

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH: LEADERSHIP

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

As Yaakov makes his way back to the land of Cannan, several events - spanning the full range of emotions - transpire in rapid succession.

The sequence (Bereishis 35:16-29) as Yaakov and Rochel are blessed with the birth of Binyamin. Rochel died during the childbirth of Binyamin and was buried in Beis Lechem. Shortly thereafter, Reuvain committed a significant misdeed by interfering in the affairs of his father when he moved the bed of Yaakov from the tent of Bilhah to his mother Leah's tent. Finally, Yaakov arrived home to the land of Cannan where he was reunited with his aged father Yitzchak.

Many meforshim (commentaries) seek to shed light on the logical thread that ties these events together. Additionally, they address the fact that the Torah seems to interject a census of the twelve sons of Yaakov in the midst of these pesukim without an obvious reason.

Rashi creates a sequential chain that pulls these seemingly disparate facts in a coherent progression. The joyous birth of Binyamin brought about the tragic death of Rochel and her burial. After Rochel's demise, Yaakov moved his bed and possessions from Rochel's tent to Bilhah's. Reuvain felt that as the firstborn, it was his place to defend the honor of his mother Leah. As Rashi explains, Reuvain felt his mother Leah would be offended at the notion of having Bilhah assuming the role of 'âakeres habayis' (the primary wife) at this point. Thus, Reuvain took matters into his own hands and moved his father's belongings. Once this incident was recorded, the Torah reverts to the fact that after Binyomin's birth, Yaakov's twelve shevatim (tribes) were now complete and listed their names. Finally, Yaakov's arrival at the home of his father is noted.

Shedding Light on the Actions of Reuvain

Rashi offers a second explanation for the interjection of the listing of the twelve sons of Yaakov in the midst of this sequence. Quoting a Gemorah (Shabbos 55b), Rashi points out that even immediately after the actions of Reuvain, he was listed with the other sons - even with the respectful title of firstborn (Bereishis 35:23) - to lend significance to the fact that he remained a tzadik (righteous person). In fact that gemorah notes that Reuvain did not sin at all.

The Ramban takes this defense of Reuvain two steps further by pointing out that the Torah specifically mentions that Yaakov immediately heard about the actions of his firstborn (Vayishma Yaakov, 35:22) to inform us that he did not punish him at that time. Additionally the Ramban maintains that the Torah lists these two themes in one pasuk - even though these is an unusual

space in midst of this pasuk - to show that Yaakov accepted Reuvain even after this act.

Why, Then, the Punishment?

After this rousing defense of Reuvain, Yaakov's actions in the twilight of his life, as recorded in Parshas Vayechi, require explanation. As he blessed his children, Yaakov admonished Reuvain for his impulsive actions, and took from his firstborn's rights to kehunah (priesthood) and malchus (royalty), which were given to Levi and Yehudah respectively. (See Rashi, others, for the reasons that Yaakov delayed his response until close to his death).

If Reuvain had not sinned, why, then, was he punished so severely? And if he was listed as the firstborn immediately after his misdeed, why did he lose those privileges later on?

The Responsibility of Leadership

I would like to suggest that Yaakov was not 'punishing' Reuvain by any means. Yaakov still considered Reuvain to be his firstborn and began the birshas Yaakov by noting 'Reuvain bechori ata (you are my firstborn, Bereishis, 49:3).'

Losing the leadership role, however, was inevitable once Reuvain had demonstrated that he acted impulsively - without proper reflection. If an individual responds impulsively to situations that arise, he or she may be subjecting him or herself to the consequences of poor decisions. However, as a leader, this type of impulsive actions can be nothing short of disastrous. A true leader must always be reflective and measured in his or her responses.

Leadership of any kind - in one's class, school, peer group, or any other social structure - is an honor and privilege. It is also a significant responsibility, one that is best exercised with restraint and reflection.

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