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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT MIKETZ

In Loving Memory of Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and
Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z"l

Dedicated in memory of my father, Hillel ben Yechiel
(Herman) Reiter, of Debrecen, Hungary, whose *yahrzeit* falls
on the 24th day of Kislev.

May his soul be among the righteous in Gan Eden.

**"You shall slay my two sons, if I bring him not to you" –
Was Reuven a "foolish oldest son"?**

By Rav Gad Eldad

Famine has struck the world, and like everyone else, Yaakov and his family struggle to cope with the new reality. Yaakov sends his sons to Egypt to buy food, but unfortunately the Egyptian ruler suspects them of being spies, even though they have done nothing wrong. He agrees to see them again only if they bring their youngest brother with them, and thus remove the cloud of suspicion of espionage. Predictably, their father refuses, but the pressure resulting from the famine continues to build. At this stage, Reuven, the eldest of the brothers, tries to convince his father to entrust Binyamin into his hands and allow him to return to Egypt with his brothers:

And Yaakov their father said to them, "Me have you bereaved of my children: Yosef is not, and Shimon is not, and you will take Binyamin away; upon me are all these things come." And Reuven spoke to his father, saying, "You shall slay my two sons, if I bring him not to you; deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him back to you." And he said, "My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he only is left; if harm befall him by the way in which you go, then will you bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave." (42:36-38)

Reuven's suggestion is astonishing, as was aptly formulated by Rashi:

He did not accept Reuven's offer. He said: What a fool is this oldest son of mine! He suggests that I should kill his sons. Are they his only and not mine also? (Rashi, v. 38)

The commentators attempt to explain Reuven's suggestion in various ways:

God forbid that Reuven should utter such great nonsense! Did he not say: If I do not return him to you, I have committed myself that my two sons shall die for this sin. It may further be suggested: If not, my two sons may you kill. This is the wording of an oath. That is to say, death will come upon them if I do not bring him to you. It may further be argued that this is what Reuven said: If I do not bring him back to you. That is to say, do not give

me a portion in *Eretz Yisrael*, as a pauper is considered like a dead man. (Riva on the Torah, v. 37)

In addition, the commentators attempt to explain why Reuven refers to his two sons, when we know (below 46:9) that he had four:

And he said, "My two sons," even though they were four,² to say: instead of one of your sons, there will be double the number of my sons. (Ramban, *ibid.*)

"Let us go and sell him to the Yishmaelites"

In order to offer an alternative explanation of Reuven's proposal, we must first trace the course of events in Yosef's sale. The Torah tells us that Yosef brought the content of his dreams to his family's attention. Because the simple interpretation of his dreams indicated that Yosef would rule over his brothers, a hostile relationship developed between him and his brothers. In time, the brothers were given an opportunity to translate their animosity into deeds, when Yosef reached them at the command of his father:

And they saw him afar off, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, "Behold, this dreamer comes. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into one of the pits, and we will say: An evil beast has devoured him; and we shall see what will become of his dreams." And Reuven heard it and delivered him out of their hand; and he said, "Let us not take his life." And Reuven said to them, "Shed no blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him"; that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. And it came to pass, when Yosef was come to his brethren, that they stripped Joseph of his coat, the coat of many colors that was on him; and they took him, and cast him into the pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it.

At first, the brothers wanted to kill Yosef, but then Reuven came to his aid. Without revealing his plan to his brothers, he raises an alternative proposal. His proposal is accepted, and Yosef is cast into a pit. This, however is not the end of the story:

And they sat down to eat bread; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a caravan of Yishmaelites came from Gil'ad... going to carry it down to Egypt. And Yehuda said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Yishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother, our flesh." And his brothers heard it... and they drew and lifted up Yosef out of the pit, and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they brought Yosef into Egypt. (37:25-28)

In this way, without realizing it, the brothers thwarted Reuven's plan to save Yosef. Apparently, he was not present at the time of the sale, and when he returned to the pit it was already too late:

² The commentators do not suggest that at this time Reuven had only two sons and that his other sons were born later. Apparently this suggestion must be rejected because of the short period of time between Reuven's proposal and the family's descent to Egypt, when he is said to have four sons. They were thus presumably already born.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise all Scriptural references are to the book of *Bereishit*. This *shiur* is based on my article: "*Ha-Oz Ve-HaAnava – Bein Reuven Le-Yehuda*," *Megadim* 35, pp. 25-32.

And Reuven returned to the pit; and, behold, Yosef was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. And he returned to his brothers, and said, "The child is not; and as for me, where shall I go?" (37:29-30)

Presumably, Reuven asked his brothers to explain the change in plans, at which time he revealed to them the real intention of his proposal, which they had inadvertently thwarted. Reuven had no choice but to adapt himself to the reality created by his brothers, and together with them he had to cope with the great grief that descended upon their father when they presented him with Yosef's coat:

And they took Yosef's coat, and killed a he-goat, and dipped the coat in the blood; and they sent the coat of many colors, and they brought it to their father; and said, "This have we found. Know now whether it is your son's coat or not." And he knew it, and said, "It is my son's coat; an evil beast has devoured him; Yosef is without doubt torn in pieces." And Yaakov rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, "Nay, but I will go down to the grave to my son mourning." And his father wept for him. (37:31-35)

Scripture tells us that many years later, Reuven still remembers how his plan had been ruined by his brothers, a plan that would have spared their father and their entire family all the suffering that befell them as a result:

And they said one to another, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us." And Reuven answered them, saying, "Spoke I not to you, saying: Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? Therefore also, behold, his blood is required." (42:21-22)

"And Yehuda went down from his brothers"

The plot is suddenly interrupted and the spotlight is directed at Yehuda, who leaves the family home:

And it came to pass at that time that Yehuda went down from his brothers, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Chira. (38:1)

The commentators attempt to explain why the tale of Yosef's sale is interrupted with this story, and therefore propose various connections between the two stories. Some suggest that this break in the story of Yosef's sale results from the criticism leveled at Yehuda for the idea of selling Yosef and their father's sharp response in its wake, as Rashi writes:

Why is this section placed here thus interrupting the section dealing with the history of Yosef? To teach that his brothers lowered him from his high position. When they saw their father's grief they said: You told us to sell him; if you had told us to send him back to his father we would also have obeyed you.³

However, if Rashi is correct, Scripture should have sufficed with noting the fact that Yehuda abandoned his family. But the story continues to follow what happened to Yehuda's

family, and therefore we must understand how this contributes to our understanding of what happened. In the verses that follow we learn of the tragedies that befell Yehuda and his family. He became widowed and his two oldest sons died:

And Yehuda took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. And Er, Yehuda's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord slew him. And Yehuda said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her, and raise up seed to your brother." And Onan knew that the seed would not be his; and it came to pass when he went in to his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did was evil in the sight of the Lord; and He slew him also. (38:6-10)

The Ramban attaches significance to the fact that the text spells out the guilt of the sons of Yehuda, though it is sparing in the case of Er, while revealing more regarding the sin of Onan:

Scripture does not mention his sin as it does with his brother, but simply states that he died for his sin, to inform us that this was not Yehuda's punishment for the sale of Yosef, because the rescue rested on the sale, and there was no death of a child among the patriarchs except for this one who was evil in the sight of the Lord, because the seed of the righteous are blessed. (Ramban, 38:7)

However, Scripture writes this from the perspective of Divine providence; there is no reason to believe that these reasons were known to the society in which they lived. It is possible that in Yehuda's family, other explanations were given for the deaths of his sons. Indeed, the exact opposite of the Ramban's view is found in the words of the Seforno:

"And it came to pass at that time" – At the same time that Yosef was sold to Egypt, because of Yehuda's counsel, for he said to sell him and he did not say to return him. Since he bereaved his father of his son, Yehuda was visited by the fruits of his actions, and he fathered two sons who were fated to die and he remained bereft of both of them. (Seforno, 38:1)

This interpretation is extreme, since it appears to ignore Scripture's explanation of the deaths of Yehuda's sons as resulting from their own guilt. Seforno apparently understands that the severe punishment imposed on them was in a small measure the result of their father's guilt. In any event, as we have noted, even if the punishment of Yehuda's sons stemmed solely from their own actions, it is not inconceivable that there were those in the family who entertained the possibility of explaining the events in the manner proposed by the Seforno.

"You shall slay my two sons, if I bring him not to you"

In light of what we have seen so far, we can clarify the point with which we opened our discussion. Yaakov's sons were sent to Egypt to buy food. In the course of their mission, they encountered an unexpected difficulty – the accusation hurled at them by the ruler of Egypt that they were spies. Now they must deal with the problem of hunger that is plaguing their family, but buying food presents its own difficulty because of their father's refusal to send Binyamin with them. Yaakov's sons and their families find themselves in a tight spot, between a rock and a hard place. We readers are aware that Reuven harbors resentment for his brothers who torpedoed his plan. It is entirely possible that in the midst of this severe crisis, he casts indirect blame on his

³ The Radak and the Chizkuni write similarly. The Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, writes explicitly that this story took place prior to the sale of Yosef.

family for the consequences that followed, and he therefore responds:

And Reuven spoke to his father, saying, "You shall slay my two sons, if I bring him not to you; deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him back to you." (42:37)

In this crisis, when the family seems to be in a dead-end situation, Reuven tries to hint to his father about who is responsible. We argue that he refers here to the possibility raised by the Seforno – that Yehuda's two sons died because of his involvement in the sale of his brother. With his proposal to accept the punishment of the death of his two sons if Binyamin does not return, he hints that he is prepared to accept the same punishment meted out against Yehuda for his responsibility for the disappearance of his brother.

It is precisely because of Yehuda's failure that Reuven seeks to regain his natural place as the eldest son, who is in charge of family affairs, and by virtue of which the mission should be cast specifically on him. However, Yaakov refuses to connect Yehuda's tragedy, the death of his two sons, to his own tragedy, the disappearance of Yosef. He rejects the basis of the proposal, and therefore the situation remains as it was.

"Reuven, you are my firstborn"

We can now understand Reuven's conduct in its broader context. The first time we hear of an initiative taken by Reuven, it is in the context of an unusual step directed against his father:

And it came to pass, while Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve. (35:22)

Scripture does not explain Reuven's action, but the commentators offer several explanations. The only other information in this context is Yaakov's reproach on his deathbed, in which he perpetuates his disappointment with the action taken by his firstborn son:

Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might and the first-fruits of my strength... Unstable as water, have not you the excellency; because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it, when he went up to my couch. (49:3-4)

The second initiative taken by Reuven is the one that we have dealt with here, when he sought to rescue Yosef from the mischief planned against him by his brothers. What these two initiatives have in common is that in both cases, Reuven acts alone and on his own, and this is the weak point in his attempted rescue of Yosef, as we have demonstrated. Another aspect of this point becomes evident when we reconsider the formulation of the proposal that he made to his brothers:

And they said one to another, "Behold, this dreamer comes. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into one of the pits..." And Reuven heard it and delivered him out of their hand; and said, "Let us not take his life." And Reuven said to them, "Shed no blood; **cast him into this pit** that is in the wilderness, **but lay no hand upon him;**" that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. And it came to pass, when Yosef was come to his brothers, that they stripped Yosef of his coat... and they took him, and cast him into the pit... And they sat down to eat bread; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a caravan of

Yishmaelites came from Gil'ad... And Yehuda said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? **Come, and let us sell him to the Yishmaelites**, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother, our flesh." **And his brethren heard it. (37:19-27)**

This passage contains three suggestions. It opens with the citation of an anonymous suggestion to kill Yosef, which is followed by Reuven's proposal to throw Yosef into the pit, and in the end we come to Yehuda's proposal to sell Yosef to the Yishmaelites, which is accepted by those who hear it.

It should be noted that Reuven's proposal is unusual in its wording, as it is phrased as an imperative, whereas the other proposals are formulated in the exact same way: "Come, and let us...." The text also indicates that the last proposal was accepted only because his brothers heard it, while everyone obeyed Reuven's command without Scripture bothering to note whether they agreed with it or not. This fact underscores the great authority that Reuven wielded over his brothers, but from a broader perspective it seems that he failed in his exercise of this authority over and over again.

The setting aside of a firstborn in the bible

Over the course of the book of *Bereishit*, we come across several firstborns who lose their elevated status. Kayin was rejected, and Yishmael was not chosen as Avraham's successor. Esav too loses his place to Yaakov, and Reuven joins this list. This being a phenomenon that repeats itself several times, we must try to understand it. It seems that the Torah wishes to show us that being a firstborn offers an opportunity, but also presents a risk. The fact that one was born first gives him an advantage over those who were born after him, but this advantage should not be overstated. Sometimes a firstborn allows himself to take his preferential status to exaggerated places because he is convinced that since that status was vested in him by the very fact of his birth, it is his forever and it allows him to behave as he pleases. This outlook is the key to the downfall of the firstborn, if he fails to look back and make sure that his younger brothers are following in his footsteps willingly and not out of coercion.

The younger brother is not infected with such an outlook. From the moment of his birth, he is well aware that he must take into account those who are greater than him, and it is on the basis of this approach that he paves his way to the front of the stage. A firstborn is given preference, but should he fail, the inferior starting point of the younger brother works to his advantage. In this way Reuven failed, and precisely in this manner Yehuda took his place.⁴

(Translated by David Strauss)

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⁴ In the aforementioned article (see note 1), I expand on the conversation between Yehuda and his father about Binyamin's going down to Egypt, and the way that Yehuda convinces his father to send Binyamin specifically with him.