

TWO SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES OF YEHUDAH

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 # 883, Evil Intentions - Do They Matter? Good Shabbos!

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In reference to the blessings that Yaakov gave his sons, the pasuk says: "Yehudah, you your brothers will praise (ata yoducha achecha) Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down before you..." [Bereishis 49:8]. There are many interpretations for the phrase "Yehudah, ata yoducha achecha". Both the Targum Yonasan ben Uziel as well as a Medrash we will quote shortly say this expression refers specifically to the incident of Tamar. The expression is translated (at least homiletically) as "Yehudah, you admitted in the incident with Tamar."

Yehudah had a daughter-in-law named Tamar. His previous two sons had died. Tamar was not supposed to marry outside of the family. Tamar disguised herself and tricked Yehudah into performing a form of levirate marriage with her. She became pregnant. Yehudah, who did not realize that she had been impregnated by him, suspected her of being like the daughter of a priest who committed adultery and sentenced her to death. As she was about to be burned alive, she picked up the deposit Yehudah had left her when he visited her thinking she was a harlot and showed it to him. He admitted "she is more righteous than I".

This pasuk in Vayechi referring to Yehudah's admission relates back to that incident. The Medrash generalizes that this pasuk is referring to righteous people who conquer their evil inclinations and

they admit when they are wrong. "For everyone who confesses his (improper) deeds merits the world to come." The Medrash describes the Almighty telling Yehudah: "You saved Tamar and her two sons (she was pregnant with twins) from being burnt by fire, by My Life I will save your sons as well."

Let's recast this scenario. Everyone thinks Tamar is guilty. Yehudah, who occupied a position of power announced, "This woman has to be put to death". She is taken out to the stake and the fires are lit. Yehudah is standing there in front of everybody. Tamar announces she is pregnant from the person who gave her the tokens she presents. Yehudah admits that she is more righteous than he. The Medrash says for this he merits the world to come and a great many blessings.

But let us remember that three people's lives were on the line here. Would we not have expected any moral person to do exactly what Yehudah did? What is so noble about his confession, which saved him from having the unjust killing of three individuals on his conscience? Wouldn't any of us have done the same thing?

The answer to this question is a resounding 'NO!' We would not have done the same thing. Let us examine the other side of the coin. Look at all the rationalizations that Yehudah could have gone through. "If I admit that I was the one who did this, it could be a catastrophic desecration of G-d's Name!" For Yehudah, the pride of the Tribes, to admit that he had promiscuous relations with this apparent prostitute would be a tremendous Chilul Hashem. Not only that, but "If I admit that I did this, it will be so devastating to my father that he is not going to survive. My father has suffered so much already. If I cause a Chilul Hashem now, who knows what this could do to him! Therefore it is 'Pikuach Nefoshos' (a matter involving saving of life) NOT TO ADMIT! It is a Chilul Hashem TO ADMIT. Everything argues in favor of "DON'T ADMIT!" All of these rationalizations went through Yehudah's mind.

But were these really moral options? Would he allow 3 people die? Did he have no decency or conscience?

The answer is that Yehudah really had another option: He could have suddenly announced "New evidence has been uncovered. We need to halt the execution and start a new investigation." He could have dragged out the investigation for six months or a year. In the meantime, Tamar and her children would be saved, and ultimately people would forget about the tumult and he would never need to incriminate himself. This is what most of us, if not all of us would have done.

To have the strength of character to admit the truth and let the chips fall where they may, took rare moral courage. This is what Yehudah did. About this Yaakov said in his blessing: Yehudah ata yoducha achecha.

But this is only part of the greatness of Yehudah, because Chazal say another thing: "Yehudah admitted and he was not ashamed." Let us continue the scenario. Yehudah admits: "I did it." What would happen to most people? For most people, such an experience would break them. They

would never recover from it. They would be so humiliated they would crawl into a hole and live out the rest of their life in anonymity. "How can I ever show my face again?"

But what did Yehudah do? He did not crawl into a hole. He dusted himself off, got up, and went on with his life. He became the patriarch of the King of Israel. The Sefas Emes writes a beautiful comment. The pasuk refers to Yehudah as a lion who lies down and crouches. The Sefas Emes writes that the greatness of Yehudah is that even in his moments of "lowness" -- when he is crouching down as it were, even when he has suffered defeat, even when he is humiliated, he still retains the dignity of a lion.

The pasuk refers to Yehudah not as a "lion who roars" but as a "lion who crouches", the lion who is sitting down. Yehudah remains a lion despite the terrible fall and humiliation he suffered. He remains strong and majestic. Anyone who has ever seen a picture of a lion knows that when a lion sits, it still looks like a lion. It still has the majesty of a lion. It is still the king of the jungle even when at rest.

This is a lesson that all of us need to learn. In the course of a lifetime, we all have our setbacks, whether they are financial or personal or family related. There is an inclination to say "I can never recover from this. I can't show my face. How can I go on?" This is not the attitude of Yehudah and this should not be the attitude of any Jew.

The Sefas Emes concludes by explaining that all the Children of Israel are called Yehudim (tracing themselves to their ancestor Yehudah), because this attribute is the strength of the Jewish people. No matter what defeats they have suffered, they go on. If one thinks of the defeats that we have experienced as a nation on the national level, they are staggering. Nevertheless, we have persevered. This is not only a quality that applies to us as a people; it applies to each of us as individuals as well. Each and every one of us is called Yehudah. Each of us has this capacity of Yehudah that despite the terrible, terrible incident, he survived and remained a lion. He was crouching, he was in a state of lowness, he was down -- but he remained a lion.

These were the two strengths of Yehudah: The ability to recognize and admit the unvarnished unadulterated truth, rather than rationalize and fabricate self-serving justifications and excuses; and the capacity that no matter how devastating the setback one has suffered, the ability to brush oneself off and go on with life.

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 this Parsha are provided below:

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