

# HOME ALONE: THE ORIGINAL

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The story of Yehudah and Tamar is among the most difficult episodes in the Torah to understand.

1. Why is Yehudah living apart from the rest of the family? The only way the twelve brothers could survive the pressures of the Canaanite society was to band together and create their own insular environment. How could Yehudah put himself in such "danger" by going off on his own?
2. Who did Yehudah marry? The family tradition forbade marrying into the local Canaanite tribes. Who was his first wife? Where did she come from? Why is she described as "the daughter of a Canaanite man?"
3. Yehudah's first two sons, Air and Onan, had a fatal character flaw. What lesson should we derive from their flaw and their punishment? Why did Yehudah seemingly fail as a father and teacher?
4. Who was Tamar? Why did Yehudah choose her as a daughter-in-law?
5. Why was Yehudah unwilling to marry Tamar to Shaylah his third son?
6. Yehudah's admission, "She is more righteous than me," is couched in unusual terms. In what manner was Tamar "more righteous" than Yehudah?
7. We know that Tamar's pregnancy gave rise to the Davidic line and the eventual birth of Mashiach. Why did the origins of Mashiach have to start in such an unusual way?
8. The Parsha is divided between two stories, the story of Yoseph and the story of Yehudah. What can we learn by contrasting the two stories?

In last week's Parsha we noted that the family of Yakov had begun to mature. Yakov's sons were becoming older, more inquisitive, and independent. It was imperative for Yakov to flee the environment of Lavan and return to the insular protection of Canaan and Yitzchak. Yakov's timing proved to be divinely inspired. Soon after his battle with Eisav's angel and his confrontation with Eisav, the sons began to "break out." Shimon, Levi, and Reuven, in their desire to do good and defend justice, got into trouble. Shimon and Levi defended Dina's honor

against Shechem while Reuven defended Leah's position as Yakov's "first wife." Yet, in each instance they were criticized for acting independent of Yakov's guidance. Yakov's disappointment was so profound that on his deathbed he reiterated his criticism of their actions. Those moments of mistaken independence proved to be defining moments in the lives of the Shevatim and the future of the nation.

Why didn't Yakov let go of those "disappointing" moments? Why did he feel that their "negative" behavior, they're well intended but impetuous actions should be the subject of his final "loving" words?

In Rabbi's Notebook Parshas Vayechi, 1997, I explained that Yakov's final blessings to his sons were intended to identify the strengths of each tribe, as they were necessary for the whole nation. By blessing them he focused each tribe on their unique contribution to the Jewish people. In most instances he encouraged their contributions in positive terms. In the blessings of Reuven, Shimon, and Levi he encouraged the positive expression of their characteristics by discouraging the negative expression of the very same characteristics.

The strength of the Jewish nation is in their ability to stand together and withstand assimilation. Yakov standing alone against the Angel of Eisav was the introduction to his monumental victory over Eisav. (32:25) However, Yakov was unique. Yakov was one of the "Avos - Forefathers". The Avos were able to stand-alone. The Avos and Imahos were uniquely gifted with the ability to stand-alone against the rest of society without the extended support system of family and community. That is why they merited being the Avos and Imahos. Everyone else who followed (except for Yoseph) required the support of family and community.

Reuven, Shimon, and Levi acted independently, impetuously, and incorrectly. However, their motivation was to protect and defend the family. Reuven was protecting Leah and Shimon and Levi were defending Dina. "For he (Shechem) had committed an outrage in Israel..." (34:7) Although their actions were deserving of criticism, they were also deserving of encouragement. As Yakov / Yisroel knew, their passion for defending and protecting each other would translate into the strength of nationhood to withstand exile, persecution, and assimilation. Therefore, his final blessings directed their positive expression of national concern by discouraging their negative expression.

The focus on the developing nation continued in this week's Parsha. The brothers, specifically Shimon and Levi, perceived Yoseph as a threat to their "nationhood." (See Rabbi's Notebook Vayeshev, 1997) They conspired to protect the nation by removing the threat. However, they again acted without Yakov's input and direction. Instead of bringing their concerns about Yoseph to Yakov they acted on their own limited and faulty analysis. They were not honest enough to challenge their own conclusions. Clearly, they assumed that Yakov would be too subjective in relation to Yoseph because "Yakov loved Yoseph more than all his sons..." (37:3)

However, they forgot two very important facts. 1. In relation to Yoseph they were equally if not more subjective than Yakov. 2. Yakov was the paradigm of truth. (Micha 20:7) In fact, the Torah specified Yakov's objectivity regarding Yoseph when he criticized him for his dreams. Furthermore, in contrast to Yoseph they were more lacking. Yoseph did not act on his own - they did. When Yoseph had concerns regarding the actions of his brothers he turned to Yakov for clarification and understanding! "And Yoseph would bring negative reports about them to their father." (37:2) They, on the other hand, did not confer with Yakov.

Following Yoseph's sale, the brothers "dumped" on Yehudah. Seeing Yakov's pain, they regretted selling Yoseph and blamed Yehudah for his suggestion to sell Yoseph rather than kill him. Their blame seems so unjust and selfish! They would have killed Yoseph if not for Yehudah's suggestion. Yet they blamed him for Yakov's pain!

(Rashi 38:1, Medresh Rabbah 42:3) Rashi explains that his brothers blamed Yehudah for a failure of leadership. "Had you told us to return Yoseph to his father rather than kill him or sell him we would have listened to you!" What an amazing twist of logic. It's not our fault, it's yours! Truly exceptional rationalization worthy of the finest of Jewish mothers! (Hey! Just kidding)

In truth, the brothers were absolutely correct and truthful in their criticism of Yehudah. Among the many other lessons extractable from the story of Yoseph's sale into slavery is the characteristic of true leadership. Yehudah was to be king, and he was the only one who did not know it. Even though he was fourth in line, his natural presence as a leader was self-evident. Had he been aware of who he was and how his brothers perceived him, even his older brothers Shimon and Levi, he would have taken Yoseph home. However, not knowing how they saw him he used diplomacy and negotiation to save Yoseph rather than direct confrontation. (In contrast to Reuven who as the oldest should have seen himself as the leader / king and should have used direct confrontation with his younger brothers to save Yoseph rather than avoidance and secrecy.)

However, Reuven, Shimon and Levi had a more insightful criticism of Yehudah. "If you are to be king you have to start thinking like a king. Granted, we are impetuous and reactive. However, we are motivated to act because of our fearless love for the concept of nation. Even amidst Yakov's criticism of our actions lies the recognition that we would do anything to save each other and protect the family and nation. True, we must learn restraint and diplomacy, but no one can question the nobility of our motives. You, on the other hand, had the insightfulness to see the errors of our ways and to devise a plan that at least removed Yoseph from our clutches. Why didn't you go one step further and confront us to rethink our entire approach to Yoseph! Had you been as fearless as us in protecting the family and nation you could have avoided the entire tragic episode! Therefore, you are to blame for Yakov's pain!"

Yehudah decided to leave the family setting and begin his family. In most regards Yehudah

had begun to think like a king. With Yoseph "missing" the family had to continue. If Yoseph would never return to the family one of the grandchildren would have to take his place and become a "Shevet - tribe." Therefore Yehudah went off to get married. However, he made a terribly fundamental mistake. He moved away from the family. In doing so he started on a path that would result in the birth of Mashiach but only after paying a terrible price.

Yehudah felt the need to leave the family and start fresh. He always intended to return to the family. However, the immediate environment that he chose was Canaanite rather than Jewish. The lesson of Reuven, Shimon, and Levi was far more than fearlessness in protecting the family. It was first and foremost the importance of family. No one Jew can stand-alone. Only Yakov (and Yoseph) and the Avos could stand-alone against society. The rest of us, even the great Shevatim, needed to be surrounded by the family / nation.

Yehudah's wife is identified as the daughter of Shua a Canaanite. The Talmud in Pesachim 50a explains that "Cannanite" means merchant, because Yehudah would have never married a daughter of Canaan. However, as the Alshich explains, (See ArtScroll Stone Edition pg.208) the use of the word Canaanite to describe a merchant is unusual. Therefore, the Torah is stating that Yehudah was mistaken in moving away from the family and living among the Canaanites. It was not a place to raise a good Jewish family, and Yehudah should have known better!

When Air and Onan were old enough to marry he chose Tamar, a daughter of Shem. (Rashi 38:24) Tamar had the qualities of her father (Grandfather?) that allowed her to withstand the assimilative influences of Canaan and retain her purity. These were the qualities that Yehudah wanted to fuse with his sons. However, he was too late. Even though they were the sons of Yehudah they had been fatally marred by the Canaanite society around them. (Sexual amorality)

Yehudah may have partially blamed Tamar for their deaths. Therefore, he did not want her to marry his third son Shaylah. In the end, it was Tamar who took the initiative to do what she felt had to be done. She disguised herself and waited for G-d and Yehudah to do the rest.

Tamar became pregnant and the subsequent scenes identify another essential characteristic of leadership and kingship, the courage to take responsibility and do Teshuvah. In the end, Yehudah becomes the worthy progenitor of kingship and Mashiach but at the tragic price of the loss of his two oldest sons.

Yoseph, on the other hand, is sold into slavery and sent away from the protective community of his family. As we know, Yoseph remains "the Tzadik" in spite of being alone, isolated, and apart from his father and family. In next week's Parsha he even succeeds in raising two sons worthy of becoming Shevatim! Clearly, he is of the stature of one of the Avos, able to stand alone against exile and assimilation.

Why was Yehudah so unsuccessful and Yoseph so successful?

I would like to suggest that the difference between Yehudah and Yoseph was that Yoseph went into exile against his will. Therefore, G-d protected him and guided him, supporting him with the strength to survive unscathed within the oppression of Egyptian amorality and perversion. However, Yehudah willfully chose to leave the protected environment of Yakov. Therefore, he was not able to protect himself and his family from the influences of Canaan. In the end he was punished with the loss of his oldest sons.

Did Yehudah learn his lesson of kingship and the imperative of familial / communal / national support? Yes! In two weeks, in Parsha Vayigash, the Pasuk says, "And Yakov sent Yehudah ahead to prepare the land of Goshen." (46:28) Rashi references the Medresh that says, "Yehudah was sent ahead of the rest of the family to establish a house of study." Yes! Yehudah had learned his lesson. To raise a Jewish child and family in a non-Jewish society there must be the infrastructure and support of a Jewish community.

### **Quick review of the laws of Chanukah**

Chanukah is from Sunday night Dec. 9 through Dec. 17. Hallel is said every morning and Al Hanisim is added to the Amidah and the Birkat Hamazon.

1. The Menorah should be lit  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour after sunset and remain lit for at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  hr. On Friday the Menorah must be lit before the Shabbos candles and remain lit for at least 90 minutes.
2. Candles should be placed in the Menorah from right to left and lit from left to right.
3. Olive oil or wax candles are acceptable; however, olive oil is preferred. Electric or gas lights are unacceptable.
4. Each family member except should light their own Menorah. A wife may light her own (there are differing opinions about whether she should or should not) and if agreed upon exempt her husband if he won't be home.
5. The Menorah should be placed in a location where both family and public can see it. The best height is at 35" to 40", however safety must be a priority.
6. Brochos should be recited before lighting the Menorah. Talking is prohibited between the Brochos and the lighting.

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