

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 15

Vayechi, Sicha 3

The Verse:

Before his passing, Yaakov summoned his children to his deathbed and blessed them, revealing to each tribe their role and destiny. To his firstborn son, Reuven, however, Yaakov delivered a rebuke:

“Reuven, you are my firstborn, my strength, and the first of my might. [You should have been] superior in rank and superior in power. [You have] the restlessness of water; [therefore,] you shall not have superiority, for you ascended upon your father’s couch; then you profaned [Him Who] ascended upon my bed. (Bereishis 49:3-4)

The Rashi:

Superior in rank — You were fit to be superior over your brothers with the priesthood. In Hebrew, the term “superior in rank — *שֵׁטֶר שְׂאֵת*”, is an expression of raising up the hands (*נִשְׂיָאוֹת כְּפַיִם*) to recite the priestly blessing.

And superior in power — with kingship... and what caused you to lose all this?

You have the restlessness of water — the restlessness and the haste with which you hastened to display your anger, similar to water which hastens on its course.

Rashi explains that, by dint of his status as firstborn, Reuven’s descendents were destined to be kings and priests. But because Reuven rashly decided to move his father’s bed into his mother Leah’s tent after the passing of Yaakov’s beloved wife, Rachel, these privileges were taken from him.

Kingship was given to Yehuda instead, as the Torah continues: “A cub and a grown lion is Judah. From the prey, my son, you withdrew.” (Bereishis 49:9) As Rashi explains, Yehuda “withdrew from the prey” on two occasions: once, when he persuaded his brothers to sell, rather than kill, Yosef, and a second time, when he admitted to having had relations with Tamar, thus preventing her death. In the merit of these interventions, Yehuda earned the kingship.

The Questions:

1. The Targum writes that Reuven lost the birthright as well, as it is listed first in

the verse, “Reuven, you are my firstborn...” Why does Rashi only mention Reuven’s loss of the priesthood and kingship?

2. In his comments on Yaakov’s blessing to Yehuda, “From the prey, my son, you withdrew,” how does Rashi derive from the straightforward meaning of the verse that this refers to the incident with Tamar? The incident with Yosef is implied by a straightforward reading of the verse, for as Rashi explains, the wording “prey” is used in the narrative of Yosef. But where is Tamar alluded to?
3. Why is Yehuda saving Yosef and Tamar considered significant enough to merit the monarchy?

Reuven also attempted to rescue Yosef. In fact, Reuven planned to return Yosef to their father, while Yehuda was thinking of the profit they could make by selling Yosef instead of killing him. It was only because Reuven was engrossed in repentance and fasting for having moved his father’s bed that Reuven returned to the pit too late to have rescued Yosef.

And concerning Yehuda’s confession of his wrongdoing with Tamar, Reuven also surpassed this accomplishment by spending years repenting for the sin of meddling in his father’s relationships.

The Explanation:

Reuven’s action of moving his father’s bed was not severe enough to warrant the loss of his privileges. It was the manner in which he acted — “the restlessness and the haste with which you hastened to display your anger” — that revealed that he was unfit for the roles of kingship and priesthood.

Kingship and priesthood both are public roles that require a person to be attuned to the needs of others. One of the priest’s main roles is to bless the people and to teach them the laws of the Torah. The king must be attentive to the people and provide for all their needs.

Reuven’s rash reaction to his father not to place his bed in Leah’s tent revealed that he was not equipped to deal calmly and patiently with interpersonal dilemmas. He did not display the intuitive wisdom of the king or the patient love of the priest.

Yehuda, however, no matter the purity of his motives, actually saved Yosef and Tamar from death. Reuven might have harbored lofty intentions and deeper spiritual sensitivity, but his focus on his own spiritual and personal growth prevented him from acting on behalf of his fellow.

Yehuda, who pragmatically saved Yosef and Tamar, displayed the traits of leadership. The kingship was given to him.

The birthright of the firstborn, however, derives from the firstborn’s inherent moral and spiritual advantages as a result of his birth order. Reuven still possessed this moral sensitivity, and therefore, according to Rashi, Reuven did not relinquish all the privileges of the firstborn.

The Lesson:

When our own spiritual advancement infringes on our ability to act on behalf of others, we must be able to tear ourselves from our personal concerns to serve another Jew with love.
