

# RABBI FRAND ON PARSHAS VAYEISHEV

*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 # 660 - Birthdays - A Jewish Minhag? Good Shabbos!*

## **Yosef and Yehudah: Down But Not Out**

In the middle of the narration of the story of Yosef and his brothers [starting at the beginning of Bereishis Chapters 36], the Torah interjects the story of Yehuda and Tamar [Chapter 38]. Yehuda had 3 sons, the first son - Er -- was married to a woman named Tamar. Er died and then the second brother -- Onan -- married Tamar. When Onan also died, Yehudah did not want to allow his third son (Shelah) to marry Tamar. Tamar disguised herself and tricked Yehudah into performing a form of levirate marriage with her. When she became noticeably pregnant, Yehudah accused her of being unfaithful to his family. Rather than embarrassing him and announcing that he made her pregnant, she merely ambiguously said that she was pregnant from the person who gave her certain items as a security pledge.

Yehudah recognized the items as his own. Rather than deny the fact that he was indeed the one who lived with her, he admitted that he was the father of her children. In fact, one of the two sons born to Yehudah and Tamar (Peretz) eventually became the ancestor of King David and the Davidic dynasty.

Immediately after this interjection, the Torah resumes the story of Yosef, telling us that he was brought down to Egypt and placed in the house of Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, chamberlain of the butchers.

Rashi explains the juxtaposition of the two stories by the words "And Yehudah went down..." [Bereishis 38:1]. Yehudah had been admired by all his brothers; however after the sale of Yosef (which Yehudah suggested as an alternative to killing him) and the deep depression that overtook their father Yaakov, the brothers dethroned Yehudah from his role of leadership. They told him "had you insisted that we return him to our father instead of killing him, we would have also listened to you!"

When the narration of Yosef resumes, there is a similar expression of descent: "And Yosef was brought down to Egypt" [Bereishis 39:1] Here, too, Rashi comments on the linkage of the two stories and the fact that Yehudah was dethroned from leadership because of the fact that Yosef was brought down to Egypt.

The Shemen haTov comments that the incidents that occurred with Yehudah and Yosef may both be described as "yerida", but there are tremendous lessons to be learned from these so-called "down-falls". As things turned out, both descents were opportunities for these two brothers to achieve their maximum potential and to reach the high-points of their respective lives. This sordid incident of Yehudah's involvement with Tamar and his public embarrassment over it may seem like a low-point. However, it was this very admission which gave Yehudah his claim to fame. Yaakov later said "Yehudah, you your brothers will acknowledge" [Bereishis 49:8] as part of the blessing that he gave to Yehudah. Jews are called by his name (Yehudim), not by the name of any other Tribe. Why are we "Yehudim"? It is because Yehudah did something that took a tremendous amount of self-discipline and honesty. He admitted: "You are right. I was wrong."

This story, which began as a tremendous down-fall for Yehudah - he was dethroned, he was abused - this could have been his Waterloo, was in fact the nadir of his life. Things looked bleak, but he rose to the occasion. He became Yehudah and he demonstrated the power of confession (Hodaah - same root as Yehudah) to all of us.

Yosef also suffered tragedy after tragedy. He was sold as a slave to Egypt and then he was thrown from there into prison. But this descent too, this terrible period in his life, gave him the title by which he is known for all time: Yosef haTzadik [Joseph the Righteous]. Yosef was tempted by the wife of Potiphar and withstood the temptation. There are very few people in Jewish history that are given the title "Tzadik".

The lesson of both these narratives is that sometimes we are thrown into circumstances that present us with tremendous challenges. We look like we are at the bottom of the pit looking up, like we have suffered an irreversible setback. Sometimes these very situations present opportunities to meet those challenges and thereby greatly improve our life situation.

The dual descents of Yehudah and Yossef turn out to be opportunities that gave these two sons of Yaakov the ability to achieve great accomplishments and to acquire immortal greatness.

### **Where's the "Emes L'Yaakov"?**

The beginning of the story of Yosef in Parshas Vayeshev essentially concludes the story of the life of Yaakov Avinu. In Sefer Bereishis, Lech Lecha, Vayera, and Chayei Sarah are the parshiyos devoted to the story of Avraham. Toldos is the story of Yitzchak. Vayetze, Vayishlach and part of VaYeshev are the story of Yaakov Avinu. The balance of Vayeshev and the rest of the book of Bereishis - Miketz, VaYigash, and Vayechi - are the story of Yosef. Now that we are leaving Yaakov Avinu for another year, so to speak, it is perhaps a good opportunity to ask a basic question about his trademark characteristic.

The trademark characteristic by which Avraham is known is Chesed [kindness]. This attribute is clearly described by many of the stories from Avraham's life. Yitzchak's defining trait is Pachad [Fear of G-d, Service of His Maker]. Yitzchak's willingness to give up his life at the Akeidah, no questions

asked, certainly earned him this trademark. One can have no argument with the identification of Yitzchak with Service to the Almighty.

However, Yaakov's trademark attribute is Truth [Titen Emes L'Yaakov]. Where is this attribute demonstrated anywhere in the various narratives we have regarding the life of the Patriarch Jacob? On the contrary: He "stole" the blessings from Eisav; he shrewdly outmaneuvered Lavan in salary negotiations with the sheep. He stood by silently when his sons were involved in the deceitful massacre of the people of Shechem. Where is the "Emes L'Yaakov"?

Rav Shimshon Pinkus makes the following observation: None of the Patriarchs had as turbulent and tragic a life as did Yaakov. From Eisav to Lavan to Dinah to Yosef, he had nothing but anguish and aggravation from even his own close family members. In such a situation, it is not difficult for one to throw up his hands and ask "What do I need this for?"

Furthermore, Chazal say that Yaakov Avinu possessed a tradition that if any of his 12 sons would die in his lifetime, he himself would wind up in Gehennom [Hell]. If a person was convinced that he was headed to Gehennom regardless of what he does, how would we expect him to live his life in this world? Most people would have the attitude "eat, drink, and be merry". The Talmud says [Chagiga 15a] that a Bas Kol [Heavenly Voice] came forth and proclaimed "Return you wayward children except for Acher". Acher's reaction was "Since I am excluded from the next world anyway, I might as well enjoy myself in this world." The Talmud says he then went out with a prostitute.

That was Yaakov's situation. He had a very trying life. He assumed that Yosef had died and that meant he was destined to lose his portion even in the world to come. He could have easily thrown it all away. "Who needs this?"

The fact that he did not have this attitude earned him the attribute of Emes. Truth means that a person does what he has to do, not because of reward and punishment, but because it is correct. Yaakov knew that the lifestyle he was leading was the honest one and the right one and he continued to live by it, never veering off the straight and narrow path, regardless of the fact that he was not expecting any reward for it. Such an attitude earned him the accolade and the identifying crown of "Emes L'Yaakov" [Truth to Jacob].

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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 are provided below:

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