

Parashat Vayigash 5780, 2020:

*And Hashem Chose Yehudah*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the dramatic encounter between Yehudah and Yosef: “*Vayigash aluv* — then Yehudah approached him [Yosef]...” As in many verses of Tanach, these simple words conceal far more than they reveal. At this moment, Yehudah is the spokesman for his family, whereas Yosef, unbeknownst to his brothers, is the second-in-command of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the world. This asymmetrical power dynamic, however, will undergo a radical shift in the succeeding millennia of Jewish history for, as we know, it is Yehudah’s descendants that are destined to be the kings of Israel, and not Yosef’s.

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, notes that “Joseph wanted to be king, to combine political and economic power with spiritual leadership. He dreamt of sheaves and he also dreamt of stars.” In contrast, “Judah was not a dreamer. Yet, apparently there was something in his personality which commanded respect and obedience...And now Judah is in the forefront; he is the one who argues with Joseph...He was a very strong and powerful personality who radiated authority.” (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and*

*Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler editors, page 40)

Why did Hashem choose Yehudah over Yosef to lead the Jewish people? After all, Yosef would seem to have been the “natural choice,” since he, rather than Yehudah, was well-practiced in all aspects of social and political leadership. According to the Rav, in order to better understand Hashem’s choice, we first need to analyze the dual nature of the covenantal community (the Jewish people), and the vast differences that obtained between Leah and Rachel:

The covenantal community that G-d established with Abraham displayed two characteristic moral streaks, two tendencies which *prima facie* are contradictory and mutually exclusive. First, the covenantal community does not shrink from power...Without power one cannot be majestic and dignified. Majesty and dignity are not sinful, they are moral virtues.

The pursuit of power in the service of majesty and dignity is counterbalanced by the second constitutive element of the covenantal community, namely, sacrificial action:

...the covenantal community displays another trait as well: sacrificial action, the ability to give away and to renounce basic inalienable rights for the sake of a great vision, an ideal, or for the benefit of another human being or community...Covenantal man knows when to act like a warrior — majestic, dignified and proud — and when to part with everything he has. (Pages 41-42)

In the Rav’s estimation, these two essential qualities of the covenantal community were embodied by Leah and Rachel:

Leah and Rachel were not merely people. Leah was the personification of *middat ha-gevurah*, of dignity and majesty...She symbolized the strength of Jewish character and the unshakable will of the Jew throughout the ages and millennia. It is because of that persistence, that stubbornness and tenacity, that we still remain a living people after thirty-five hundred years of persecution and massacres. (Page 43)

While Leah was the exemplification of dignity and majesty, Rachel’s persona epitomized great sacrificial action:

Rachel is the opposite of Leah. She is the tragic heroine who lives for others and not for herself. She gave up her most precious possessions and her elementary rights in order to

make it possible for others to find the happiness denied them...She helped her sister take Jacob away from herself. She brushed aside all her own hopes and cherished wishes because her sister was also entitled to the same happiness which Providence had showered upon her, but denied to her sister. (Page 44)

As in so much of the Rav's writing, Leah and Rachel are presented as nearly pure archetypes. Within this conceptual construct, Leah is *gevurah* and Rachel is *tzimtzum* (withdrawal) and sacrificial action. Fascinatingly for the Rav, each mother endows their respective sons (in this instance, Yehudah and Yosef) with their most powerful personality trait: "Leah represented *gevurah*, and Judah was a son of Leah. Judah's personality radiated power, authority, and prestige...Judah is self-asserting, valiant, and fearless; he personifies dignity and majesty." In stark contrast:

Joseph was the son of Rachel, to whom was assigned a mission to sacrifice, to retreat from positions won with blood and tears...He retreated many times, thus sacrificing himself, but his real sacrifice was the way he treated his brothers when they were at his mercy: "Be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here" (*Sefer Bereishit* 45:5) He was not the least bit vindictive.

The Rav now explains how Yosef could have acted in a way that was *mevatel et atzmo* — he virtually nullified himself before his brothers:

Only a son of Rachel could have done that. Only the son of Rachel, who had sacrificed her love for Leah's sake, could down-grade his own self and offer friendship and kindness to his brothers who were responsible for all the misery and agony he had experienced. Joseph was the representative of *hesed* (kindness) and *kedushah* (holiness, page 45).

We are now ready to ask our question once again, "Why did Hashem choose Yehudah over Yosef to lead the Jewish people?" The Rav formulated this question, and its answer, in the following manner:

Who then should be the king: the representative of *gevurah* or the representative of *hesed* and *kedushah*? The problem was submitted to the Almighty, and He decided in favor of *gevurah*. The king is the trustee and the leader of the people; he must possess all facets of *gevurah*: the ability to acquire, to defend, to possess and to protect. Sacrificial life is good as far as the individual is concerned. But the king cannot be a sacrificial type at the expense of the nation. (Page 45)

Based upon the Rav's trenchant analysis, we are in a much better position to understand Hashem's choice of the tribe of Yehudah for kingship, and ultimately, messianic leadership. Yehudah, like his mother Leah, is *gevurah*, whereas Yosef, like his mother Rachel, is *tzimtzum*, *hesed*, and *kedushah*. Our kings must represent the highest aspects of *gevurah* if they are to lead and protect; only Yehudah could fulfill this role.

May the time come soon and, in our days, when we will witness the return of our nation's kingship in the person of the *Mashiach*, and the rebuilding of the *Beit HaMikdash*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.