with his father, Yaakov, who initially refused to let the brothers take Binyamin with them to Egypt. Yehudah put his foot down and told his father, "If you send Binyamin with us, we'll go to Egypt and bring back food, and we'll all live; if you won't send him, we can't." However, it's one thing to stand up to your own father, quite another to stand up to a total stranger who wields the power of life and death over you and everyone you love. Yehudah does exactly this when Yosef insists he will keep Binyamin as a slave, as a punishment for allegedly stealing a silver cup. Yosef, of course had arranged for this cup to be planted in Binyamin's bag in order to frame him. Faced with the possibility of going home a free man, at the price of letting Binyamin rot in Egyptian slavery, Yehudah instead chooses to stand up to the man he does not recognize as his own brother, in order to save Binyamin.

In doing this, not only did Yehudah speak truth to power, but he also put his own life on the line for the sake of his brother. The willingness to sacrifice oneself on behalf of others is known as *Mesiras Nefesh*, literally handing over your soul. Anyone who would be a leader needs to let their actions be guided, not by self interest, but by a desire to serve their fellow, even at great personal cost.

It's also worth noting that Yehudah stood up for Binyamin, even though he had no way of knowing that Binyamin was innocent. Even though he did not know Binyamin had been framed, he was willing to take Binyamin's punishment as his own, not to protect an innocent young man, but to protect someone who was possibly guilty for all he knew. Back in Parshas Vayeishev Yehudah demonstrated strength in character in acknowledging his own wrongdoing vis-a-vis his daughter-in-law Tamar, but here he goes further, not only taking responsibility for his own misdeeds but even for those of others. Anyone who wants to consider themselves a decent human being needs to be able to accept responsibility for their own actions, but a leader needs to be able to accept responsibility for the actions of others.

The Talmud teaches that all Jews are held accountable for one another's behavior. It also teaches us that anyone who has the ability to speak out against someone else's behavior and doesn't is guilty for that person's crimes. If every Jew is responsible for their fellow Jew's actions, all the more so, someone in a position of leadership.

Thus, in a single act of courage, Yehudah demonstrates three important moral virtues that make it clear he is meant for a role of leadership:

- 1) The willingness to speak the truth, however uncomfortable, even to those in power.
- 2) The willingness to sacrifice his own well-being for the sake of others (*mesiras nefesh*).
- 3) The willingness to take responsibility not only for his own mistakes and misdeeds, but those of others.

Even as Yosef continues to hold onto political and material power, Yehudah has now emerged as the moral and spiritual leader of the generation. This distinction between power and leadership is important to notice. Having power does not make someone into a leader. Someone who can hire and fire, convict or

acquit, make decisions that save or take away lives has power, just as Yosef did. Sometimes that power is inherited, sometimes it comes from wealth, or a job description or simply because people admire a person and are willing to do what they say. But being a leader has as much to do with character as it does with power.

We live in a culture that admires and makes heroes out of people who, like Yosef, are wealthy, talented, good-looking and intelligent. Sometimes, though not often enough, the people we admire even have Yosef's sense of moral integrity.

I encourage us all to take note of who we hold up as role models and objects of praise for ourselves and for others. Are they talented artists, brilliant scholars, successful business people, powerful politicians? Or are they people who give selflessly, who speak unpopular but necessary truths, and who not only acknowledge and take responsibility for their own mistakes, but who also take responsibility for the people around them. Those are the people who deserve our admiration and emulation. Those are the real heroes.

We might not always be able to find heroes like Yehudah walking the red carpet at award shows, or profiled in glossy magazines. To find people with these more humble virtues of truth-telling, self-sacrifice and taking responsibility, we might have to look closer to home—in our local schools, hospitals, governments, non-profit organizations. And we might have to look beyond the obvious leaders—doctors and rabbis and politicians and CEOs—to find our heroes and leaders in more humble professions. But if we can begin to not only for ourselves but in our public discourse elevate those kinds of leaders and role models, we can change our culture from one that worships external power and accomplishment, to one that focuses instead on character and virtue. If we can do this, we will all reap the benefits of a more humble, honest, benevolent and unified society.

Shabbat Shalom!