

REASON TO LIVE

by Rabbi Label Lam

Yaakov called for his sons and said, "Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. Gather and listen, sons of Yaakov, and listen to Israel, your father. Reuvain, 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... (Breishis 49:1-4)

superior in rank: You were fit to be superior over your brothers with the priesthood... Rashi

and superior in power: [i.e. superior] with kingship... Rashi

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. Therefore- ... Rashi

you shall not have superiority: You shall no longer receive all these superior positions that were fit for you. – Rashi

How is all this a blessing? Reuvain's beloved and holy father is telling him in his final moments that he could have become great if not for a certain character flaw. How much was fumbled, how much was lost because of what we would call "impulsivity"? He could have been the super star in a nation of super stars, but he acted hastily a few times with a vision clouded by emotion. That trait of impulsivity cost him plenty.

Unfortunately a person is often judged by and remembered for the mistakes he made and all the rest is evaporated and is forgotten like last year's snow. That doesn't sound like a blessing to me! How then was it a blessing?

The answer is- it was the truth- the absolute truth! It wasn't that he just made a few mistakes. No, those missteps reveal a deep and continuous fault line in his personality.

He received from his loving father a very deep reading of the root cause for his not being granted leadership. Sure it must have stung terribly but it was the medicine he needed. How can a father withhold such critical information from his child if he knows it will affect a cure and save him from further harm!?

Reuvain needed desperately to know the truth even if it hurt. Harry Truman was nicknamed "Give'm hell Harry". He is reputed to have said, "I never gave anyone hell. I just said the truth and it felt like hell!" So how was this dose of TRUTH a blessing? How is the condemning report a help for Reuvain?

I went to Rabbi Mordechai Schwab, the Tzadik of Monsey, with a personal problem, a character issue that was playing itself out in a few interpersonal relationships. He was rubbing his heart the whole time like he was polishing a diamond, listening empathetically, and reciting quietly to himself, (I'll say it in English), "Purify my heart to serve You in truth!" (V'Taher Libeinu L'Avdecha B' Emes!)

He then told me something that both calmed my spirit and made me want to faint at the same time. While continuing to rub his heart, he said, "I have the same problem. I have been working on it for 50 years and it's just starting to go away!"

That is him, a true Tzadik, working at it with his wisdom, extraordinary effort, and constancy. He's working on this same issue for 50 years and it's *just* starting to go away. I thought, "What hope is there for me?" I also realized it's not something that's going to vanish in an instant and I might just have to spend the rest of my life working on it.

I realize that I now even find myself in great company and in the company of the great. That's my mission! That's my G-d given task to work on that aspect of my character. My success or failure in life is dependent upon this correction being made. The Vilna Gaon had stated, "If one is not improving his character then why is he alive!?" It turns out then, that stinging rebuke actually gave Reuvain **reason to live!**