

Spirituality vs. Leadership

By Yosef Y. Jacobson

One dark night outside a small town, a fire started inside the local chemical plant and in a blink it exploded into flames. The alarm went out to the fire departments from miles around. When the volunteer fire fighters appeared on the scene, the chemical company president rushed to the fire chief and said, "All of our secret formulas are in the vault in the center of the plant. They must be saved. I will give \$50,000 to the fire department that brings them out intact."

But the roaring flames held the firefighters off. More fire departments were called in as the situation became desperate. As the firemen arrived, the president shouted out that the offer was now \$100,000 to the fire department who could bring out the company's secret files.

From the distance, a lone siren was heard as another fire truck came into sight. It was the nearby Jewish rural township volunteer fire company composed entirely of men over the age of 65. To everyone's amazement, the little run-down fire engine passed all the newer sleek engines parked outside the plant... and drove straight into the middle of the inferno.

Outside the other firemen watched as the old timers jumped off and began to fight the fire with a performance and effort never seen before. Within a short time, they had extinguished the fire and saved the secret formulas.

The grateful president joyfully announced that feat he was upping the reward to \$200,000, and walked over to personally thank each of the brave, though elderly, fire fighters.

The local TV news reporters rushed in after capturing the event on film asking, "What are you going to do with all that money?"

"Well," said Morris Goldberg, the 70-year-old fire chief, "The first thing we are going to do is fix the brakes on that lousy truck!"

The Final Conversation

This week's Torah reading tells the story of Jacob's final conversation with his children. With profound vision, moving prose and astonishing candidness Jacob speaks to each of his sons, heart-to-heart, just moments before he is about to pass on to the next world.

"Come and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel," Jacob begins. Then he addresses Reuben, his oldest son, with razor-sharp words:

"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my power and the beginning of my might, foremost in rank and foremost in power. Water-like impetuosity — you will not be preeminent, for you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it."¹

Reuben the firstborn, the rabbis explain, should have been entitled to priesthood ("foremost in rank") and kingship ("foremost in power"). The Jewish priests and kings should have emerged from Reuben. But Reuben forfeited these privileges and they went instead to his brothers Levi and Judah, respectively. (Aaron's family of priests came from Levi; the Davidic dynasty of kings came from Judah). Reuben remained the firstborn, "my firstborn," with many of the privileges conferred by Jewish law on a firstborn (3), but he lost the priesthood and kingship.²

Reuben's Error

What was Jacob referring to when he spoke of Reuben "ascending on his bed"? The midrashic tradition³ offers two interpretations.

This first takes us back to a disturbing scene that transpired after Rachel's death, some 47 years earlier.

"So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb. Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.

"While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went and lay with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it."⁴

Rashi, following Talmudic tradition, insists that this passage is not to be understood literally and illuminates the backdrop behind this incident. When Rachel died, Jacob, who usually resided in her tent, moved his bed to the tent of Bilhah, her handmaid. For Reuben, Leah's oldest son, this was an unbearable provocation and a slap in his sensitive mother's face. It was bad enough that Jacob preferred Rachel to her sister Leah, but intolerable that he should prefer a handmaid to his mother. He therefore removed Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's.⁵

Almost a jubilee later, in his final moments, Jacob reminds Reuben of this episode and attributes his firstborn's loss of potential greatness to it. "Water-like impetuosity," Jacob declares, "you will not be preeminent, for you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it."

Reuben's Mandrakes

The midrash presents yet another meaning to Jacob's words, "For you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it." It takes us a back to another dramatic incident that occurred around ten years before the one just discussed.

"During wheat harvest," the Bible relates, "Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah (the commentators⁶ explain that mandrakes were considered both an aphrodisiac and fertility drug). Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?' Rachel said, 'Therefore, he shall lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'" Indeed, Jacob spent the night with Leah instead of Rachel.⁷

Reuben, in other words, was the indirect cause for a relocation of his father's bed for one night.

A Child's Sensitivity

What is fascinating about both of these tales is that they sketch a portrait of a remarkably sensitive and noble child. Reuben's heart goes out for his mother's plight. As the firstborn son of Leah, he seems to carry alone the burden of his mother's relative lack of appeal in Jacob's eyes. In fact, his very name, Reuben, meaning, "see, a son," was bestowed upon him by his mother, "because G-d has discerned my humiliation, for now my husband will love me."⁸

In the earlier episode, Reuben, as a young lad out in the field, is thinking of his mother's anguish and hoping that, with the aid of the mandrakes, Leah will be able to win Jacob's complete affection. In the latter episode following Rachel's death, Reuben can't bear the pain caused to his mother by Jacob's placing his bed in Bilaha's tent.

It is indeed true that in both of these instances Reuben's hastiness and impetuosity had negative consequences. In the incident with the mandrakes, had he waited until Rachel left Leah's tent, his gift to Leah might have prevented the bitter row that erupted between the two sisters—the only feud between them recorded in the Bible—and would have not created confusion in Jacob's sleeping arrangements. In the second instance, too, had Reuben broached the issue directly with his father or with Bilhah, instead of taking the matter into his own hands and moving his father's bed, the issue may have been resolved in a more dignified manner.

Still, it is clear that the motivation—in contrast to the end result—of both of these actions was pure and reflected profound moral concern. Why did he deserve to forfeit the priesthood and royalty?

Judah the King

Our dilemma becomes more disturbing upon considering who, of the eleven other sons of Jacob, received the gift of royalty in lieu of Reuben. It was the fourth son, Judah.

Here are Jacob's final words to Judah:

"A lion cub is Judah; from the prey, my son, you elevated yourself. He [Judah] crouches, lies down like a lion, like an awesome lion, who will dare rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah; nations will submit to him until the final tranquility comes."⁹

The message is clear. Just as the lion is the "king of the beasts,"¹⁰ Judah is destined to be the king of the nations. Indeed, Judah became the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David. Since David, royalty among the Jewish people belonged to Judah's tribe.¹¹ The messiah himself, we are told, will be a descendent of Judah.¹² Even our very name, "Jews" or, in Hebrew *Yehudim*, or in Yiddish, *Yidden*, is derived from the name Judah, or Yehudah. It was Judah who conferred his identity on the people.¹³

Why Judah? Jacob presents the reason in eight words: "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Judah was potentially a man of prey, a lion, a devourer; yet he succeeded in elevating himself from this terrible

characteristic. Judah transformed himself.

Why did Jacob view Judah as a potential man of prey? Rashi, quoting the midrashic tradition, focuses our attention to two rather unforgettable incidents about Judah that transpired nearly four decades earlier.¹⁴

The Joseph Drama

The first, of course, is when Joseph, on instruction of his father, pays a visit to his brothers, who are shepherding Jacob's flock in the city of Shechem.

The brothers, who despised Joseph deeply, see him approaching from afar. They realize that with no one to see them, they can kill Joseph and concoct a tale that will be impossible to refute. Only Reuben protests. The biblical text states:

"Reuben heard and saved him [Joseph] from their hands. He said, 'Let's not take his life'. Reuben said to them: 'Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him' — intending to rescue Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to his father."¹⁵

It is interesting to note that the Torah rarely described people's inner drives. In this instance, however, the Torah makes an exception, revealing to us Reuben's true motivations: He wished to save Joseph.

As the story continues, the brothers agree to Reuben's suggestion. They throw Joseph into an empty well and they sit down to eat a meal. In the midst of the meal they see an Arab caravan traveling to Egypt. Here, for the first time, we encounter Judah's voice:

"Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands. After all — he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'"¹⁶

The brothers consent. Joseph is sold and brought to Egypt as a slave, where, 13 years later, he will rise to become the viceroy of Egypt.

Reuben's Fasting

Reuben was not present during the sale. "When Reuben returned to the cistern," the Torah relates, "and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! And I, where can I go?'" The brothers dipped Joseph's tunic in blood, and presented the tunic to Jacob, who exclaimed: "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph has surely been torn to bits!"¹⁷

Where was Reuben during the sale of Joseph? The text is obscure, but it does offer a glimpse: The brothers sold Joseph while in the midst of a meal. The Torah, perhaps, shared with us this irrelevant detail in order to hint to us the reason for Reuben's absence. Reuben left the scene because he could not eat with his brothers. Why?

Rashi, again quoting the midrashic tradition, says that Reuben had been dressing himself in sackcloth and fasting ever since he rearranged his father's beds after Rachel's death. Although the incident with the bed occurred nine years earlier, Reuben was still seeking ways to repent. Therefore, he did not join his brothers in their meal and was not present during Joseph's sale.¹⁸

A Tale of Two Personas

Now, we come to understand Jacob's final words to Judah: "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Rashi explains, that when Jacob stated, upon discovering Joseph's blood-drenched tunic decades earlier, "a savage beast devoured him [Joseph]," he suspected that Joseph fell prey to Judah's hands. When Jacob learned the truth, that instead of letting Joseph die in the well Judah actually persuaded his brothers to sell him into slavery, Jacob, in appreciation, conferred upon Judah the crown of royalty, assuming the position taken from Reuben.

This is a deeply disturbing comment. Reuben is the only older brother of Joseph who attempts to save him and return him to his father. The Torah, as mentioned above, is unusually clear about Reuben's virtuous intentions. "His plan," states the Torah, "was to rescue Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to his father." Judah, in stark contrast, merely substitutes Joseph's death from starvation with a life sentence of slavery. Judah does not even consider liberating Joseph!

The moral contrast between Reuben and Judah is even more striking when we reflect on the wording employed by Judah to persuade his brothers to sell Joseph. "Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands. After all—he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'"

This, let's face it, is a speech of monstrous callousness. There is no word about the evil of murder, merely pragmatic calculation ("what will we gain"). At the very moment he calls Joseph "our own flesh and blood" he is proposing selling him as a slave!

The moral paradox embodied by Jacob in his final moments, as he moves the gift of kingship from Reuben to Judah, is nothing less than astonishing. In the very episode for which Judah is rewarded the gift of royalty (because he "elevated himself from prey"), Reuben stands head and shoulders above Judah in his nobility, compassion and sensitivity. Yet it is Reuben who loses the crown to Judah!

The Tamar Drama

As we recall, in addition to the Joseph drama, the Midrash and Rashi present a second meaning in Jacob's final words to Judah, "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." According to this interpretation, Jacob was alluding to the event that took place between Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar.

Tamar, we recall, had married, in succession, Judah's two elder sons, both of whom had died, leaving her a childless widow. Judah, fearing that his third son would share their fate, withheld him from her, thus leaving her unable to remarry and have children, since the levirate laws of marriage at the time held that when a husband died and left a childless widow, she was bound in marriage to either her brother-in-law or her father-in-law.¹⁹

Once she understands her situation, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute. Judah encounters her and they are intimate with each other. She becomes pregnant. Judah, unaware of the disguise, concludes that she must have had a forbidden relationship and orders her to be put to death by burning. At this point, Tamar, who, while disguised, had taken Judah's seal, cord and staff as a pledge, sends them to Judah with a message: "The father of my child is the man to whom these belong." Judah now understands the whole story. Not only has he placed Tamar in an impossible situation of grass widowhood, and not only is he the father of her child, but he also realizes that she has behaved with extraordinary discretion in revealing the truth without shaming him. (It is from this act of Tamar's that we derive the rule that "one should rather throw oneself into a fiery furnace than shame someone else in public."²⁰)

Judah admits he was wrong. "She is right!" he exclaims. "It is from me [that she has become pregnant]." Tamar's life, of course, is spared. She soon gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerach, the former becoming the ancestor of King David.

This, then, explains the meaning behind Jacob's words, "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Judah was a "man of prey" who sentenced Tamar to death. Yet at the last moment he confessed his guilt and rescued Tamar and her unborn twins from death. Because of this he was conferred with the power of kingship.

One Moment vs. Nine Years

This interpretation, too, is disturbing. Both Reuben and Judah commit serious wrongdoings. Reuben intervenes in his father's intimacy; Judah sentences an innocent pregnant woman to death. Both confess their guilt and take full responsibility for their wrong actions. But in this instance again, it is Reuben who surpasses Judah on two counts.

Firstly, Judah almost caused the destruction of three innocent lives, while Reuben merely relocated intimate furniture. Secondly, Judah admitted his guilt and that was it. Reuben, on the other hand, for at least nine years after his sin, was fasting every day in repentance!

We encounter here what appears as cruel cynicism at its finest. The act for which Judah receives the endowment of royalty—his readiness to confront his wrongdoing and acknowledge his guilt—is performed by his brother Reuben with far more depth and diligence. Yet it is Reuben who loses his potential greatness to Judah.

Furthermore, if Reuben has been fasting and repenting all this time for his mistake in tampering with his father's bed, why did this not suffice in having the royalty restored to him?

Reuben: A Spiritual Profile

Yet upon deeper reflection, it is precisely in this entire complex tale that we may encounter Judaism's perspective on the function and meaning of genuine royalty and leadership.

Reuben, throughout Genesis, displays moral dignity, sensitivity and gracefulness that surpasses Judah. Reuben, obviously, is a person who works on himself. He challenges his instincts, habits and emotions. He

seems to possess a frail ego. We do not notice a tinge of pompousness or arrogance in this human being. He is always thinking about somebody else. When he is in the field, his thoughts are with his mother and her plight. When Rachel dies, his thoughts, again, are with his mother. When Joseph is kidnapped, his heart is with his younger brother and father. Finally, for nine years he fasts and dons sackcloth in order to cleanse his ego, his sins, his faults.

Yet, Reuben's greatness is also his flaw.

If we examine every single episode recorded about Reuben we discover an astonishing commonality. In each of them, his noble intentions come across in delightful splendor; his sensitivity to injustice is nothing short of remarkable; his willingness to work on himself and his faults is legendary. Yet in all of them, the other person—the outsider, the victim—never ends up actually gaining from Reuben's kind intentions.

Leah, instead of enjoying her mandrakes, ends up in a bitter row with her sister. By moving Jacob's bed, instead of creating a more affectionate ambiance between Jacob and Leah, Reuben ends up offending his father deeply and not helping his mother's situation in the slightest. In the Joseph story, Reuben's actions have Joseph placed in an empty well, where he can easily die from starvation or venomous serpents.

Finally, Reuben's fasting and repenting for nine years is what actually causes him to be absent while his brother's sell Joseph into Egyptian slavery. While Joseph lay helpless in a well, Reuben went off to pray, meditate and repent. Had he remained, he might have actually rescued Joseph before he was sold.

The Contrast

At last, a pattern emerges. Reuben is consumed with his personal daily battle for transcendence. Reuben is a great man, but he is not a leader. He is a spiritual giant, but he is not a rebbe, a king, a shepherd to his people. Reuben ought to remain the firstborn son, with all the great status involved, since he might be morally superior to his brothers. But he has not proven worthy of become a genuine leader.

Now, let us draw the contrast with Judah's profile.

In both episodes—the sale of Joseph and the relationship with Tamar—Judah does not display the dignity or sincerity of his brother Reuben. Judah's actions leave him personally wanting, but they produce concrete and tangible benefits to the victims in need of help. As a result of Judah's words to his brothers, Joseph is not allowed to die in the well and is left to live as a slave. As a consequence of Judah's confession, Tamar and her unborn children are saved from death. Judah does not reside in the richness of his own inner space; he is present in the flames of the outsider. Reuben's intentions were greater; but Judah made a real impact on people's lives.

Of course, Judah must learn from his errors and grow to become a deeper and finer human being, which he does. Years later, when Joseph's younger brother Benjamin is about to be taken as a slave, Judah offers himself instead. Judah experiences a metamorphosis.

Reuben too, learns from his errors, rectifies them and discovers deeper and greater horizons of truth. But in the final analysis, Reuben is a great, moral spirit; Judah is a king. The difference? Reuben sees his spiritual work as the epicenter of his universe; Judah knows that the bottom line of life is not who you are, but how your decisions and behavior affect the fate of other people. For Reuben, even at his highest moments, the zenith of life consists of man's confrontation with his own tension and darkness. Judah, in contrast, even at his lowest moments, knows that life in its ultimate expression is about touching and embracing the otherness of a stranger.

And that is what it means to be leader.²¹

FOOTNOTES

1. [Genesis 49:3-4](#).
2. Rashi to [Genesis 49:3-4](#); Midrash Tanchumah (Buber edition) Vayeizei 13; Agadas Berieshis section 48. Cf. Rashi to [Genesis 35:23](#); 29:32. This does not contradict [Chronicles 1 5:1](#), see Rashi ibid. and Likkutei Sichot vol. 15 p. 444 and references noted there. Other sources are of the opinion that Reuben also forfeited his firstborn status, see Midrash Rabbah Berieshit 98:4; 99:6; Tanchumah Vayechi 9; Targum Unkelus, Targum Yonatan and Targum Yonatan Ben Uzeiel to [Genesis 49:3-4](#); Agadat Bereishit section 82.
3. Midrash Rabah, Bereishit 98:4.
4. [Genesis 35:19-22](#).
5. Rashi on verse; Talmud, Shabbat 55b.
6. See *The Living Torah* (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan) in footnote to [Genesis 30:14](#) for a detailed commentary and references on the subject.
7. Genesis 30: 14-16.
8. [Genesis 29:32](#).
9. [Genesis 49:9-10](#).
10. Talmud Chagigah 13b.
11. See Maimonides' *Laws of Torah Study* 3:1; *Laws of Kings* 1:7-8. Cf. Maimonides' fascinating commentary to Genesis ibid.
12. Maimonides' *Laws of Torah Study* 3:1; *Laws of Kings* 11:4.
13. See Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 98:6.
14. Rashi to Genesis ibid. from Midrash Rabbah Bereishis 98:7.
15. [Genesis 37:21-22](#).
16. Ibid. verses 26-27.
17. Ibid. verses 29-33.
18. Rashi on [Genesis 37:29](#), from Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 84:19.
19. Genesis 38; see Nachmanides' commentary to verse 8.
20. Talmud Sotah 10b; quoted in Rashi to Genesis 38: 25
21. This essay is based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, delivered on Shabbat Vayechi 5730 (December. 27, 1969) and published in *Sichot Kodesh 5730* vol. 1 pp. 322-332; *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 15 pp. 439-446. A number of the ideas and rendition of biblical narratives presented in this essay were culled from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' *Covenant and Conversation*, Vayigash 5763 and Vayeishev 5764.

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