

YEHUDA, YOSEF AND CHANUKAH

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Today's Learning:

Chullin 7:3-4

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Sanhedrin 80

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Eruvin 37

This week's parashah describes the sale of Yosef and begins a series of three parashot that relate the conflict between Yosef and his brothers. These parashot are always read on or around Chanukah. Interestingly, in Tractate Shabbat (22a), in the midst of discussing the laws of Chanukah, the Gemara seems to digress to describe the pit into which Yosef was thrown by his brothers. Since the Gemara was not arranged haphazardly, this further suggests that there must be some relationship between the Chanukah story and the "rivalry" between Yosef and his brothers. Many explanations have been given. R' Shimshon David Pinkus z"l suggests the following:

When Yosef related his first dream to his brothers, they challenged him (Bereishit 37:8): "Would you then rule over us? Would you then dominate us?" Yaakov's sons knew that King David was destined to come from Yehuda, and they considered Yosef to be a rebel against King David's dynasty. (Indeed, Yosef's descendant Yeravam would later rebel against King David's grandson and would establish the kingdom of the ten northern tribes.)

However, it was never Yosef's intention to rebel, nor was he trying to supplant the rule of the tribe of Yehuda or of King David. Rather, Yosef and Yehuda represented different ways of serving Hashem, and Yosef was seeking recognition for his approach. What are these different approaches?

The name "Yehuda" is made up of G-d's Four Letter Name, plus the letter dalet. The Gemara teaches that the letter dalet represents one who has nothing (in Hebrew, "dal"). [Note that the letter dalet lacks sides all around. Like a pauper, it is incapable of holding anything.]

When Yehuda was born, his mother Leah said, "I thank Hashem." She recognized that all comes from Hashem, and she gave Yehuda a name that reflects that fact. This was always Leah's attitude. Thus we read (Bereishit 29:17) that Leah's eyes were red, for she was always crying her heart out to Hashem. Likewise, Yehuda's descendant, David, said of himself (Tehilim 22:7), "I am a worm, not a man." Despite his great accomplishments, David took no credit for himself, for he recognized that all comes from Hashem.

In contrast, Yosef attributed to a person greater control over his own spiritual standing. And, he taught that this requires a person to be perfect. In our parashah, both Yehuda and Yosef faced similar challenges. Yehuda seemingly failed his test (with Tamar), but he confessed and moved on with his life. Likewise, Yehuda's descendants David and Menashe erred and repented. This was not Yosef's view. He told Potiphar's wife (paraphrasing 39:9), "If I fail, I shall be considered a sinner." The Gemara teaches that Yaakov appeared to Yosef at that moment and told him that his place among the tribes would be forfeited forever if he failed his test. In contrast to Leah, Yosef's mother Rachel is described as perfectly beautiful. Rachel's descendant King Shaul also had to be perfect, and, for one sin, he forfeited his entire kingdom.

Yosef's brothers felt that Yosef's approach was dangerously close to Greek philosophy. The Greeks, too, preached self-improvement and perfection, but this ultimately leads to denying G-d. Unlike the Greeks, Yosef's focus was on spiritual improvement, but Yosef's brothers felt that any philosophy that attributes undue importance to man's accomplishments is heretical.

Ultimately, the approaches of Yehuda and Yosef will be reconciled, as described in the haftarah for Parashat Vayigash (the parashah in which the confrontation between Yosef and Yehuda reaches its climax). Regardless of what tribe we come from, we all call ourselves "Yehudim" -- spiritual descendants of Yehuda. Like Yehuda, we say (Tehilim 8:5), "What is man that You should remember him." Yet, in the next breath we acknowledge (Tehilim 8:6), "You have made him slightly less than the angels." One of Judaism's most unique teachings is the idea that man can be G-d's partner. In the time of the Bet Hamikdash, fire for the altar came down from Heaven, yet G-d expected man to feed the fire with wood. Similarly, we work hard at our jobs, yet we know that success is dependent on His Will.

With this lesson in mind, one can revolutionize his attitude, R' Pinkus adds. He notes, for example, that even people who would never waste their time reading certain popular magazines will look at

those publications while waiting with their children at the pediatrician's office. Why? Because they feel that the time spent in the waiting room is wasted time anyway. But it's not. One should instead see that time as minutes or hours spent in partnership with G-d, healing and raising a Jewish child, not as time to be "written-off". This is the Jewish outlook. (Sichot Rabbi Shimshon David Pinkus: Chanukah p. 51)

"Reuven said to them, 'Do not shed blood! Throw him (Yosef) into this pit in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him!' - intending to rescue him from their hand, to return him to his father." (37:22)

Rashi explains that the last phrase is not part of Reuven's words, but rather is the Torah's testimony that Reuven's intention was to save Yosef.

What else would we think? Isn't it apparent that Reuven was saving Yosef? R' Yekutiel Yehuda Gruenwald z"l (Hungarian rabbi; died 1934) explains:

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 17a) teaches that when a court begins its deliberations in a capital case, if all of the judges are in favor of convicting the defendant, he goes free. The Gemara also teaches that in a capital case the Chief Justice votes last. Thus, one might think that when Reuven recommended not killing Yosef, he reasoned as follows: If we are all in favor of killing him, he will have to be freed. I, as the eldest, have the final vote. Therefore, I will speak against killing him in order to ensure that he is killed.

That is what one might have thought. Therefore the Torah testifies: Reuven's true intention was to save Yosef. (Quoted in Al Hada'af, Sanhedrin 17)

Why does a capital defendant go free if the judges are unanimously in favor of convicting him? R' Reuven Margalioth z"l (Israel; died 1971) quotes the following explanations in his commentary on Tractate Sanhedrin:

Rashbatz explains: This law does not apply if, after deliberations, the court votes unanimously to convict the defendant. Rather, it applies only if all of the judges are convinced of the defendant's guilt as soon as they have heard the evidence. The Torah teaches that a defendant may not be convicted in a capital case on the same day that the evidence was heard because the judges must deliberate and reflect on the evidence and the arguments. However, if all of the judges are immediately convinced of the defendant's guilt, deliberations are pointless. Since the defendant cannot be given what the Torah considers to be a fair trial, he must be freed.

Maharal explains: The Torah wants judges to look at every side of an issue in order to reach the truth. But, because of man's physical nature, such intellectual pursuits require great effort. Once a judge has made up his mind, he will not exert the effort that is necessary to reach truth. Therefore, the defendant may not be judged. (Of course, Maharal adds, G-d will judge the defendant.) (Margalioth Hayam)

"It was at that time that Yehuda went down from his brothers..." (38:1)

Rashi says that Yehuda's brothers lowered him from his previous stature because he failed to use his influence to save Yosef.

R' Moshe Bezalel Alter z"l (son of the Sefat Emet) commented: That is why Yehuda immediately got married, for the halachah accords a bridegroom the status of royalty. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

R' Yosef Zundel Hutner z"l

R' Yosef Zundel was born in 1846 in Dvinsk, where his father was a noted scholar. His father was also his first, and only, teacher; from a young age, R' Yosef Zundel was self-taught.

At the age of 25, R' Yosef Zundel published his first work, Bikkurei Yosef. (In the introduction, he bemoans the passing of his young wife.) Thereafter he moved to Bialystok, where he remarried, and became the chavruta/ study partner of R' Meir Simcha Hakohen, who later achieved fame as rabbi of Dvinsk and author of Meshech Chochmah and Ohr Sameach. R' Yosef Zundel himself was offered the rabbinate of Dvinsk at that time, but he declined it.

In 1897, R' Yosef Zundel became rabbi of Eishishok. The demands on his time in this small town were few, and he was able to study Torah almost without interruption. Even during World War I, when the front approached Eishishok, R' Yosef Zundel was not distracted from his study.

R' Yosef Zundel took it for granted that young men should become Torah scholars. When he was introduced to R' Eliezer Yehuda Finkel (then a student in Radin, later rosh yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) and was told that the boy was expert in the entire Talmud, R' Yosef Zundel asked, "How old is he?" Told that the student was 17 years-old, the sage responded, "Then why is it a big deal that he knows the entire Talmud?!" Similarly, he told the young Yosef Shlomo Cahaneman (later the "Ponovezher Rav"), "Being a great Torah scholar does not require constant study. Fourteen hours a day is enough."

R' Yosef Zundel also was known for his piety and for the power of his prayers. When supplicants would seek a blessing from the Chafetz Chaim, he would send them to nearby Eishishok, to R' Yosef Zundel.

R' Yosef Zundel passed away on 27 Shevat 5679 / 1919. He left several written works, which were published by his sons. One of his grandsons was R' Yehoshua Hutner, executive director of the Encyclopedia Talmudit project. The latter's sister, Chava Leah, was the wife of R' Zvi Yehuda Kook. R' Yitzchak Hutner, rosh yeshiva of Yeshiva Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, also was a relative.

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