

Reuben and Judah

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

In his blessings to his children before his passing, Jacob assigned to each of them their role in the formation of the Jewish nation. The twelve sons of Jacob became the twelve tribes of Israel, whose twelve individual callings collectively realize the mission of Israel.

Judah, Jacob's fourth son, was granted the role of sovereign and ruler. In Jacob's words, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the legislator's pen from his descendants; to him nations shall submit, until the coming of Shiloh." Beginning with King David, all legitimate rulers of Israel -- kings, *nessiim*, exilarchs -- up to and including Moshiach, were and will be from the tribe of Judah.

By rights, the sovereignty belonged to Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. But Reuben had sinned against his father, forfeiting this right, which was then transferred to Judah. Why Judah? Our sages identify two virtues for which Judah merited the leadership of Israel:

(a) When the other sons of Jacob plotted to kill Joseph, Judah saved his life. "What shall we profit by killing our brother and covering his blood?" argued Judah. "Let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not harm him with our own hands, for he is our brother, our own flesh." The others accepted Judah's reasoning, and Joseph was taken out of the snake-infested pit into which he had been thrown and sold into slavery.

(b) Judah publicly admitted his culpability in the incident of Tamar, thereby saving her and her two unborn sons from death.

It would seem, however, that Reuben was no less virtuous than Judah. Indeed, in both these areas, Reuben's deeds were greater and his intentions purer.

Regarding the plot to kill Joseph, it was Reuben who first saved Joseph's life by suggesting to his brothers that, instead of killing him, they should throw him into the pit. As the Torah attests, he did this "in order to save him from their hands and return him to his father" (Reuben did not know that there were snakes and scorpions in the pit). The Torah also attests that Reuben was not present when Joseph was sold, and records his shock at not finding Joseph in the pit when he returned to take him out and his berating of his brothers for what they had done. Judah, on the other hand, only suggested a more profitable way of disposing of Joseph (the Torah says nothing about any hidden intentions), and was the cause of Joseph's sale into slavery. Indeed, we later find the others accusing Judah: "It was you who told us to sell him. If you would have told us to return him [home], we would have listened to you" (Rashi, Genesis 38:1).

As for Judah's public penance, here, too, Reuben excelled him. Reuben, too, admitted and repented his sin. And while Judah was faced with a choice to either admit his responsibility or cause the destruction of three innocent lives, there were no such compelling factors in Reuben's case. Furthermore, Reuben's penance did not end with a one-time admission of guilt, but continued to consume his entire being for many years. Indeed, the reason why Reuben was not present at the time of Joseph's sale -- nine years after his original wrongdoing against his father -- was that "he was occupied with his sackcloth and fasting."

26 November | 20 Kislev

Vayeshev

Shabbat Begins: 3:44 pm

Shabbat Ends: 4:50 pm

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains: As far as personal virtue is concerned, Reuben indeed surpassed Judah, both in the purity of his intentions regarding Joseph and the intensity of his repentance over his failings. But Judah was the one who *actually saved* Joseph, while Reuben unwittingly placed him in mortal danger. In the same vein, Judah's repentance saved three lives, while Reuben's remorse helped no one; in fact, had he not been preoccupied with his sackcloth and his fasting, he might have prevented Joseph's being sold into slavery.

Indeed, Reuben retained his rights as Jacob's firstborn in all that pertained to him as an individual. But he forfeited his role as a leader, by neglecting the most basic prerequisite for leadership. Believing Joseph safe for the time being, Reuben rushed back to attend to his prayers and penance, forgetting that concern for one's fellow must always take precedence over one's own pursuits, no matter how pious and lofty these pursuits might be.

While Reuben prayed and fasted, Judah acted. Judah earned the leadership of Israel by recognizing that when another human being needs us, we must set aside all other considerations and get involved. Even if our own motives are still short of perfection. Sometimes, we cannot afford to wait.

The content in this page is produced and copyrighted by www.chabad.org

26 November | 20 Kislev

Vayeshev

Shabbat Begins: 3:44 pm

Shabbat Ends: 4:50 pm