

Parashat Vayigash 5771, 2010:

The Greatness of Yehudah's Humility

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Yaakov Avinu's (our Patriarch Yaakov's) blessing to his 12 sons gives us a great deal of insight into the true nature of each *shevet* (tribe). Yehudah, the protagonist of this week's *parasha*, was particularly fortunate in that his father blessed him with a beautiful *bracha* (blessing) composed of five verses:

Judah, [as for] you, your brothers will acknowledge you. Your hand will be at the nape of your enemies, [and] your father's sons will prostrate themselves to you. A cub [and] a grown lion is Judah. From the prey, my son, you withdrew. He crouched, rested like a lion, and like a lion, who will rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the student of the law from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him will be a gathering of peoples. He binds his foal to a vine, and to a tendril [he binds] his young donkey. [He launders] his garment with wine, and with the blood of grapes binds his raiment. [He is] red eyed from wine and white toothed from milk. (*Sefer Bereishit* 49: 8-12, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Given its poetic nature, this passage offers us a significant number of interpretative challenges. Nonetheless, the meaning of one phrase seems quite clear: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah..." As Rashi (1040-1105) explains: "**The scepter shall not depart from Judah:** from David and thereafter..." In other words, following King Saul, all legitimate future kings of Israel would come from the tribe of Yehudah. This statement is clearly a prophetic vision that was vouchsafed to *Yaakov Avinu* by the Almighty. Based upon its import, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) searched for the rationale inherent in Hashem's choice of Yehudah. Thus, they asked in *Tosefta Berachot*, 4:17-18:

“Why did Yehudah merit kingship?” (“*Mipnei mah zachah Yehudah l’malchut?*”) Our Sages responded with three different answers:

1. Because he admitted his culpability in reference to his daughter-in-law, Tamar (*Sefer Bereishit* 38:26)
2. Because he saved his brother [Yosef] from death (*Sefer Bereishit* 37:26)
3. Because of his humility (*anivut*, *Sefer Bereishit* 42:33)

All of these responses deserve deep and considered analysis. Due to space limitations, however, I will limit my comments to an examination of the outstanding role humility played in Hashem’s choice of Yehudah for kingship. In order to do this, a few brief comments regarding *anivut* are in order.

Within Judaism’s purview, *anivut* is beyond question one of the most important *middot* (ethical qualities) that a person must strive to develop. Arrogance (*gaavah*) is the exact opposite of what Hashem wants from us. This is illustrated by the following passage from *Talmud Bavli*, *Sotah* 5a:

R. Chisda said, and according to another version it was Mar 'Ukba: “Every man in whom is haughtiness of spirit, the Holy One, blessed be He, declares, I and he cannot both dwell in the world; as it is said: ‘Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him will I destroy; he that has an high look and a proud heart will I not suffer’ — read not “him” [I cannot suffer], but “with him” I cannot [dwell].” (Translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

Throughout Rabbinic literature, *gaavah* is perceived as one of the main factors that can lead toward a multiplicity of sins. Hence, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) deviated from his own rule of the *shvil hazahav* (the middle path) regarding the rejection of this unethical personality trait:

There are those moral qualities where it is **prohibited** (*assur*) for a person to follow the middle path. Rather, he must distance himself from one extreme and totally pursue its opposite. This refers to arrogance (*govah lav*). It is not good enough for an individual to be humble alone. Instead, he must have a lowly character and his spirit must be

exceedingly low. Therefore, it states regarding Moshe our teacher, that he was exceedingly humble (*anav m'od*) rather than merely stating that he was humble. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot 2:3*) (Translation my own)

Anyone who acts with haughtiness is, in reality, trying to substitute himself for Hashem. “*B’kochi v’otzem yadi*” (“By **my** strength and by **my** hand,” *Sefer Devarim 8:17*) is, therefore, the antithesis of Jewish life and living. Little wonder, then, that the great Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) taught us in his celebrated *Iggeret* that when we act humbly, Hashem’s divine spirit and glory rest upon us and we merit *Olam Haba* (the World to Come).

How do these ideas apply to Yehudah? In my view, the true leader places his needs second, and the needs of those he represents first. Paradoxically, he must be subservient in word and deed to the community, the *tzibur* that he leads. Yehudah demonstrated this kind of humility in both this week’s and last week’s *parshiot*. At the end of *Parashat Mitzet*, the Torah relates the brothers’ reaction to the discovery of the regent’s royal cup in Binyamin’s sack. Significantly, when the brothers stood before Yosef, the spokesman was none other than Yehudah: “And Judah said, ‘What shall we say to my master? What shall we speak, and how shall we exonerate ourselves? G-d has found your servants’ iniquity both we and the one in whose possession the goblet has been found.’” (*Sefer Bereishit 44:16*) Herein, Yehudah described himself, and all of his brothers, as being Yosef’s servants. Yet, in the beginning of our *parasha*, when Yehudah attempted to rescue Binyamin from the state of servitude, he labeled only himself as Yosef’s servant: “Then Judah approached him and said, ‘Please, my lord, let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant, for

you are like Pharaoh.” (Ibid., 44:18) Moreover, he repeated this self-abasing servant appellation two more times in the course of pleading for Binyamin’s release:

For your servant assumed responsibility for the boy from my father, saying, “If I do not bring him to you, I will have sinned against my father forever.” So now, please let your servant stay instead of the boy as a slave to my lord, and may the boy go up with his brothers. (Ibid., 32-33)

Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 13:3 viewed Yehudah’s *anivut* as the essential reason for his tribe’s future position of glory and honor:

Rabbi Berechyah the Kohan, the son of Rabi, said in the name of Rabbi Levi: “The Holy One Blessed be He said: ‘Yehudah, since you have lowered yourself before your younger brother [in order to rescue him from servitude,] when the *Mishkan* (portable Sanctuary in the desert) will be erected and all of the tribes will come to offer [sacrifices]; there will be no tribe that will offer before you. Rather, they will all demonstrate respect before you and you will have [the honor] of being the first to bring [the sacrifices].’ Therefore the Torah states: “And the one [of the tribal princes] who brought sacrifices on the first day... from the tribe of Yehudah...” (Translation, my own)

Anivut, therefore, emerges as one of the singular qualities that prepared Yehudah to receive the mantle of kingship.

I believe that we have much to learn from Yehudah’s emphasis upon the importance of *anivut*. According to the Ramban (Op. cit.), *anivut* is the single greatest *middah* that an individual can develop. His proof text, while few in words, speaks volumes: “In the wake of humility comes fear of the L-rd, riches, honor, and life.” (*Sefer Mishle* 22:4) Thus, like Yehudah of old, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to live lives infused with humility and awe of Heaven. Then, may we, too, be blessed with *anivut*’s rewards – “riches, honor, and life.”

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.