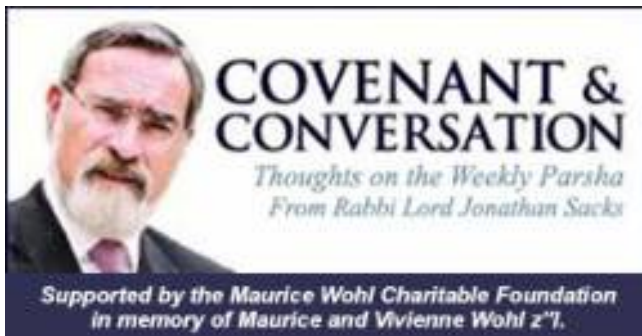


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The Power of Praise

Reuben is the leader who might have been but never was. He was Jacob's firstborn. Jacob said of him on his deathbed, "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power." (Gen. 49:3) This is an impressive tribute, suggesting physical presence and commanding demeanour.

More significantly, in his early years Reuben consistently appeared to be the most morally sensitive of Jacob's children. He was Leah's son, and keenly felt his mother's disappointment that

she was not Jacob's favourite. Here is the first description of him as a child:

During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. (Gen. 30:14)

Mandrakes were thought to be an aphrodisiac. Reuben knew this and immediately thought of his mother. It was a touching gesture but it misfired because he presented them to Leah in the presence of Rachel and unintentionally caused an argument between them.

The next episode in which we see Reuben is far more troubling:

Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrat, that is, Bethlehem... While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept [*vayishkav*] with his father's concubine Bilhah ... (Gen. 35:19-22)

If understood literally this would amount to a major sin. Sleeping with your father's concubine was not only a sexual crime; it was an unforgivable act of treason and betrayal, as we discover later in Tanach when Absalom decides to rebel against his father David and replace him as king. Ahitophel gives him the following advice:

"Sleep with your father's concubines, whom he left to take care of the palace. Then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself obnoxious to your father, and the hands of everyone with you will be more resolute." (2 Samuel 16:21)

According to the Sages, the text about Reuben is not to be understood literally.¹ After Rachel died, Jacob had moved his bed to the tent of Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaid. This, felt Reuben, was an intolerable humiliation for his mother. It was hard for Leah to endure the fact that Jacob loved her sister more. It would have been altogether unbearable for her to discover that he even preferred Rachel’s handmaid. So Reuben moved Jacob’s bed from Bilhah’s tent to Leah’s. The verb *vayishkav* should therefore be translated not as “slept with” but “changed the sleeping arrangement.”

At this point, however, the text does a strange thing. It says, “Reuben went in and slept with [or changed the sleeping arrangement of] his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it ...” and then signals *a paragraph break in the middle of the sentence*. The sentence ends: “Jacob had twelve sons.” This is very unusual indeed. What it suggests is an audible silence. Communication had completely broken down between Jacob and Reuben. If the Sages are correct in their interpretation, then this is one of the greatest tragedies in the whole of Genesis. Jacob clearly believed that Reuben had slept with his concubine Bilhah. He cursed him for it on his deathbed:

Unstable as water, you will not excel,
for you went up onto your father’s
bed, onto my couch, and defiled it.
(Gen. 49:4)

Yet according to the Sages, this did not happen. Had Jacob been willing to speak to Reuben he would have discovered the truth, but Jacob grew up in a family that lacked open, candid

communication (as we saw a few weeks ago, during our discussion of parshat Toldot). Thus, for many years Reuben was suspected by his father of a sin he had not committed – all because he cared about the feelings of his mother.

Which brings us to the third episode in Reuben’s life, the most tragic of all. Jacob favoured Joseph, son of his beloved Rachel, and the other brothers knew it. When he gave Joseph a visible sign of favouritism, the richly embroidered cloak, the brothers resented it yet more. When Joseph began to have dreams of the rest of the family bowing down to him, the brothers’ animosity reached boiling point. When they were far from home, tending the flocks, and Joseph appeared in the distance, their hatred made them decide then and there to kill him. Reuben alone resisted:

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him [Joseph] from their hands. “Let’s not take his life,” he said. “Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. (Gen. 37:21-22)

Reuben’s plan was simple. He persuaded the brothers not to kill Joseph but rather to let him die by leaving him to starve in a pit. He intended to return later, when the brothers had moved on, to rescue him. When he returned, however, Joseph was no longer there. He had been sold as a slave. Reuben was devastated.

Three times Reuben tried to help but despite his best intentions, his efforts failed. He was responsible for the one recorded quarrel between

Leah and Rachel. His father wrongly suspected him of a major sin and cursed him on his deathbed. He failed to save Joseph. Reuben knew when things were not right, and tried to act to make changes for the better, but he somehow lacked the prudence, confidence or courage to achieve his desired outcome. He should have waited for Leah to be alone before giving her the mandrakes. He should have remonstrated directly with his father about his sleeping arrangements. He should have physically taken Joseph safely back home.

What happened to Reuben to make him lack confidence? The Torah gives a poignant and unmistakable hint. Listen to these verses describing the birth of Leah's (and Jacob's) first two children:

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, *"It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."* She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, *"Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too."* So she named him Simeon. (Gen. 29:32-33)

Both times, it was Leah, not Jacob, who named the child – and both names were a cry to Jacob to notice her and love her – if not for herself then at least because she has given him children. Jacob evidently did not notice.

Reuben became what he became because – so the text seems to imply – his father's attention was elsewhere; he did not care for either Leah or her sons (the text itself says, "the Lord saw that Leah was not loved"). Reuben knew this and felt intensely his mother's shame and his father's apparent indifference.

People need encouragement if they are to lead. It is fascinating to contrast the hesitant Reuben with the confident – even overconfident – Joseph, who was loved and favoured by his father. If we want our children to have the confidence to act when action is needed, then we have to empower, encourage and praise them.

There is a fascinating Mishnah in Ethics of the Fathers:

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five (pre-eminent) disciples, namely Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yose the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He used to recount their praise: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus – a plastered well that never loses a drop. Joshua ben Chananya – happy the one who gave him birth. Yose the Priest – a pious man. Shimon ben Netanel – a man who fears sin. Elazar ben Arach – an ever-flowing spring. (Mishnah Avot 2:10-11):

Why does the Mishnah, whose aim is to teach us lasting truths, give us this apparently trivial account of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's pupils and how he used to praise them? The answer, I believe, is that the Mishnah is telling us how to

raise disciples, how to be a coach, mentor and guide: by using *focused praise*.

The Mishnah does not simply say that Yochanan ben Zakkai said good things about his students. It uses an unusual locution: “He used to count [*moneh*] their praise”, meaning, his positive remarks were precise and accurately targeted. He told each of his disciples what their specific strength was.

Eliezer ben Hyrcanus had an outstanding memory. At a time when the Oral Law was not yet written down, he could recall the teachings of the tradition better than anyone else. Elazar ben Arach was creative, able to come up with an endless stream of fresh interpretations. When we follow our particular passions and gifts, we contribute to the world what only we can give.

However, the fact that we may have an exceptional gift may also mean that we have conspicuous deficiencies. No one has all the strengths. Sufficient if we have one. But we must also know what we lack. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus became so fixated on the past that he resisted change even when it was decided on by the majority of his colleagues. Eventually he was excommunicated for failing to accept his colleagues’ ruling (Baba Metzia 59b).

Elazar ben Arach’s fate was even sadder. After the death of Yochanan ben Zakkai, he separated from his colleagues. They went to Yavneh; he went to Hamat (Emmaus). It was a pleasant place to live and it was where his wife’s family lived. Apparently he was so confident of his intellectual gifts that he believed he could maintain his scholarship by himself. Eventually he forgot

everything he had ever learned (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan 14: 6*). The man more gifted than his contemporaries eventually died while making almost no lasting contribution to the tradition.

There is a delicate balance between the neglect that leads to someone to lack the confidence to do the necessary deed, and the excessive praise or favouritism that creates overconfidence and the belief that you are better than others. That balance is necessary if we are to be the sunlight that helps others grow.

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. Would you consider giving targeted praise to the people in your life, to elevate your relationship with them and give them confidence?
2. Is it more important to be reminded of our strengths or our weaknesses?
3. Do you think Reuben’s mistakes, and attempts to put things right, are linked to the fact that the Cities of Refuge were located in the Reuben territory of the land of Israel?

NOTES

1. See Shabbat 55a-b



Unequal

Being married to four women simultaneously can make life complicated. Having children with each of those wives can add to the complications. Having a favorite wife and a chosen child can make life perilous - particularly for that child. This, in a nutshell, was the situation in Yaakov's home.

The favorite child was Yosef, son of Yaakov's "real" wife Rachel - the only wife Yaakov had ever wanted. Yosef had a rare combination of gifts: good looks, brains, charisma, and a highly developed sense of decency. His brothers oscillated between jealousy and hatred - eventually settling on a combination of the two.

Unlike his brothers, one of Yosef's "sins" was that he treated the children of his father's *pilagshim* (concubines) like brothers, which was neither self-evident nor automatic. In families such as this, there is a perceived hierarchy among the wives which carries over to the children, and Yaakov's household was no exception. As Parashat Vayeshev begins, Yaakov's beloved wife Rachel had died in childbirth, leaving two orphaned sons, Yosef and the newborn Binyamin. Yaakov's second wife, Leah, had borne six sons

and a daughter; this was the dominant group, both by virtue of strength in numbers and by virtue of their mother's status as a full-fledged wife. The other sons were the children of Bilhah and Zilpah - handmaids of the wives, Rachel and Leah.

Leah's children were intent on establishing their status within the family, now more than ever. Although they could not hope to achieve the preferred status enjoyed by the sons of Rachel, they had no intention of being lumped together with the "second class" children of the concubines, or surpassed by the children of Bilhah, Rivkah's handmaid, who had become a surrogate mother for Rachel's orphaned sons.¹ With this issue of status in mind, Reuven beds Bilhah, at once relegating her to the status of chattel - and by extension, classifying her children as slaves - while at the same time symbolically declaring himself to be Yaakov's true heir.

Yosef's response to Reuven's gambit is no less clever: Yosef has an affinity for Bilhah, and he defends her honor by honoring her children and treating them as brothers. He counters the outrage committed by Reuven with love toward the secondary victims - the children of the concubines. This becomes a recurrent motif in Yosef's life: Abuse is repaid with love, never with vengeance. Time and time again, Yosef mends rifts and heals wounds with love.

Yosef's behavior did not arise in a vacuum; he learned it from his father. Yaakov had to contend with his sons' outrageous behavior on more than one occasion: Reuven, and then Shimon and Levi who annihilated the city of Shechem, and more generally the brothers' disdain and rejection of

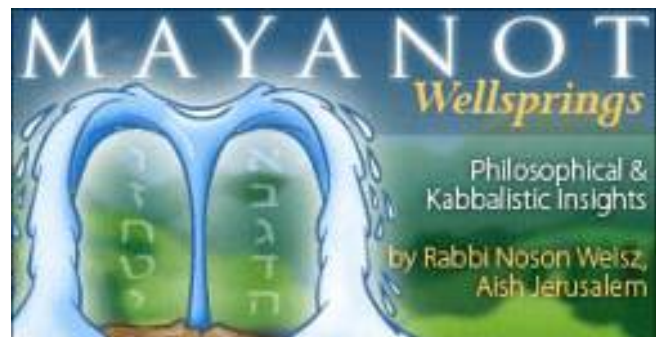
Yosef. Each of these episodes might have served as reason enough for Yaakov to expel one or more of his sons from the family. Had he done so, he would have been following the pattern set in previous generations of the family: Yishmael was banished by his grandparents, and his brother Esav was no longer a part of the clan. And yet, Yaakov does not take this path. He does all that he can (in his own mind, at least²) to maintain the unity of the family - and Yosef takes this lesson to heart. Apparently, Yosef understands Yaakov's silence in the face all the familial intrigue as communicating a basic value: Family first. They must stay together, no matter what. In this spirit, Yosef extends the "family first" attitude to his most vulnerable brothers - the children of the *pilagshim*.³

Not for the last time, Yosef's kindness is repaid with hatred. His brothers detest him; they plot to kill him. Ironically, the conspiracy they hatch to rid themselves of Yosef is what finally unites the other brothers. They share their perfidious secret, and it binds them to one another, forces them to rely on one another for support. The children of the *pilagshim* could just as easily have used the brothers' dark secret to leverage their own status in Yaakov's household, but they joined the sons of Leah and kept their shared secret to the very end. By remaining silent during and after the sale of Yosef, Bilhah and Zilpah's children become co-conspirators, and Leah's children intuit that the price for their continued silence is a change in the status of the children of the *pilagshim*. Now, and only now, they become full-fledged brothers, partners in crime, bound by oath to a terrible, unspeakable secret. One wonders if Yosef

appreciated the delicious irony: He had succeeded in unifying the family - by becoming the common enemy and victim.

This may explain why the hand of God directs Yosef to Egypt. Had he remained with his family, his true greatness could not have emerged. He would have brought himself down to the lowest common denominator for the sake of unity. Yosef could not leave any of his brothers behind - which is why it was so painful when his brothers united to cast him out. Only when he was far away from his family, in Egypt, Yosef's true personality could emerge, and his greatness become apparent to one and all. His brothers, blinded by jealousy, were unable to see Yosef as he truly was.

1. Rashi, Bereishit 37:10.
2. Yaakov sends Yosef to look after his brothers, and encourages him not to separate himself from the others. He reprimands him for his dreams that cause friction and disunity.
3. See Rashi, Bereishit 37:2.



Of Second Chances

This week's Torah portion has two major themes:

1. The first is the sale of Joseph by his brothers, his arrival in Egypt and the vicissitudes of his life there.

2. The second is the story of Judah and Tamar.

The sequence in which these two stories are presented is unusual. The Torah interrupts the tale of Joseph, tells us the complete story of Judah and Tamar, and then returns to the interrupted tale of Joseph's affairs.

The story of Judah and Tamar took place sometime during the 22 years during which Joseph was lost to his family. Why not finish relating the tale of Joseph?

Rashi responds to this question in the name of the Midrash:

It was at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned away towards an Adullamite man whose name was Hirah. (Genesis 38:1)

Why does this story interrupt the story of Joseph? To teach you that his brothers demoted Judah when they witnessed their father's anguish. They said, "You told us to sell him. Had you told us to return him to our father we also would have listened to you." (Exodus Raba, 42,3)

Seeing that his brothers cast him out, Judah went off on his own and formed a partnership with Hirah the Adullamite.

Thus, the consequence of the sale of Joseph was the loss of two brothers, not just one.

Nor were they just any brothers. These two -- Joseph and Judah -- were the ancestors of both lines of Jewish kings. The progenitors of the kings

of Judah and Ephraim (son of Joseph) were cast out by the congregation of Israel at the same time, leaving Israel effectively leaderless. What is more, Judah was cast out because he was held ultimately responsible for the casting out of Joseph. The progenitor of David's line was cast out for deciding to cast out the progenitor of Ephraim, his rival's line. There is something quite remarkable about the way the fates of these two Jewish giants are intertwined. We hope to explore the relationship between them in this essay.

Let us begin with the story of Judah and Tamar.

LEVIRATE MARRIAGE

Nachmanides, basing himself on many Jewish sources, uses reincarnation to explain the commandment of levirate marriage, which obligates a man to marry his deceased brother's wife, and which figures prominently in the story of Judah and Tamar.

Judah had three sons, the eldest of whom -- Er -- married Tamar. When he died, the second son -- Onan -- married Tamar as per the commandment. He also died and at that point Judah stalled in allowing his third son -- Sheilah -- to marry Tamar as he would be required to do.

Let us follow this story via Nachmanides' commentary.

Nachmanides explains that when God sees that a soul is not carrying out the task that it was sent to the world to accomplish, sometimes God will withdraw it and send it down again at a later time, thus allowing it not only a second chance, but one that kicks off with a fresh start untainted by past failure.

Our souls and our bodies (which constitute the souls' physical envelopes) are not accidentally matched. The body is engineered to fit the soul much more closely than a spacesuit is designed to fit an astronaut. Therefore, when you marry your fraternal brother's wife you offer the greatest possible correspondence in terms of physical fit. A man's wife is a part of his physical and spiritual self in the first place as explained in Genesis 2, and a brother is the closest possible genetic match. Thus the child born of the levirate marriage is the most comfortable venue for enabling the departed soul to return to the world.

But Onan knew that the seed would not be his; so it was that whenever he would consort with his brother's wife, he would let it go to waste on the ground so as not to provide offspring for his brother. (Genesis 38:9)

Explains Nachmanides: Onan had been taught the secret behind levirate marriage by Judah; he knew that the child he would bear with Tamar would be the reincarnation of his brother instead of his own child. For his own reasons, he did not want his brother back, and consequently he spilled his seed.

When Onan died, Judah realized that it would be dangerous to submit his remaining son Sheilah to the same test till he reached full maturity and was strong enough to cope with the obvious spiritual pitfalls that marriage to Tamar appeared to present. Consequently, he told Tamar to wait until Sheilah reached maturity.

Tamar did not understand the reason for the delay, so when Sheilah was old enough in her eyes to

marry and she was not summoned by Judah, she decided to take matters into her own hands and force Judah himself to carry out the levirate obligation.

She did so by dressing herself as a prostitute and seducing Judah. She became pregnant as a result of the union.

Nachmanides explains: in truth all relatives that are in the line of inheritance are suitable candidates; a brother is merely the most qualified. After the Torah was given and it was forbidden to consort with relatives, an exception was made for only the best possible candidate, the fraternal brother, but at this point in history all relatives were qualified, the closer the better.

Sure enough, the levirate marriage worked. Tamar bore Judah twin sons -- Perez and Zerach -- who were in fact the second editions of Er and Onan, respectively. The second time they came to the world, these souls made it. Perez is the progenitor of David and the great grandfather of the Messiah, who is David's descendant.

THE FALL OF JUDAH

In terms of the theme of this essay we can interpret these events on a deeper level in the following way: Judah fell in the incident involving the sale of Joseph into slavery. His brothers sensed that he was not fit as yet to fill his destined role as their monarch. It was not enough for Judah to merely lead -- he was not only Israel's predestined monarch, he was also its messiah. Besides knowing how to lead them, Judah also had to possess the talent to redeem them and restore to them the spiritual treasures

that were lost. They understood from Jacob's anguish that Joseph's loss was irremediable.

All his [Jacob's] sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to comfort himself, and said, "I will go down to the grave mourning for my son." (Genesis 37:35)

This is strange behavior for Jacob as it is written:

You are children to the Lord your God, you shall not cut yourselves and you shall not make a bald spot between your eyes for a dead person. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God... (Deut. 14:1-2)

Nachmanides states that this statement "you are a holy people" is a guarantee of the survival of souls in God's Presence. So the verse is to be understood as the statement of an argument: "As you know that you are a holy people, treasured by God, and He will never surrender a Jewish soul; therefore it is inappropriate for you to mourn to an extreme degree even over someone who dies young." The Torah does not forbid tears, as it is human nature to cry over any painful departure of a loved one, even when both parties remain alive. But extreme forms of mourning are inappropriate, as the one who is being mourned is not truly lost. It is more appropriate to think of him or her as merely separated. From this law, our rabbis derived the rule that it is forbidden to mourn anyone an unusual amount. (See Talmud, Moed Katan, 27b.)

Indeed, Rashi was bothered by the phenomenon of Jacob's apparently excessive mourning. He

explains Jacob's refusal to be comforted with the aid of the Midrash:

God had given Jacob the following promise; if all his children survived he was guaranteed never to see the face of Gehenom, but if any of his children were lost in his lifetime, this would indicate that the house of Israel had not yet reached its desired level of spiritual perfection, and therefore his mission in life had failed. (Tanchuma, Vayigash,9)

When they witnessed the severity of Jacob's mourning, Judah's brothers understood that they, Israel, could not survive the loss of Joseph intact. Joseph should have been saved, not cast out. Judah was therefore an inadequate redeemer as it was his ultimate responsibility to decide what was necessary to reach the redemption. Having failed, he was demoted.

The brothers were not mistaken in their assessment. Judah's children, Er and Onan, the intended progenitors of the line of the redeemer were both failures. What is more, the crux of their failure was on the very point of inadequate concern for Jewish survival. Instead of thinking of the future and carrying out their responsibility to bring souls into the world who could lead the Jewish people on the march to their destiny, which was their first duty as potential monarchs, they thought only of their present gratification and ignored their social responsibilities.

But here is where Judah came into his own and demonstrated his greatness. He would not give up on them even in death. Nachmanides explains that it was Judah who instituted the practice of levirate

marriage in the world. (Breishis raba, 85,6) He was determined to redeem the lost souls by giving them a second opportunity to achieve their potential. In the end he was successful.

PERSONAL REDEMPTION

The difficulties that Judah had to surmount on the road to this success provided the key to his own personal redemption. These difficulties on the road were composed of two main elements. One was emotional pain. Judah repeatedly suffered the pain associated with the tragedy of personal loss, the loss of his wife and two of his three children. This pain expiated for his readiness to inflict the pain of such a loss on his father by selling his brother. The second element is more subtle.

Once it was discovered that Tamar was pregnant, she was condemned as an adulteress since no one knew -- not even Judah who believed he had been seduced by a nameless prostitute -- who was the father of her child. Thus Tamar was sentenced to death.

On her way to her execution, Tamar sent Judah's staff and seal back to him (she had taken them from him at the time of the seduction) and asked him to recognize that he was in fact the father of her unborn children and formally acknowledge her innocence. Judah's response was:

She is right; it is from me.(Genesis 38: 26)

The Talmud breaks this response into two parts: Judah said "she is right"; God said "it is from Me." (Makot 23b). Let us see if we can unravel this a bit.

At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses blesses the tribes:

May Reuben live and not die and may his population be included in the count. And this to Judah and he said: Harken O! God to Judah's voice and return him to his people... (Deut. 33: 6-7)

Remarking on the juxtaposition of Reuben and Judah in Moses' blessing, the rabbis offer the following comment:

Moses said to God: "Who caused Reuben to admit his sin? Judah! Therefore Harken to the voice of Judah." (Talmud, Makot, 11b)

Explains Rashi: "Who caused Reuben to confess that he lay with Bilhah? Judah who confessed to Tamar." The rabbis had a tradition that when Reuben heard Judah declare, "She is right!" he was inspired to declare "I mixed up my father's marriage bed."

It would appear that Judah's confession had the inspirational quality possessed by deeds that embody great demonstrations of moral courage. But it is difficult at first glance to see any moral greatness in Judah's confession. How could he have stood silently and watched Tamar be executed once he knew that she was innocent? After all he surely recognized the articles he had pledged? Would any of us have behaved any differently?

Perhaps we can explain it this way: Judah had had relations with a woman who behaved exactly like a prostitute. What prompted him to engage in

such an act, which was surely beneath his dignity and high standing? The obvious answer is that he must have had an irresistible impulse. But what is the source of such an impulse? Joseph had also claimed that he was driven by an irresistible impulse to dream the dreams that he later recounted to his brothers. Joseph's explanation was that every irresistible impulse is Divinely inspired, and thus he argued to his brothers that his dreams were really in the nature of prophecies. But his brothers rejected his argument and maintained that his irresistible impulse originated in his passion for power for the sake of power alone.

But what of Judah's own impulse? If it was a manifestation of his deep sexual frustration then Tamar was just an ordinary prostitute. The fact that she once had relations with him did not prove that the children she was carrying were his. If she had indeed become a prostitute then she had relations with many men. But if his own irresistible impulse was Divinely inspired then Tamar was not really a prostitute at all.

By instilling the irresistible impulse into Judah, God helped Tamar to carry out her design to fulfill her role in the levirate marriage that would restore the souls of her dead husbands. On the one hand, why would God choose to infect the progenitor of the Messiah with a depraved desire for a mere prostitute? On the other hand, if his own irresistible impulse was Divinely inspired than so was Joseph's and Judah had misjudged him and thus sanctioned the creation of a major Jewish tragedy.

Weighing these arguments, Judah confessed. The very second he uttered the words "she is right," God immediately confirmed the fact that Judah's impulse to have relations with Tamar was indeed Divinely inspired. The heavenly voice confirmed, "Indeed, it was Me."

Witnessing Judah's moral courage in acknowledging himself to be at fault both with Tamar and with Joseph, Reuben was also inspired to confess his fault.

The story of Judah and Tamar had to be told precisely at this point -- in the middle of the story of Joseph.

Judah is the one who cast out Joseph. First he must realize and acknowledge his own fall and recover himself. Only after his own spiritual awakening would he have the wisdom to accept Joseph back into the Jewish fold. As soon as Judah was spiritually restored, the stage was set for Joseph's success in Egypt and his ultimate restoration to his family. Before Judah's recovery is complete, Joseph's cannot begin.

JEWISH KINGS

The Jewish people have two kings and two kingdoms, because the kingdom of God on earth takes two forms: God is the creator and ruler of the physical world, but he is also the creator and ruler of all souls.

In terms of His kingdom over the physical world, it is our task as His people to establish a physical kingdom that is dedicated to using the physical resources available on earth in His service, so that all human beings can learn the proper way to

conduct their lives here on earth as God's servants.

In terms of his dominion over the world of souls, it is our duty to develop the spiritual nuances of all Jewish souls so that no Jew's spiritual potential is allowed to go to waste.

The Jewish people have a tradition of two Messiahs -- one the son of Joseph, and the other the son of David.

In his eulogy of Theodore Herzl, Rabbi Kook compared the Zionist effort of reestablishing Israel as a physical state to the work of the Messiah of Joseph.

When Israel has a state, there is a physical part of the earth that has the potential of demonstrating to the rest of mankind how man can conduct his everyday affairs and yet retain the closest relationship with God. This is the provision of "light onto the nations" that is Israel's earthly destiny.

But in order to be able to exploit this potential, Israel must also engage in the effort associated with the Messiah of David.

We must restore the Jewish soul by redeeming Jewish souls from the spiritual damage and exhaustion inflicted on them by the trials and travail of our painful history. Spiritual struggle and turmoil are inevitable in the Jewish state until this task is fully accomplished. Its final step will usher in the arrival of Judah's descendant, Messiah ben David.



In the Spotlight

Reuven heard, and he rescued [Yosef] from them, and he said, "Let us not murder him."
(Gen. 37:21)

The issues were complex. Yosef's brothers had sat in judgment and decided that he posed a mortal threat to them. They deemed him a *rodef*, a stalker bent on destruction, and they condemned him to death. But Reuven wanted no part of it. When he heard what they intended to do, he objected and suggested they toss Yosef into a pit instead. His intention was to come back later and spirit Yosef out of the pit and bring him back safely to Yaakov. But it did not work out that way.

The Midrash comments (*Rus Rabbah* 5:6), "Had Reuven known that Hashem would write in the Torah, 'Reuven heard and rescued [Yosef] from them,' he would have snatched Yosef and carried him back to his father on his shoulders." The Midrash also makes a similar comment about Aharon. "Had Aharon known that Hashem would write in the Torah, 'Behold, he will come out to welcome you,' he would have greeted Moshe with music and dancing." And Boaz also merits such a comment, "Had Boaz known that Hashem would write in the Torah, 'And he tossed [Ruth] roasted

grains, and she ate her fill and left some over,' he would have served her a feast of fatted calves."

What exactly is the Midrash saying here? At first glance, Reuven, Aharon and Boaz seem to be portrayed as publicity hounds. If they had known how much press coverage and exposure they could receive, they would have done things differently. As it was, however, unaware that the public would scrutinize their acts so closely, they did not overextend themselves.

But this cannot be the intent of the Midrash, which clearly comes to praise them, not to bury them. But if so, why didn't these three righteous people do the right thing even without the additional publicity?

The issue in all three cases, apparently, was not one of publicity but of clarity. None of them was certain he was doing the right thing. However, had he known Hashem would endorse his decision and emblazon it in the Torah for all eternity, he would have acted in a much more decisive and resolute way.

Reuven had to contend with his brothers, the future tribal patriarchs of the Jewish people, men of great scholarship, righteousness and character. They had sat in judgment and condemned Yosef to death. As much as Reuven objected to the decision of the majority, could he be absolutely certain that he was right and they were wrong? And so Reuven acted tentatively. He persuaded them to toss Yosef into the pit, hoping to sneak back later and pull him out to safety. Had he known Hashem would write in the Torah, "And Reuven heard, and he rescued Yosef," had he known Hashem would endorse his view rather

than that of his brothers, he would have acted more decisively. He would have hoisted Yosef onto his shoulders and carried him back to his father.

When Aharon went out to greet Moshe, he also had his doubts. After all, he was the older son, the acknowledged leader of the Jewish people in captivity, a man who enjoyed the gift of prophecy. How would people look at it if he stepped aside in favor of his younger brother? Wasn't the younger brother obliged to honor his older brother? If so, how could he assume a superior position? And so Aharon, who was prepared to accept Moshe as the leader with the least bit of resentment, whose heart was filled to bursting with joy at the prospect of seeing his brother, went forth to greet Moshe, but he suppressed his natural urge to bring musicians and dancers. He did not have the confidence to make such a public spectacle of their reunion. Had he known Hashem would write in the Torah, "Behold, he will come out to welcome you," he would have brought the music and the dancers.

Boaz was afraid of the appearance of impropriety. He was concerned that people seeing him give food to the young maiden Ruth would raise an arch eyebrow and snicker, "Hey, what's going on with Boaz and Ruth? Isn't she a little too young for him?" Had he known Hashem would endorse his actions, he would have laid out a lavish feast for her.

The Midrash concludes, "In days gone by, a person would do a mitzvah and the prophet would record it. But now, when a person does a mitzvah and people mock him, who records who was



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right? Eliyahu and *Mashiach* write it down and the Holy One, Blessed is He, signs in affirmation, as it is written (Malachi 3:16), "Then those who fear Hashem spoke to one another and Hashem listened..."

The problem of hesitation in the face of criticism and scorn plagues us in every generation. The prophet Malachi foretells a time, just prior to the Messianic era, when people will ridicule those who do mitzvot, but Eliyahu, *Mashiach* and Hashem Himself will give the seal of approval to those with the courage to do what is right. The prophet encourages us not to hesitate, not to act tentatively when others accuse us of not being "modern" enough or "progressive" enough. We need not worry that we are in the minority and our detractors are in the majority. We need to act according to the conviction of our beliefs, and in the end, we will surely be vindicated.

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