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ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION

THE CARE OF A LEADER

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YEHUDAH MARCUS ('20)

DINA GREEN ('20)

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ADINA HIRSCH ('19)

When Yosef's brothers are considering killing him, Reuven hears of their plans and, "saves [Yosef] from their hands. And [Reuven] said, let us not kill him" (Bereishit 37:21). Instead, Reuven suggests

that the brothers toss Yosef into a pit and not take any physical action against him.

The Torah testifies that Reuven's true intention was, "so that [Reuven] could save [Yosef] from [the other 9 brothers'] hands and return [Yosef] to his father" (37:22). While the brothers indeed follow Reuven's advice, the outcome is not quite as Reuven anticipated. After this episode, Reuven leaves the scene (Rashi explains that he went home to help out with Yaakov) and by the time he comes back to the pit, the other brothers

have already sold Yosef to a caravan of traders. Realizing that Yosef is no longer in the pit, Reuven is completely distraught and can't imagine facing his father's grief (see Rashi 37:30).

A little later, we get filled in on some additional details that were seemingly left out. A few years later, the brothers find themselves face to face with Yosef in Egypt. They have come to buy food because of a famine in Canaan and do not recognize Yosef, who is the leader of the land. After accusing them of being spies, Yosef (still in disguise) demands that they leave one brother with him in Egypt, return to their father, and bring Binyamin along with them the next time that they come down. Dealing with this setback, the brothers talk amongst themselves: "And each man said to his brother, but we are guilty for our brother, since we saw the anguish of his soul when he begged us and we did not listen. And this is why this trouble is now befalling us" (42:21). Reuven immediately responds, "Did I not speak to you [then] saying, 'Do not sin against the child!' and you did not listen; and now his blood is being avenged" (42:22).

This entire dialogue is missing from the initial story, and even some of the parts that overlap aren't entirely consistent. In this retelling of the story, Reuven mentions that he tried to completely stop his brothers from doing anything bad; however, in the original telling of the story, we only hear of Reuven suggesting an alternative means to dispose of Yosef.

It's the Torah's narrative in the original story that tells us that Reuven's motivation was in fact to save Yosef's life. Ramban (37:22) in fact suggests that when Reuven was arguing with his brothers, he initially told them not to harm Yosef at all (as Reuven states in 42:22), but they did not listen to him. Reuven then resorts to a different tactic that he intended as a means to buy some time.

R. Elchanan Samet suggests that even in the original telling of the story, we can find a hint to this idea in that the Torah introduces Reuven's speech twice. First, we read (37:21): "And [Reuven] said, let us not kill him." Immediately thereafter, instead of just continuing his sentence, the Torah (37:22) reintroduces Reuven, "And Reuven said to them," when he suggests that they throw Yosef into the pit. It seems that after his first suggestion, Reuven got no response, merely blank stares. He was waiting for somebody to step up and agree with him. When that didn't happen, he needed to change tactics, and that is why the Torah states again, "And Reuven said," to suggest that this is not a direct continuation of Reuven's initial message. In the retelling of the story, when the brothers react to Yosef's demand of imprisoning one of them, we see two different responses to crisis. The brothers offer a religious and positive response – taking responsibility for what they did and engaging in serious soul searching, recognizing the Divine hand in history.

Reuven, on the other hand, accuses his brothers of the crime and tries to completely absolve himself of any responsibility. Whether or not he was correct is not the issue. Even if he fought valiantly against his brothers to save Yosef (he didn't), Reuven could still have been more supportive when his brothers are expressing remorse.

In most families described in the Torah, the firstborn is supposed to be the leader, the one who carries the torch of the tradition forward. Not so with Yaakov; Reuven is passed over and out of the running for con-

sideration. Chazal give several reasons for why Reuven was deemed not worthy. This instance, even if not a reason in itself, is likely just a symptom of some larger character trait.

A leader must be somebody who not only takes responsibility for his or her own errors, but even when the leader was in the right, helps and supports others who are experiencing remorse and regret. A leader needs to lead not only by standing out in front as an example, but also by making sure that all of his followers know that he has their back.

USING OUR WORDS CAREFULLY

YEHUDAH MARCUS ('20)

This week's parsha includes the famous story of Tamar and Yehuda. Chazal teach that Tamar refused to reveal that Yehuda fathered her child, even when faced with the threat of death. Tamar prevented Yehuda from experiencing great embarrassment, teaching a critical message for life.

The gemara (Bava Metzia 59b) explains that it is better for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace than shame his neighbour. Earlier in Bava Metzia (58b) the gemara states: "Whoever shames his neighbor in public, is as if he shed his blood." The Rabbis are clearly opposed to public humiliation. Moreover, at Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's deathbed, Rabbi Elazar explained to his disciples that the dignity of others is the only thing he can teach.

Judaism is a religion of words. Through Judaism, we have the potential to create or destroy society with our words even without any actions. Hashem created the entire world through words. Hashem's use of words teaches us the power of words and our responsibility to speak mindfully, especially pertaining to protecting human dignity. We must remember Tamar's words, which ensured Yehuda's dignity, through words and not actions.

We should always be aware of the power of our words and be mindful of hurting someone's feelings. We should be careful with assessing our actions and concerns. In the merit of our listening to people and have ahavat chinam, may we be zocheh to the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash.

FOCUSING ON OTHERS

DINA GREEN ('20)

In this week's parsha the brothers sell Yosef into slavery. Initially, Reuven protested the sale, but he seems to disappear and it happens without him. Our Rabbis explain that when Reuven sinned in the past regarding his father, he would fast and do teshuva. The brothers sold Yosef while Reuven was off doing teshuva for his past deeds. Yosef was only able to be sold into slavery because Reuven was so busy mourning and crying over the past, instead of correcting the present and avoiding future sins. A person should try and correct past failures and work on growing spiritually, but it should never come before what's happening in the now, especially when it's helping another Jew.

One time, the Alter Rebbe of Chabad was learning Torah with his son, the Mittler Rebbe, on the floor below him. The Mittler Rebbe's son fell out of his crib, but the Mittler Rebbe was so focused on his learning he didn't hear the baby crying. The Alter Rebbe, who was also focused on his learning, was able to hear the baby and went to calm him. The Alter Rebbe asked his son the Mittler Rebbe how he didn't hear the baby, and he answered with what he thought was a good excuse, that he was learning Torah and was so focused that he couldn't hear anything else. The Alter Rebbe answered him and said: "You should never be so involved in your own spiritual goals that you fail to hear the cry of a Jewish child." We have to constantly be aware and sensitive to the cries for help from the Jews around us. We can learn from the mistakes of both Reuven and the Mittler Rebbe, and always make the time to help, even if it means putting ourselves on hold.

TANGLED TWINS

SARA DEICHMAN ('19)

This week's parsha details one of the most morally complex tales in all of Tanach. Tamar deceives her father-in-law to sleep with her so that she can carry on her husband's legacy through fulfilling the mitzvah of having children after she is widowed. The Torah decides to delve into considerable detail when describing the birth of Tamar's babies:

וְהָיָה בְּלִדְתָהּ וַיִּתֵּן יָד וַתִּקַּח הַמַּיִלְדָּת וַתִּקְשֶׁר עַל-יָדָיו שְׁנֵי
לְאָמֵר זֶה יֵצֵא רֵאשִׁיטָה

"While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first" (38:28).

Twins are born, and a midwife ties a red string around the baby who will be born first. Then, the baby pulls back, and his twin is born first. These twins, Perez and Zerach, get minimal attention in the Torah, so why is their birth so detailed?

Rabbi Abba Wagensberg utilizes the ideas of the Kedushat Levi, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, to help understand the moment. The Talmud (Niddah 30b) states that every baby has a candle lit at its head before it is born; the baby's soul can "see" all across the world. When the baby emerges from its mother's womb, some angel taps the baby on the lips and all of the Torah they learned in utero is forgotten until they are taught it once again throughout their lives. The Kedushat Levi sees this tap as the most incredible gift. The removal of all knowledge allows the baby to start its life as an innocent being, looking at the world in a pure sense. As we get older, obstacles interrupt our path to Divine understanding. We grapple with questions of belief and forbidden temptations. But, if we stay with the knowledge of God, we can reconnect to God in a meaningful manner. Pairing the physicality of life experiences with a learned and mature understanding of God facilitates/engenders the most fulfilling life. The names of Tamar's babies teach us this understanding, and that is why their birth is so paramount in the Torah. Perez attempts to break through, alluding to breaking through our physicality and still connecting to God. Then, God will be able to view us as the most holy beings, with a holy light, zerach, shining upon us.

BEST INTENTIONS

ADINA HIRSCH ('19)

Parshat Vayeishev contains two stories about two seemingly opposite women. The parsha first tells the story of Tamar, explaining how after her husband Er, Yehuda's oldest son, died, Tamar fulfills the mitzvah of yibum by marrying Yehuda's next son, Onan. When Onan died, Tamar was prepared to marry Yehuda's youngest son, Shelah. Realizing that Yehuda was not going to allow her to marry Shelah, Tamar took initiative, seducing Yehuda in order to fulfill yibum and carry out her original husband's legacy.

Staff

The parsha then continues on to the next story, which reverts back to the parsha's original topic of Yosef. Yosef is working in the house of Potiphar and is becoming very successful due to Hashem's blessings. Considering Yosef's newfound success, Potiphar's wife becomes attracted to Yosef and makes advances towards him. Yosef rejects her, but Potiphar's wife lies to her husband and says Yosef attacked her, leading to Potiphar throwing Yosef in jail.

Rashi quotes a midrash that explains that the juxtaposition of these two incidents is meant to teach us that just as Tamar acted with good intentions to fulfill yibum, so too Potiphar's wife also acted with good intentions. Rashi explains that Potiphar's wife saw, through her astrologer, that she was destined to have children with Yosef. She was slightly mistaken, as the prediction was that Yosef would carry out her legacy by marrying her daughter, Osnat. The midrash explains that Potiphar's wife did in fact have good intentions in her attempt to seduce Yosef, as she tried to ensure that she would have a family with Yosef. Both of these women made sexual advances, but while Tamar is regarded in a positive light, Potiphar's wife is typically viewed as a purely negative person. So what went wrong with Potiphar's wife?

Rav Yerucham Levovitz explains that this midrash is true. Both Tamar and Potiphar's wife started off with the right intentions. The two women diverged when they began fulfilling their underlying plans. Tamar's pure intentions are manifested throughout the incident, shown when she has the opportunity to publicly announce that Yehuda is the father of her child, but remains silent so as not to embarrass him, even at the expense of her own life. Tamar was able to keep her good intentions throughout the entire ordeal, so she is rewarded and merits having the lineage of David Hamelech. In contrast, Potiphar's wife is unable to maintain her pure intentions. She advances towards Yosef, but when he refuses, she persists. After his final rejection, Potiphar's wife gets angry and lies about Yosef. She cannot handle the rejection, allowing herself to become vindictive. Had she maintained her good intentions, she would have never lied to her husband and never would have allowed Yosef to remain in jail for a crime he did not commit.

This contrast between the manner in which Tamar and Potiphar's wife carried out their good intentions teaches us a very important lesson. Many times in life, we begin a course of action with the right intentions. Sometimes things get complicated and we lose sight of our original purpose. The true test of character is how we behave when our plans do not go as planned. Do we remain loyal to our morals like Tamar, or do we let our pure intentions slide away like Potiphar's wife? May we all have the ability to fulfill our actions with our initial pure intent just like Tamar.

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