



## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### Yosef's 20/20 Hindsight

Sarah Rudolph

When Yosef reveals his identity to his brothers in one of the Torah's most emotional scenes, he hurries to set their guilt at rest. "Don't be distressed... that you sold me here, for G-d sent me before you to sustain life... it was not you who sent me here, but G-d" (45:5, 8). He points out that two years of famine have already passed, with another five foretold (v. 6) – and of course Yosef's position in Egypt will enable him to provide for his family during the rough times to come.

He has that position only because he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams; he was called on to interpret them only because he had previously interpreted the dreams of his fellow prisoners; he was in prison only because of his master's wife; and he had that master only because his brothers had sold him. Yosef's hindsight enabled him to view this sequence of events as having been directed by G-d for the express purpose of this very moment: the day he and his brothers would be reunited in Egypt and he would be able to sustain them through the famine.

On one hand, we might be impressed with Yosef's equanimity in viewing his suffering as the road to a divine destiny. We might be

inspired to look for similar chains of events in our own lives, to find the hand of G-d behind apparently purely human machinations, and to reassure ourselves He will truly ensure everything works out for the best.

On the other hand, even Yosef, with all his 20/20 hindsight, didn't have the full picture. We know, because we read the whole story both before and after this scene, that Yosef's position in Egypt – which led to his family's move there, which led to their being enslaved there – was actually part of an even farther-reaching Plan. G-d told Avraham, "Your offspring will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will serve them... and afterwards, they will come out with great wealth...and the fourth generation will return here" (15:13-16).

Yosef sees his slice of the story, with his slice of hindsight, and recognizes a finite chain of events he ascribes to G-d. But only G-d Himself can know the full reach of everything that happens to us, and how it all leads toward everything that will eventually unfold.

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### "Anyone who says that Reuven sinned is mistaken." – The Power of Teshuvah

Elisha Fredman

The Gemara in Masechet Shabbat lists several cases in which Chazal make a radical departure from the straightforward meaning of *pesukim*, downplaying apparently egregious sins to lesser mistakes. For instance, after Rachel's passing, the Torah states:

"And it was, while Yisrael dwelled in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine, and Yisrael heard. And the sons of Yaakov were twelve." (Bereishit 35:22)

On the surface, the sin is explicit. However, R' Shmuel bar Nachmani states (Shabbat 55b), "Anyone who says that Reuven sinned is mistaken." Rather, the Gemara goes on to explain, the *pasuk* must actually mean that after Rachel died and Yaakov invited Bilha to take her place as the new primary wife, Reuven was upset over the rejection of Leah and either moved or overturned his father's bed (or Bilha's bed) in protest and defense of his mother's honor. To support this explanation, R' Shmuel bar Nachmani cites the conclusion of the above *pasuk*: "and the sons

of Yaakov were twelve," implying all of the sons of Yaakov were equally worthy and precluding the possibility that Reuven did something so heinous as to literally lie with Bilha.

A second proof is then offered by R' Shimon ben Elazar: if Reuven had committed such an act, his descendants, many years later, couldn't possibly have stood on *Har Eival* (as we find in Devarim 27:20) and, in good faith, declared "Cursed is the one who lies with his father's wife."

What drives R' Shmuel bar Nachmani and R' Shimon ben Elazar to go to such lengths to defend Reuven in this episode, against the literal reading of the *pesukim*? Further, what is the *nafka mina*, the practical difference, between the proofs these two *Amora'im* offer to support their stance on Reuven's relative innocence, and what message can we learn?

R' Yaakov Medan, one of the *Roshei Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, understands the need to defend the actions of Reuven not as ideological but rather exegetical. As Yaakov addresses his sons one

final time at the end of his life, he describes Reuven and his act as follows:

"Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellence of dignity and the excellence of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, for you ascend to your father's bed and then defiled it; he went up to my bedclothes." (*Bereishit 49:3-4*)

Is it fathomable that after committing such an abominable act as lying with Bilha, Yaakov would have allowed Reuven to stay in his house, referred to him as "my strength," and gifted him land in *Eretz Yisrael* alongside the rest of his brothers? Just consider the sins of Cham, Yishmael and Esav that resulted in their being rejected from the family! Yaakov's retelling of the episode with Bilha frames Reuven's actions in a substantially less severe light.

Two logical approaches can resolve these contradicting versions, represented by R' Shmuel bar Nachmani and Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, respectively.

In the first approach, R' Shmuel bar Nachmani believes Yaakov's proud nostalgic stance toward Reuven would be incomprehensible if the account in *perek 35* were literally true. Yaakov's version is therefore more compelling as the literally accurate description, and the original account must be reinterpreted as non-literal.

In the second approach, that of R' Shmuel ben Elazar, the original story may in fact be literal, but then something changed so fundamentally as to alter Yaakov's recollection and relationship toward those events. This change was formative enough to allow Reuven to again be counted among the rest of his siblings, and for his descendants to be able to honorably proclaim, "Cursed is the one who lies with his father's wife" generations later.

What could that change have been?

The midrash in *Bereishit Rabbah 84:19* helps fill in the missing pieces. According to this midrash, Reuven did not regularly accompany his brothers to shepherd their sheep in the fields because he was deeply involved in a constant state of mourning in order to do *teshuvah* for his sin with Bilha. (This explains why he only "heard" about the plot to kill Yosef (*Bereishit 37:21*) – since he was not present at the outset.) Whether we believe that

Reuven truly sinned in the way the *pshat* describes, or whether he merely overturned his father's bed, from that moment on, he spent the ensuing years remorseful for what he did and in a state of repentance. This was certainly a meaningful change in Reuven that did not go unnoticed by his father. His actions did have logical consequences despite his *teshuvah*: Reuven attempted to demonstrate his power and authority as *bechor*, and in response, he is stripped of the leadership role and replaced by Yehuda. His *teshuvah*, however, allowed him to maintain his place in the family of Yaakov, to preserve his father's affection, and to inherit his portion in *Eretz Yisrael*.

This approach finds a parallel in the story of David Hamelech embarking on a relationship with Batsheva while dispatching her husband, Uriah, to the front lines of battle. Here too, R' Shmuel bar Nachmani states that whoever claims that David Hamelech sinned is mistaken. But of course he sinned! The *pesukim* in Shmuel II, *perek 11* are explicit! Rather, we can understand the Gemara to mean that while David certainly sinned, he then, like Reuven, dedicated the rest of his life to repenting for that sin. (Although not directly stated in the Gemara, the proof for this can be found in the entirety of *Tehillim 51*, which is worth learning in detail.)

We can learn a profound lesson from *Chazal's* analysis of both of these episodes. In the course of our lives, sometimes we make mistakes; we commit sins. If, however, we dedicate ourselves to *teshuvah* (consider the lengths to which Reuven and David went in their individual processes), learn from our mistakes, commit to never acting in those ways again, all on our path to becoming the best version of ourselves we can possibly be – ultimately Hashem may look upon us as if we had never sinned in the first place.

As in both of these stories, there will always be natural consequences to our actions and debts to be paid, and we must always strive to make the best decisions and act in the proper way. We can take comfort in the knowledge, however, that through the power of *teshuvah*, we have the potential to emerge as if we had never sinned, and anyone claiming otherwise, to quote the Gemara, "אינו אלא טועה" – would be mistaken.

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