TAKE 'CAR'E OF YOURSELF

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The storyline of parshas Vayeishev centres around the sale of Yosef as a slave to the Egyptians, and the ensuing events, with the exception of one relatively small, seemingly tangential account of Yehuda's separation from his brothers, and some of what went on with him. Indeed, Rashi questions why the Torah chose to interrupt its narrative of Yosef with something apparently unrelated.

As we know, the "sale" of Yosef first took root in the scheme of a cold-blooded murder.

"Come, and let us kill him, and throw him into one of the pits. And we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.'" (37:20)

Reuven was the first to modify the plan: "Rather than committing murder, why don't we just toss him into a pit, and let nature take its course..." His real plan was to come back later, when no one was around, and rescue Yosef. When Yehuda noticed a group of Ishmaelites approaching, he suggested that they could just as easily "do away" with Yosef by selling him into slavery, thereby avoiding taking his life, and at the same time making away with a tidy profit. The rest is history.

With this background, Rashi explains, we can understand the interruption of the story of Yosef with the separation of Yehuda from his brothers: When the brothers saw their father, Yaakov's, unbearable pain at the loss of his beloved son, they truly regretted what they had done. Analyzing what had transpired, they became critical of Yehudah. "You were the one who suggested selling him," they said. "We listened to you, because you were a leader among us. Had you told us to return him [to Yaakov], we would have listened to you as well! (38:1)" Accordingly, the brothers temporarily removed Yehuda from his leadership role, whereupon he separated from them ("At that time Yehuda went down from his brothers... " [38:1-30]).

There seem to be a number of troublesome questions here. First of all, whereas the best the other brothers could come up with was to kill Yosef, Yehuda devised the far more compassionate plan of selling him into slavery. It seems rather audacious to criticize him for "not having done enough," when the other brothers were routing for his death! It seems, too, that by the same token, Reuven should not have escaped criticism, for he also successfully modified the plan, and could have gone further yet didn't. But Reuven is not taken to task.

A harried New York businessman was once running late, driving to work in his brand new car, when he came to a standstill in front of a large truck, which didn't seem to be moving. The truck driver got out of his truck. He motioned to the car driver to lower his window. "I'm stalled," he said, " - can't

move. But look, there's still room between my truck and the side-rail. It'll be a tight squeeze, but you can make it. I'll go out front, and give you a hand."

Slowly, the driver inched forward. A few feet in front of him stood the truck driver, motioning and gesticulating as he animatedly waved to the driver: Right, left, right, stop, slowly, a little more to the right, slowly now... His car was almost through. But it was not to be. It was then that the driver heard the unmistakable sound that every driver most dreads, as the metal alloy of his car gave way, and he wedged himself firmly between the truck and the side rail. He was stuck. He couldn't even get out of his car. And he was furious. He slowly rolled down his window. "You said there was room," he said slowly, mustering every ounce of self-control he could to keep from screaming at the top of his lungs. "You told me to keep coming forward!"

"Well," said the truck driver, "maybe I did. But who ever told you to listen to me... "

There are times in life when the best thing to do is "go with the flow." And there are times when we must buck the trend. Life is full of trials; situations that test our judgement, commitment, responsibility, and integrity. Sometimes we must act based on our own sense of right and wrong. Sometimes we follow the advice of others. But ultimately, we must come to the recognition we are the drivers of the cars of our lives; no one can take responsibility for our successes and failures other than ourselves. There may be situations where we do something in order to gain favour in the eyes of our friends, yet when we go astray, they will not be there to pick up the pieces. They will not take responsibility for what we have done, nor should they. That is what free will is about - understanding that we choose which path to take; when to stop, and when to go.

Reuven was not in a leadership position. It was not expected of him to "take the reins," and show the brothers the error in their ways. He receives only praise for taking the steps he did. But Yehuda was a leader. He could have done more, and for that he had to bear the blame. It must have been infuriating for him: The brothers wanted blood. He steps in, saves the day, and in the end they blame him for not doing enough. He must have wanted to scream: "You wanted to kill him! I'm the one who had compassion, and now you throw the blame on me?!"

Their answer? "Who ever told you to listen to us... "

As we gaze into the light of the Chanukah candles, perhaps we should offer a silent prayer to Hashem for the insight to realize right from wrong, for the ability to ignore others when their advice is not timely, and for the inner strength to take responsibility for our lives and our choices.

Have a good Shabbos, and a freilichen Channukah.

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