

THE DANGER OF NOT REALIZING WHEN ONE IS A "NOGEAH B'DAVAR"

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: #967 – Public Humiliation - Can An Older Brother Object to the Younger Brother's Engagement? Good Shabbos!

The story of Yosef and his brothers is one of the most troubling stories in all of *Chumash*. The *pasuk* records:

And one man said to his brother, "Look! That dreamer is coming! So now, come and let us kill him, and let us throw him into one of the pits; and we will say 'A wild beast devoured him.' And we shall see what will become of his dreams." [Bereishis 37:19-20]

Reuven heard and he rescued him from their hand; he said, "We will not strike him mortally!" And Reuven said to them: "Do not shed blood! Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but send no hand against him." [Bereishis 37:21-22]

(Rashi explains that Reuven's intention was to come back and save Yosef, but as circumstances would have it Yosef was sold into slavery before Reuven had a chance to rescue his brother.)

As the well-known story develops, in Reuven's absence...

Yehudah said to his brothers, "What gain will there be if we will kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites – but let our hand not be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." [Bereishis 37:26-27]

Reuven returned to the pit (intending to rescue Yosef and return him to his father, as Rashi explains) and tore his clothes in anguish at the thought of facing his father Yaakov's grief over the loss of his beloved son.

Rashi fills in an additional detail regarding the whereabouts of Reuven when the fateful removal of Yosef from the pit and subsequent sale to the Ishmaelites took place: He actually offers two interpretations. His first interpretation is "He was not there at Yosef's selling for his day had come to go and serve his father." Alternatively Rashi suggests "he had been busy with his sackcloth and with

his fasting (in repentance) for having rearranged his father's couches."

In last week's *parsha*, we learned that after Rochel (who was Yaakov's favorite and prime wife) died, Yaakov moved his bed, which had been in Rachel's tent into the tent of Rachel's maidservant, Bilhah. Reuven, offended at the insult to his mother Leah, moved his father's bed from Bilhah's tent into Leah's tent. "It is bad enough that my mother should have been treated as a second class wife compared to her sister Rachel, but that she should also be treated as a second class wife even in comparison to Rachel's maid servant is intolerable!"

Chazal say that this was a serious sin on Reuven's part. In fact, Moshe Rabbeinu alludes to this fact in his blessing given to the Tribe of Reuven before he died. It is for this sin, Rashi says, that Reuven was doing *Teshuva*, and hence was not present when the other brothers pulled Yosef from the pit and sold him into slavery.

I saw an interesting observation in a sefer called *Avir Yosef*. When did this incident with the switching of the beds happen? It happened when Rachel died, which was when Yosef was eight years old. Yosef was sold when he was 17 years old. In other words, the incident for which Reuven is now suddenly doing *Teshuva* occurred 9 years earlier. We must ask the question – what was Reuven doing for the last nine years that he suddenly wakes up and runs off to do *Teshuva* (fasting and wearing sackcloth according to Rashi) for that prior sin, in the middle of this major family crisis? Why now?

The *Avir Yosef* says that we see from here that Reuven had a sudden epiphany of sorts. The realization that the brothers want to kill Yosef, their own brother had a major effect on him. He realized that they had rationalized this act because they were jealous of Yosef. Their jealousy blinded them to the extent that they did not see themselves as being involved in fratricide (killing a brother). Rather, they thought they were actually doing a *mitzvah* by killing him because they considered Yosef a *rodef* [pursuer], so they believed were actually doing it in self-defense.

They convened a *Beis Din* (Court) against him and ruled that he was deserving of death. How did that happen? Reuven suddenly realized that it happened because their jealousy blinded them. In Hebrew, there is a term called "*nogeah b'davar*" [personal bias]. Through the blinding effect of being "*nogeah b'davar*," a person can mistake an act that is the equivalent of murder for a *mitzvah*.

One of the greatest challenges in life is that a person must be able to look at himself, overcome his biases, and ask himself "am I doing this for the right reason or do I have some kind of personal agenda?" One of the most common expressions we hear is "I know I am *nogeah b'davar* BUT NEVERTHELESS..." That expression and that phenomenon reeks of self-deception and denial. If someone is "*nogeah*" he cannot see straight. If someone has an agenda, he cannot judge accurately.

Once it dawned on Reuven that the brothers were so blinded by their jealousy that they could make a *mitzvah* out of potential murder, he thought about his action in Bilhah's tent nine years prior. He realized that he was not as "pure of heart" as he thought he was at the time. He was finally able to

recognize that perhaps there was also a personal agenda involved. He began to think, "Maybe I was just sticking up for my mother; and I did not see the incident accurately."

When he saw the extent to which jealousy and hatred can affect a person, the light went on vis a vis his impudent movement of his father's bed nine years earlier. He now looks back at the earlier incident and says "You know what? I may be guilty of the same thing." That is why he was now doing Teshuva.

The truth of the matter is that we see a similar concept elsewhere in this week's parsha. When the incident of Yehudah and Tamar occurred and unbeknownst to him he fathered a child (actually a set of twins) with his daughter-in-law, Tamar presented him with the evidence. She does not publicly humiliate him but she says "The man who owns these items is the man who fathered the child(ren) with whom I am now pregnant." What does Yehuda do? He says, "She was more righteous than I." [Bereishis 38:26]

Put yourself in Yehuda's shoes. He is the most prestigious amongst the brothers. His father has gone through a very difficult life. Now, Yaakov needs this additional family scandal that his most prominent son has this relationship with Tamar?" It is easy for someone who wants to sweep this indiscretion under the rug to find half a dozen or more rationalizations why Yehuda should have kept quiet at the very least: It is a *Chilul Hashem*; my father will have a heart attack; he will not be able to take this; I will be humiliated; father will be humiliated.

However, would Yehuda allow an innocent woman to be executed for his action? No. He could have done what every leader does in such situations. He could have "called for an investigation". "We will convene a 'Blue Ribbon Panel' to determine what really happened here." Nine months later, when everyone has almost forgotten the story, the panel will issue an inconclusive report that there was some DNA evidence that was somehow lost and close the case. Excuses could have been found to avoid confessing.

The LAST thing most people would do is to say "She is right and I am wrong". Every personal "*negius*" [bias] would cause a person to say, "I cannot admit this in public". The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel says that this is why Yehuda was eventually chosen to be the house of royalty (*Malchus*) in Israel. The Targum comments on the *pasuk* in *Parshas VaYechi*: "Yehuda – you your brothers will acknowledge..." [Bereishis 49:8] as follows: "Yehuda, do you know why you are going to be the head of *Klal Yisrael*? Do you know why Jews are going to be called *Yehudim* (from the name Yehuda)? You merited all this because of the fact that you admitted the incident with Tamar. You were able to say that she was right and you were wrong. That is the marking of true leadership – the ability of a person to overcome his own personal agenda, to stare the truth in the face and say, "I was wrong." This type of person can be the Jewish King.

In Judaism, the king is empowered with powers that in the hands of the wrong person could be disastrous. The king can order the execution of someone he senses is rebelling against him. There is

no requirement for witnesses or *Beis Din*. He may usurp property. He has absolute power. How can a monarch be entrusted with that kind of power? How do we know he will not use his powers for his own aggrandizement and personal agenda? The answer is the king needs to be a special person, who can overcome his own *negius*. This is what Yehuda demonstrated in the incident with Tamar.

This is one of the great challenges of life and in my opinion this is what separates the rest of us from true *Gedolei Yisrael*. For me, the mark of leadership and the mark of a true *Gadol* is this ability to raise himself above his own agenda. True *Gedolei Yisrael* cannot be bought for anything – not for money, not for power, not for personal pride, not for family reasons, not for anything. They need to be above it all.

The rest of us should struggle to meet this challenge as well.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayeshev is provided below:

- # 034 - Chanukah Licht on Erev Shabbos
- # 076 - Katlanis: The Twice Widowed Woman
- # 125 - Ha'Malbim P'nei Chaveiro: Shaming Another
- # 172 - The Complex Issue of Child Custody
- # 218 - Grape Juice and Yayin Mevushal
- # 262 - Yichud and the Open Door Policy
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