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**Reflections on Parashat Vayeshev: Praised be Yehuda**

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In the final parshiyot of sefer Bereishit we leave the world of the patriarchs behind and the story of the children begins to unfold.  Two children, future tribes, emerge as dominant; Yehuda and Yosef.  I wish to focus upon Yehudah and his problematic leadership qualities.

In parashat Vayeshev, Yehuda instigates the sale of Yosef into slavery and experiences the embarrassing episode with his daughter-in-law, Tamar.  I believe that these two stories must be read as one.

Upon seeing Yosef from a distance, the brothers plot to murder him and dispose of his body.  Yehuda intercedes with the following words,

“What will we gain (*ma betza’*) if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let us sell him to the*Yishma’elim* and not harm him with our own hands…”

Referring to this passage R. Meir says in  Sanhedrin 6b:

R. Meir says: …it is written, *And Judah said to his brethren, What profit*(betza’)*is it if we slay our brother*?  And **whosoever praises Judah, blasphemes**, as it is written, *He who praiseth the man who is greedy of gain* (botzea’) *contemneth the Lord*.

R. Meir’s categorical condemnation of Yehuda begs us to look at the situation more closely.

The brothers seem to be determined to do away with Yosef once and for all.  Yosef’s own appeals (as recounted later in Bereishit ch. 42 v.21 “…we saw him suffering when he pleaded with us but we would not listen.”)  fall upon deaf ears and stone hearts.

In my mind Yehuda had three options.

1)   Subterfuge: attempt to deceive the brothers and sabotage the plot in order to return Yosef to his father.  This is the option chosen by Reuven and proven to be ineffective.

2)    Confrontation: Go head to head against the brothers.  This option is very risky.  Those who insist on all or nothing most often get nothing.

3)    Compromise.

Yehuda faces an excruciating dilemma. Should he risk Yosef’s life in an effort to return him safely to his father*or* at least save his life even though it means selling him into slavery?

Leaders- politicians- are often criticized for not taking the principled positions. This is unfair.  It is a test of leadership to be able to read the situation and to determine whether to take the principled stand or compromise in order to maximize the good which is possible.  The leader who chooses the pragmatic path exposes himself to the criticism of being weak, unprincipled and seeking the easy way out.

We who are reading the story must ask ourselves, what sort of leader is Yehuda? How can we know?

This is the significance of the story at the end of the parasha concerning Yehuda and Tamar.  At the conclusion of that story, Yehuda bravely stands up and takes responsibility for his actions.

**26**And Yehuda acknowledged them and said, “She hath been more righteous than I, because I gave her not to Shelah my son.”

Yehuda’s courageous stand, his ability to confront the truth publicly at the risk of humiliation, is testimony to his character.  The narrative of Yehuda and Tamar is a vindication of Yehuda.  This informs us that his earlier compromise was not a product of self interest, fear and expedience. Rather it was Yehuda’s concern for Yosef, his father and the future of the tribe which determined his behavior. Yehuda was willing to sacrifice principle in favor of pragmatism in the interest of the greater good.  His sacrifice is twofold:

Firstly, the painful sacrifice of the principle itself, and secondly opening himself up to derision of those who would later hold him responsible.

Yehuda’s two fold sacrifice is a testimony to his character and leadership; let the leader who compromises be praised.