

CHANUKAH AND MECHIRAS YOSEF: THE HIDDEN CONNECTION

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Hamaayan / The Torah Spring Edited by Shlomo Katz

Parashat Vayaishev
Volume XVIII, No. 9
25 Kislev 5764
December 20, 2003

Sponsored by the Evans family
in memory of Bonnie's aunt, Ite Leah (Lillian Erasmus) a"h

Today's Learning:
Negaim 5:2-3
O.C. 139:5-7
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Menachot 75
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Yevamot 38

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, because of one sin, he forfeited his entire kingdom.

Yosef's brothers felt that Yosef's approach was dangerously close to what would be 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's descendant King David, 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 is 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)

"And Reuven heard, and he saved him [Yosef] from their hand; he said, 'Let us not strike him mortally . . . Throw him into the pit in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him' - intending to rescue him from their hand, to return him to their father." (37:21-22)

The midrash says (commenting on Shir Hashirim 7:14): "'The dudaim/ jasmine flowers yield fragrance' - this refers to Reuven, who saved Yosef; 'and at our door are treats' - this refers to the light of Chanukah." What is the connection between Reuven's saving Yosef and Chanukah?

R' Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel z"l Hy"d (Slovakia; killed in the Holocaust in 1945) explains: Numerous commentaries discuss the following famous question, known as the "Bet Yosef's question": If the Maccabees found a jug with enough oil to last for one day and the oil lasted for eight days, the miracle itself was seven days long. Why then is Chanukah celebrated for eight days?

One answer that is given (by R' David Halevi z"l, the "Taz") is that miracles always involve making something-out-of-something ("yesh mee'yesh"), not something-out-of-nothing ("yesh mai'ayin"). For example, we read in Melachim II (chapter 4) that the prophet Elisha caused a small amount of oil to fill dozens of jugs. He did not cause a miracle involving flour, bread or some other commodity because the widow did not have any of those things. However, because she had a few drops of oil, he could cause the oil to "multiply" miraculously.

Similarly, writes the Taz, in order for the oil to "multiply" and last for eight days, there had to be a drop left at the end of the first day. This means, in turn, that less than one day's supply of oil was consumed during the first day that the menorah burned. Thus, the miracle did last more than seven days.

Of course, continues R' Teichtel, Hashem is capable of bringing about a miracle that involves something-out-of-nothing ("yesh mai'ayin"). However, the Taz's point is that to whatever extent a miracle can be made to appear more natural, Hashem prefers that.

How do we know this? R' Teichtel answers: The gemara says that the pit into which Yosef was thrown was home to snakes and scorpions. How then was Reuven saving Yosef by throwing him into this pit? The answer is that Reuven was counting on Hashem to save Yosef. But, if Reuven was counting on Hashem, why did he make any effort to save Yosef? Let Hashem do it! The answer is that Reuven knew that Hashem prefers that miracles be lessened.

Now we see the connection between Reuven's saving Yosef and Chanukah. Why do we observe Chanukah for eight days, not seven? Because, as Reuven taught us, Hashem prefers that miracles

be lessened, and from this we know that some oil was left over after the first day.

(She'eilot U'teshuvot Mishneh Sachir: O.C. II, No. 24)

"So [Yaakov] sent [Yosef] from the valley of Chevron . . ." (37:14)

Rashi comments: Is Chevron in a valley? Chevron is on a mountain! Rather, this refers to the "deep" plan relating to the tzaddik who is buried in Chevron (i.e., Avraham), to bring about what was told to Avraham, "Your descendants will be foreigners in a land which is not theirs" (i.e., Egypt).

R' Mattisyahu Solomon shlita (Mashgiach at Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, N.J.) elaborates on Rashi's comment as follows:

This is a parashah in which all the major players make mistakes that not only have serious consequences, but also seem to us to be obvious errors. Yaakov openly favors one son over the others. Yosef persists in relating his dreams to his brothers despite their negative reactions. Yosef's brothers conspire to kill him and end up selling him into slavery.

How could so many intelligent people - indeed, prophets - make such blunders? The answer is that Yaakov, Yosef and his brothers were all "playing into the hands" of Hashem's master plan. This is what Rashi is telling us - every seemingly irrational event that occurred happened because of Hashem's "deep" plan.

This lesson, that Hashem stands behind the scenes pulling the strings of history, is so important that the Torah drew our attention to it by seemingly making a "mistake" (so-to-speak) and saying that Chevron is in a valley.

Another point regarding Hashem's hand in history: If we had been present when Yosef was sold into slavery, we would have thought it was an immense tragedy. Had we been present when Yaakov traveled to Egypt to be reunited with Yosef, we would have rejoiced. Yet, we would have been wrong both times. Yosef's sale to Egypt was a good thing, for it led to his becoming viceroy and saving his family from famine. On the other hand, Yaakov's journey to Egypt was an unhappy event, for it was the beginning of the long exile in that land.

(Matnat Chaim: Ma'amarim p. 56)

"And Reuven heard, and he saved him [Yosef] from their hand; he said, 'Let us not strike him mortally . . . Throw him into the pit in the wilderness . . .'" (37:21-22)

The gemara (Shabbat 24a) states that this pit was home to snakes and scorpions. The halachah is that if a man falls into a pit full of snakes and scorpions, he is deemed dead and his widow may remarry. Yet, the Torah refers to Reuven's act as saving Yosef!

In contrast, Yehuda convinced his brothers to remove Yosef from the pit and to sell him into slavery. Yet, the gemara (Sanhedrin 6a) says that whoever praises Yehuda for this angers Hashem. Why?

R' Chaim of Volozhin z"l (1749-1821) explained: Reuven caused Yosef to be lowered into a pit full of snakes and scorpions, but the pit was in Eretz Yisrael. Yehuda saved Yosef's physical life, but he caused Yosef to be taken out of Eretz Yisrael. It is far better, said R' Chaim, to remain in Eretz Yisrael surrounded by snakes and scorpions than to live outside of Eretz Yisrael.

(Quoted in the journal Yeshurun Vol. VI, p. 200)

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