

Parshat Vayechi 5777

In a most uplifting and inspiring deathbed scene, Ya'akov peacefully takes leave of the world by blessing, evaluating and prophesying about every one of his sons and assigning to each of them their role in the formation of the Jewish nation.

"Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise ... Judah is a lion's whelp the sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." Bereshit 49:8-10

But why was Yehuda granted the role of sovereign and ruler. By right, the sovereignty belonged to Reuven, Ya'akov's first born. As Ya'akov's sons stood around his deathbed to hear his last wishes, Reuven is addressed first, and Ya'akov leaves no doubt that he is fully aware of Reuven's rights and responsibilities as firstborn. *"Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed, then you defiled it, he went up to my couch." Bereshit 49:3-4.*

According to tradition, Reuven as firstborn should have received three precious gifts: a double portion of Ya'akov's inheritance, kingship and priesthood. In fact, Reuven received none of these. The priesthood is eventually given to Levi and by elevating Ephraim and Menashe to the level of Yoseph's brothers; Ya'akov in effect gives the double portion to Yoseph. These two grandsons of Ya'akov, sons of Yoseph, become tribes in their own right and each in the future receives their own portion in the land of Israel, a clear indication that Yoseph, and not Reuven, has received the double portion.

The kingship is bestowed upon Yehuda. On the surface, it might seem odd to give this blessing to Yehuda. Yehuda was one of the eight brothers who conspired to kill Ya'akov's beloved son Yoseph. Neither was he morally upright with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, whom he mistook for a prostitute and with whom he had illicit sexual relations.

Rashi, however, tells us that Yehuda elevated himself by his further actions in these two instances. When the other sons of Ya'akov plotted to kill Yoseph, Yehuda saved his life. *"What shall we profit by killing our brother and covering his blood?"* argued Yehuda. *"Let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not harm him with our own hands, for he is our brother, our own flesh". Bereshit 37:26-27.* The others accepted Yehuda's reasoning and Yoseph was taken out of the snake infested pit into which he had been thrown and sold into slavery. In the incident with Tamar, Yehuda publicly embarrassed himself in order to save her and the lives of her two unborn sons.

It would seem, however, that Reuven was no less virtuous than Yehuda. Regarding the plot to kill Yoseph, it was Reuven who first saved Yoseph by suggesting to his brothers that, instead of killing him they should throw him into the pit. As for public penance, Reuven too admitted and repented his sin. And while Yehuda was faced with a choice to either admit his responsibility or cause the death of three innocent lives, there were no compelling factors in Reuven's case. Furthermore, Reuven's penance did not end with a one-time admission of guilt, but continued to consume his entire being for many years.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains: As far as personal virtue is concerned, Reuven indeed surpassed Yehuda, both in the purity of his intentions regarding Yoseph and the intensity of his repentance over his failings. But Yehuda was the one who *actually saved* Yoseph, while Reuven unwittingly placed him in mortal danger. In the same vein, Yehuda's repentance saved three lives, while Reuven's remorse helped no one; in fact, had he not been preoccupied with his sackcloth and his fasting, he might have prevented Yoseph being sold into slavery.

Indeed, Reuven retained his rights as Ya'akov's firstborn in all that pertained to him as an individual. But he forfeited his role as a leader, by neglecting the most basic prerequisite for leadership. Believing Yoseph safe for the time being, Reuven rushed back to attend to his prayers and penance, forgetting that concern for one's fellow must always take precedence over one's own pursuits, no matter how pious and lofty these pursuits might be.

While Reuven prayed and fasted, Yehuda acted. Yehuda earned the leadership of Israel by recognizing that when another human being needs us, we must set aside all other considerations and get involved, even if our own motives are still short of perfection. Sometimes, we cannot afford to wait.

In Pirkei Avot, the question is asked *"Who is a mighty person?"* and is answered *"He who rules over his own desires"*. Such a person is worthy to rule over others because he will rule over them with the same righteousness as he rules over himself.

In saving Yoseph, Yehuda ruled over himself not to be influenced by the other brothers who wanted to kill Yoseph. In saving Tamar, he did not let personal pride stand in the way of doing the right thing. The ability to rule over one's own passions makes any person a true king.