

SPECIAL PRIVILEGES BRING SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 440, Third Night of Chanukah but Only Two Candles. Good Shabbos!

Special Privileges Bring Special Responsibilities

Parshas VaYeishev begins with the story of Yosef and his brothers. It ends with the story of Yosef arriving in Egypt and his initial adventures in that land. Yosef seems to be the central figure throughout the Parsha. There is only one exception -- Chapter 38 narrates the story of Yehudah and Tamar.

On the surface, the complex narrative of Yehudah, his sons, and his daughter-in-law has no relationship whatsoever to the story of Yosef. It seems to fit awkwardly into the middle of what would otherwise be a smooth-flowing narrative. The obvious question is: what is it doing here?

Rashi quotes a statement of Chazal (which is actually part of a longer Medrash) that this chapter, beginning with the words "And it was at that time, Yehudah descended from his brothers..." marks a descent in the stature of the leadership of Yehudah. Up until this point, the brothers accepted Yehudah as their leader. After the sale of Yosef and the impact of his disappearance on their father Yaakov, the brothers blamed Yehudah for the sequence of events, and demoted him, so to speak, from his leadership role in the family.

This seems to be a rather unfair reaction on the part of the brothers. The pasukim [verses] describing the plan to dispose of Yosef indicate, if anything, that Yehudah was the "good guy". The other brothers wanted to kill him. Yehudah tried to save his life. Now, the brothers suddenly turn around, and blame Yehudah for the reaction of Yaakov! What chutzpah [audacity] on the part of his brothers, to blame him for not doing more to protect Yosef!

The other part of the aforementioned Medrash is even more unsettling. The Medrash states that a

person who begins a mitzvah, but doesn't complete it, is punished by having to bury his wife and children (which is what happens to Yehudah in Chapter 38). Yehudah began the mitzvah. It was his idea to try to save Yosef. He should have gone all the way. He should have stood up and told his brothers, "This is not acceptable. I am going to take Yosef out of that pit and bring him back home to our father."

This is a really mind-boggling Medrash! The other brothers, who were ready to kill Yosef, suffered no negative family consequences. They did not bury their children. Yehudah, who at least tried to save Yosef -- and was partially successful -- winds up losing his wife and children. Where is the fairness here?

Rav Yeruchum Levovitz (1874-1936) says we learn two startling facts from this Medrash. We learn from the fact that Yehudah was demoted that leadership does not only include privileges, it also includes responsibilities. Ultimately, the buck stops at the leader. Every brother was responsible for his own deeds. But Yehudah was the leader and as such he was responsible for the collective deeds of everyone. If the leader fails to meet his responsibility, the results are disastrous.

This is true of every area of responsibility. If the foot soldier "blows his assignment", it can cause trouble. If the general blows his assignment, the results can be disastrous. If we want to give a mundane analogy from American football -- if the tackle blows his assignment, it is not the end of the world. But if the quarterback drops the football, the play is over. The team and the fans and the coach will all come to him with complaints: "It's all your fault now."

Yehudah was the leader. He had the power to save the day, but he did not do so. In terms of the "fairness" issue raised by the second Medrash, Rav Yeruchum says that we see from here that when one begins a mitzvah he creates a force in the world that if carried to fruition can take on a life of its own. When one begins a mitzvah, he creates something tangible. The mitzvah beckons to its initiator: nurture me; follow through with me. Those who did not begin the mitzvah did not create such a force. The chain reaction that may be generated by the initiated mitzvah is not going to be theirs to nurture and follow through on.

Stopping a mitzvah in the middle is analogous to squashing out a life. The analogy here is to someone who decides not to have children. This is, from our perspective, not a good thing; but we would not call that person a murderer. On the other hand, if a person decides to have a child, conceives a child, and then aborts this child, that is another story. Alternatively, what if the person allowed a child to be born and then strangled the baby? The latter person is certainly deserving of much harsher criticism than the person who decided from the outset not to have children.

When a person creates something real and then destroys it or does not allow it to reach its expected

potential, he is or is like a murderer. He created a human being or a force that has the capacity to become something.

Starting a mitzvah is like conceiving a child. Aborting the mitzvah, before it has a chance to be completed leaves the initiator much worse off spiritually than one who merely said, "I am not going to try."

The brothers didn't even try. For whatever personal reasons, they never even "began the mitzvah." But Yehudah started something. He created a force with a potential to become real and alive. He decided to squelch it and stomp it out. He aborted his mitzvah. This is the poetic justice, that Divine Providence caused him in the end to bury his own children.

This is truly a frightening idea. It runs counter to our usual inclinations. We would normally tend to say, that the brothers were worse than Yehudah. Yehudah at least tried to save Yosef. He should get credit for trying -- "an A for effort!"

While it is true that effort is what really counts when it comes to ruchniyus [spirituality], in this case there is a chesoron [something lacking] in the effort. The imperfect effort is worse than no effort. When one tries and creates something that creates responsibility. Just like leadership has responsibility, so too the creation of the life force of a mitzvah includes responsibility as well. May we all merit to begin mitzvos and see them through to fruition.

A Happy Chanukah to everyone.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas VaYeishev is provided below:

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