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Parashat Vayechi and the Truest Kindness: Chesed V'Emet
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

As Jacob's life draws to a close in Parashat Vayechi, he summons Joseph and makes an urgent request: "deal with me with chesed v'emet – do not bury me in Egypt" (Genesis 47:29). The patriarch asks to be returned to the Land of Israel for burial, and frames this plea with a striking phrase: chesed v'emet, "kindness and truth," or perhaps "true kindness."

Rashi offers the classic explanation: when one performs kindness for the dead, it is pure and genuine, as no repayment can be expected. The deceased cannot reciprocate; they cannot return the favor, offer gratitude, or enhance one's reputation.

But this raises a glaring question: What could it possibly mean to say there is no repayment for caring for the deceased? Did Jacob and Joseph not believe in divine reward and punishment? Wouldn't God's reward constitute a very real form of payback for Joseph's kindness? How can we speak of "no expectation of return" in a worldview permeated by belief in divine justice?

This question opens a window into understanding not just this particular mitzvah, but the very nature of authentic human relationships and the kind of society our tradition envisions.

The Midrash on Abraham and Sarah

Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, in the Asufat Ma'arakhot to Chayei Sarah, draws attention to a surprising Midrash that Abraham was praised as having attained the qualities of God specifically when he buried his wife Sarah.

This is striking: Abraham, who performed so much kindness throughout his lifetime, receives singular commendation for an act that any relative, certainly any husband, would be expected to perform. Why does the burial of Sarah merit such special praise, suggesting that through this act Abraham achieved divine qualities, when Abraham's legendary hospitality and generosity were far more extraordinary?

R. Goldvicht connects this to the theme of Chesed v'Emet. The other services that Abraham provided to humanity were those for which one could expect reciprocity, and thus could be understood as part of a social contract, recommended without necessarily being rooted in divine influence. When Abraham welcomed guests, fed the hungry, and showed generosity to all, these were admirable acts, but they operated within the framework of human social interaction. They could be explained, at least in part, by enlightened self-interest, by the recognition that such behavior builds community and often brings return benefits.

Burial, however, is different. It is an act of kindness to the departed, a "chesed shel emet" – a pure, selfless act for which no reciprocity can be expected. Thus, it is a clear manifestation not of utilitarianism or of the social contract, but of Godliness itself.

Acts that exist within the framework of mutual benefit, however admirable, do not necessarily reflect divine qualities. They can be recommended by practical wisdom, by social necessity, by enlightened self-interest. But kindness that offers no possibility of return, purely out of recognition of another's dignity and worth, transcends the human and touches the divine.

God's kindness to humanity is not motivated by what He can gain from us. The divine chesed flows from God's essential nature, from His goodness itself, not from any expectation of reciprocity. When we care for the deceased, we emulate this divine attribute most purely. We act out of pure goodness, out of recognition of human dignity, out of commitment to truth; not out of calculation of benefit.

This is why the Midrash singles out Sarah's burial as the moment when Abraham attained the qualities of God. In that act, he demonstrated that his kindness was not ultimately rooted in the social contract or in reciprocal relationships, but in something deeper, in chesed that flows from Godliness itself.

Additional Layers of Meaning

Yet other commentators offer additional layers that enrich our understanding. R. Yitzchak Kreiser (Ish Le-Re'eihu, Genesis, 469) suggests that "emet" refers to the undeniable reality of the need. In other realms of chesed, one might question whether help is truly necessary, but burial admits no such doubt. The "truth" here is the inescapable reality of human mortality and dependency.

The Kozhiglover Rav, R. Aryeh Leib Fromer, offers a homiletic insight (printed in Responsa Eretz Tzvi II, pp. 409-410) that adds another dimension. He suggests that while the deceased requires the assistance of others, those who are alive need the deceased as well. The tremendous mitzvot associated with caring for the departed cannot be performed in any other context. Thus, the chesed associated with these mitzvot is particularly great because they provide a final merit to a soul anguished by the loss of further opportunity to accrue merit on this earth. This perspective transforms our understanding: we do not simply do a favor for those who have died; rather, we engage in a sacred partnership.

R. Elyakim Shlesinger (Sichot Beit Av, pp. 66-67) notes that acts of chesed are often motivated partially by the desire of the giver to avoid witnessing the pain and suffering of others, which diverts focus from the needs of the recipient to those of the giver. In the case of funeral preparations, however, the recipient is not visibly suffering, and thus the service is more purely altruistic.

(For a more mystically oriented interpretation, see Ma'avar Ya'abok, Sefat Emet, ch. 27.)

Two Aspects of One Obligation

The mitzvah of burial operates on two distinct levels. On one level, it is an independent obligation identified in the Torah as a commandment (Deuteronomy 21:23), with its own goals and requirements. On another level, it is the final expression of dignity shown to a human being, and one that by definition necessitates the involvement of others. As such, burial and all that it entails is firmly rooted within the broader commandment of chesed.

This is a chesed modeled by God Himself. The Torah tells us that God personally buried Moses (Deut. 34:6) – a powerful paradigm for human emulation. When we attend to the needs of the deceased, we walk in the ways of the Divine.

Some authorities delineate two distinct responsibilities within this framework. For family members, burial is an absolute obligation. The community at large, which assists the family or steps in when there is no family, is engaged in chesed.

The Ketav Sofer offers another dimension: burial is a basic societal need that could be met minimally and functionally. The "true kindness" was not merely burying Jacob, but honoring his specific wish not to be buried in Egypt. Going beyond minimal compliance to honor the deceased's preferences – that is purely chesed. (Responsa Ketav Sofer, Yoreh Deah 180. Note also the analysis of R. Meir Dan Plotzki, Keli Chemdah, Parshat Ki Tetze 6:6.) This interpretation is relevant to understanding the Midrashic comment regarding Abraham, who would have been required to minimally attend to Sarah's burial regardless. The extent he went to in showing her proper dignity and care is evidence of the chesed the Midrash is identifying.

The Priority of Attending to the Deceased

The importance of this mitzvah is underscored by the principle that attending a funeral supersedes even Torah study (Ketuvot 17a). This is grouped together with hakhnasat kallah, escorting a bride into marriage. The majority of authorities rule that one must set aside learning to participate in a funeral procession. This extends to all community members at work as well (YD 361:2). The message is unmistakable: the dignity of every human being, even in death, takes precedence.

While the obligation to set aside Torah study is striking, some authorities actually considered it redundant in light of the standard rule that Torah study does not exempt one from a mitzvah that cannot be done by others. Since one's absence from a funeral will reduce the size of the crowd (even if others are present), it seems self-evident that this

mitzvah cannot be delegated. Others suggest the ruling was necessary because one might mistakenly think only the burial itself is the mitzvah, while the procession merely adds honor. The Talmud therefore teaches explicitly that the procession also takes priority.

The Challenge of Contemporary Practice

Despite these clear teachings, contemporary practice falls short of the ideal. R. Moshe Feinstein reportedly considered this a very serious question with no satisfactory answer. R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (He'arot Le-Massekhet Ketuvot, 17a [70-71]) noted that no single explanation suffices, but taken together various theories provide a general defense.

R. David Ariav surveys several possibilities: the obligation may apply only when one actually sees the deceased being transported; one actively engaged in learning may not need to interrupt; the original principle may have applied only to unified communities; the obligation may exist only at the precise moment of movement, which is generally not known in advance.

Some authorities concede that current practice represents a necessary accommodation given the frequency of death in larger cities and cemetery distances. Others note that when there is a chevra kadisha, there is less obligation on the general populace, as the chevra acts as community emissaries. (See Responsa Tzitz Eliezer IX, Kuntres Ramat Rachel, 50, and Kuntres Even Ya'akov, 19-23, who surveys various perspectives on this issue.)

Whatever explanation is accepted, friends, neighbors, and relatives of the deceased have particular obligations. As R. David Friedman (Karliner) emphasizes (Sh'eilat David, chiddushim to Yoreh De'ah 361), their absence may constitute public disgrace and the issue must be evaluated accordingly.

The Meaning of Accompaniment

The term used for attending a funeral is halvayat ha-met, literally "escorting the deceased." The act of physical accompaniment is fundamental, prompting the question of how far one must escort.

An initial reading of the Shulchan Arukh indicates a minimum of four amot (six to eight feet). R. Yeshaya Shlomo Asdit asserts that the mitzvah is actually to escort the body to the cemetery, but minimally one has performed the basic duty with four amot. In defense of contemporary practice, he suggests that many are lenient about traveling to the cemetery because Jewish communities typically live among non-Jewish populations, with cemeteries located at some distance. The Chafetz Chaim observes that at minimum, the community must ensure a minyan at the cemetery for kaddish.

The Muncaczer Rebbe, R. Chaim Elazar Schapiro, after an extended effort to understand the apparently inadequate common practice, suggests the following distinction (Responsa Minchat Elazar I, 26, in footnote. See also IV, 2.). The Talmud states that one who sees the deceased in transit, and chooses not to accompany him, is in essence mocking the departed, and subject to the designation of "who so mocks the poor (lo'eg la-rash) blasphemes his Maker" (Proverbs 17:5). This criticism is applicable only to one who fails to escort the deceased even for a minimal four cubits. To go beyond that minimum, and escort to the cemetery, is an act of voluntary chesed. R. Ovadiah Yosef (Responsa Yabbia Omer IV, Yoreh De'ah 35:1) records a practice to wait until the deceased has left one's field of vision, and notes that this is apparently sourced in a comment of the Chizkuni (Deut. 21:7).

The Manner of Escorting

It is not only the act of escorting that matters, but also the manner. The pace should be deliberate and respectful, not rushed. Those escorting must not push others away, which would undermine the honor of both the dead and the living. All extraneous conversation, even Torah discussion, is inappropriate during the procession.

The Shulchan Arukh states that even when not obligated to accompany, one must stand when the coffin passes. According to the Taz, this honors those involved in the proceedings; as agents of chesed, they command respect. The Pitchei Teshuvah, citing R. Eliyahu of Lublin, offers a different theory: the standing is for the honor of the deceased themselves.

Contemporary authorities assert that the standing obligation applies even to one on a passing bus. R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach is quoted (Halikhot Shelomoh: Tefillah, ch. 13, n. 22) as maintaining that if the bus stops or turns in another direction, the passenger is obligated to descend and accompany the funeral procession. R. Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (Responsa Salmat Chaim, Yoreh De'ah 614) inclined toward the same conclusion.

Beyond the Procession

The language of halvayat ha-met connotes "escorting the deceased," and much discussion centers on accompanying the coffin. Nonetheless, as R. Yisrael David Harfenes notes, participating in eulogies is also a fulfillment of this mitzvah.

R. Harfenes cites an instructive practice of the Satmar Rebbe. When asked to speak at a funeral, the Rebbe would request to be the last speaker; at the conclusion of his eulogy, he would also escort the deceased. However, if he were not the last speaker, he would not necessarily remain for all speeches.

Building on this, R. Harfenes suggests: The primary responsibility is escorting the deceased. Attending eulogies is an overt act of honor, so much so that one present may have difficulty justifying leaving mid-service. However, if one is actually speaking, this constitutes such visible honor that it may be a complete fulfillment in itself.

R. Pinchas Korakh asserts that just as one who cannot escort the entire way does so for four cubits, one who cannot remain for all eulogies but listens for whatever duration possible has accomplished something significant.

The Contemporary Application

To return to our opening question: How can we speak of "no repayment" when Jacob and Joseph surely believed in divine reward and punishment?

The answer lies in understanding the profound distinction between divine reward and human transactionality. Of course they believed in divine justice; but that is not what Jacob was asking Joseph to transcend. Jacob was asking Joseph not to approach this act like a politician in a transactional relationship, but to set aside that entire framework and to act from a place of pure principle, out of divine attributes rather than human calculation.

The social contract – the framework of reciprocal obligations – is not inherently bad. It is, in fact, the foundation of civilized society. But chesed v'emet asks us to recognize that beneath and beyond the social contract lies something higher: the emulation of divine attributes.

God's kindness to humanity flows from His essential goodness, not from any expectation of reciprocity. When we care for the deceased, when we perform acts that offer no possibility of return benefit, we most purely emulate this divine quality.

There is much going on in this last parashah of Genesis that is ambiguous. The sons of Jacob remain anxiously unclear as to their standing with Joseph, and ultimately transmit a message to him that Jacob has instructed him to forgive them (50:16-17), which may or may not be true (see Yevamot 65b).

Jacob issues blessings to each of his sons that the Torah describes with the unusual formulation (Gen. 49:28) of "Each man with his own blessing (singular) He blessed them (plural)." The Sefat Emet picks up on the change in language: he was bestowing each son with blessings tailored to his unique abilities, with the understanding that he harness those talents and gifts towards the good of the family as a whole.

When blessing his grandchildren, Jacob emphasizes the younger over the older, seemingly repeating the mistake of favoritism that he committed with his own sons (see Shabbat 10b and Megillah 16b). One possibility is that he was testing them: Would there be a jealous reaction, as had happened with his sons, or would there be a sense of cooperation, a more auspicious sign for the next generation? (See Da'at Shlomo.)

Yet another possibility is that Jacob's target at that moment was actually Joseph, who objects to his inversion and declares that Menashe is the older son. Jacob's response is a cryptic, "I know, my son, I know." Perhaps, it has been suggested, these words contain multitudes. "I know all too well, my son, how painful it can be for an older child to be passed

over for a younger child. I was a part of that many years ago and saw the price that it extracted from the older sons. I am asking you to appreciate it now as well, as it seems you do; and to have compassion on your own older brothers who reacted so negatively when it happened to them. Perhaps you can find within your heart to forgive them." (Yalkut Ish L'Reihu, quoting Nachalat Av.)

In that case, perhaps Jacob did instruct Joseph to forgive his brothers, whether or not he ever said those words specifically. Perhaps through one action or a combination of actions, through a series of implications and subtle messages, he conveyed to Joseph the importance of seeing the larger picture and working beyond the politics of the moment.

And then, once again, at the very end of his life, he instructed Joseph to listen to his final wishes for dignity and for a resting place consistent with his spiritual vision. He asked him to do so, not because of any transactional benefit, or for any social contract, or justifiable reciprocity, but simply because kindness and giving is the very essence of his soul. In that, Jacob was making a request, but was, in truth, bequeathing a legacy; one begun by his own grandfather Abraham, and now transmitted to his own grandchildren and beyond: telling them not what to do, but who to be.]

Vayechi

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The book of Bereshith is completed in this week's Torah reading. The story of the emergence of first one person and then an entire family as being the spearhead of monotheistic belief in a pagan world is an exciting but difficult one.

At so many turns in the events described in the Torah the idea of monotheism and the few who championed its cause could have died at birth. Yet somehow the idea and the people advancing it survived and grew until, over the ages, it became the defining idea in the major religions of civilization.

Truth somehow survived, unable to be crushed by the great and mighty forces always aligned against it. Our patriarch Yaakov tells the Pharaoh that "my years are relatively few and very difficult ones." But Yaakov is not only speaking for himself in this statement. He speaks for the Jewish people as a whole in all of its generations and ages. And he also speaks for all those in the world who still value truth over falseness, accuracy over populism, reality over current political correctness and imposed intellectual conformity.

The Midrash taught us that the seal of God, so to speak, is truth. The book of Bereshith begins with truth inscribed in its opening words, the last letter of these first three words of the Torah spelling the Hebrew word emet – truth. Falseness requires publicity, media, excuses and greater falsehoods to cover and justify the original untruth.

In Yiddish there is a phrase that says: "The best lie is the truth." Truth needs no follow-up. It stands on its own for all eternity.

Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence stated that truths are self-evident. If we merely contemplate, even on a superficial level, the events as described in the book of Bereshith, we must stand back in awe to realize the power of truth and the tenacity of individuals who pursue it and live by it.

How easy and understandable it would have been for any of our patriarchs and matriarchs to have become disappointed and disillusioned by the events of their lives. Yet their ultimate faith, that truth will survive and triumph, dominates the entire narrative of this first book of the Torah. Bereshith sets the pattern for everything that will follow.

All of the Torah is a search for and vindication of truth. God's revelation at Sinai was an aid in this quest for truth, otherwise so many people could not have arrived at that moment of truth all together. But falseness, human nature, greed and apathy continually whittle away at the idea of truth as the centerpiece of human endeavor.

The rabbis taught us that the acts of the patriarchs, which are the main story of the book of Bereshith, guide us for all later generations. This Shabat we will all rise and say "chazak" – be strong - at the conclusion of the Torah reading. The never ending pursuit of truth requires strength of purpose and will. May we really have the strength of purpose and belief to "be strong."

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vayechi

Squeeze Play

Yaakov had passed from this world. His twelve sons were left alone in a foreign world, and it was time for reconciliation. The brothers were afraid that with Yaakov's passing Yoseph would avenge them for selling him to Egypt. So they sent the sons of Yaakov's concubine Bilhah, with a message. "Your father commanded before his death saying, 'Thus shall you tell Yoseph, please, kindly forgive your brothers terrible deed and their sin for they have done you evil." Yoseph assures them that he has no intent for retribution. In fact, he promises to sustain the brothers and their families.

The Talmud in Yevamos tells us that Yaakov would not have suspected Yoseph to be vengeful and he never issued the stated command. The Talmud extrapolates from this incident that one may twist the truth for the sake of peace and harmony. Yet it seems that there was a bit more than twisting truth. It sems that there was an overt lie. And why would they use Yaakov's name in this untruth? If he did not suspect Yoseph as Rashi explains, then weren't they insulting him by saying, "your father commanded"? The 1929 Boston Braves were owned by Judge Emil E. Fuchs. Judge Fuchs cared basically for the financial management and legal affairs of the team, but the depressed economy and his unwillingness to put up with the difficult and expensive Roger Hornsby, left the team without a manager.

Judge Fuchs, an experienced adjudicator, read the rulebook and surrounded himself with a few cronies who would help him guide the team. Then he literally brought his swivel chair into the dugout and began to manage the team.

It was late in the summer of that dismal season, and the team had just been on a losing streak. Miraculously, however, it seemed that the down streak was about to end. The game was tied in the bottom of the ninth and the bases were loaded. The Braves were batting and Judge Fuchs gave the orders to swing away.

After one strike, the batter, Joe Dugan, called time and approached his well-respected manager. "Judge," the player suggested, "the rookie at third base is playing well behind the bag. If I drop a bunt, we'll squeeze in the winning run!"

The judge looked sternly at the ball player. He was stunned at the mere suggestion. "Mr. Dugan," he exclaimed, "You will do no such thing. Either we will score our runs honorably or not at all!"

The Sha'ar Bas Rabim explains that though Yaakov never explicitly gave the command to lie, he did issue a game plan for the future. Before he blessed the brothers, he gathered them together with the words, "gather yourselves together," (Genesis 49:1-2). The charge for the future was unity, and whatever it took to achieve unity amongst the brothers was the core of Yaakov's wishes. The brothers understood how to play the game of life and how their father Yaakov would have wanted it. Peace and harmony were the only ultimate goal. That is what all parents want for their children and that is what the objective of the twelve brothers was. It took a squeeze play, but harmony was achieved. Had Yaakov been alive to manage the situation he may have also chosen the exact game plan. Yaakov, with the guidance of his mother and a skillful deception, had his father give him the blessings that were intended for Esav.

My grandfather, Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, once told me that attaining the highest level of any attribute require knows when to violate it! And to that end, Avraham the stalwart of kindness and compassion, was ready to sacrifice his own son at God's command, surely an act of seeming brutality. Yaakov, whose virtue is truth, knew when it was proper to mislead. And Yaakov's sons who understood the virtue of Yaakov's truth, also understood his quest for peace. They

learned, very well, that though sometimes it is time to swing away, this was the time to drop a gentle bunt.
Good Shabbos
Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Generations Forget and Remember
Vayechi
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
The drama of younger and older brothers which haunts the book of Bereishit from Cain and Abel onwards reaches a strange climax in the story of Joseph's children. Jacob/Israel is nearing the end of his life. Joseph visits him, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. It is the only scene of grandfather and grandchildren in the book. Jacob asks Joseph to bring them near so that he can bless them. What follows next is described in painstaking detail:
Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right hand to Israel's left, and Manasseh on his left hand to Israel's right, and brought them close. Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, even though he was the younger. And, crossing his hands, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though he was the firstborn...
Gen. 48:13-14
When Joseph saw that his father had placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, he was displeased. He took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to his father, "Not so, father. This is the firstborn. Put your right hand on his head." But his father refused: "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great, but his younger brother will become even greater, and his descendants will become an abundance of nations." On that day, he blessed them: "By you shall Israel bless, saying: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" He put Ephraim before Manasseh.
Gen. 48:17-20
It is not difficult to understand the care Joseph took to ensure that Jacob would bless the firstborn first. Three times his father had set the younger before the elder, and each time it had resulted in tragedy. He - Jacob, the younger - had sought to supplant his elder brother Esau. He had favoured the younger sister Rachel over Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Joseph and Benjamin, over the elder Reuben, Shimon, and Levi. The consequences were consistently catastrophic: estrangement from Esau, tension between the two sisters, and hostility among his sons. Joseph himself bore the scars: thrown into a pit by his brothers, who initially planned to kill him and eventually sold him into Egypt as a slave.
Had his father not learned? Or did he think that Ephraim – whom Joseph held in his right hand – was the elder? Did Jacob know what he was doing? Did he realise that he was risking extending the family feuds into the next generation? Besides which, what possible reason could he have for favouring the younger of his grandchildren over the elder? He had not seen them before. He knew nothing about them. None of the factors that led to the earlier episodes were operative here. Why did Jacob favour Ephraim over Manasseh?
Jacob knew two things, and it is here that the explanation lies. He knew that the stay of his family in Egypt would not be a short one. Before leaving Canaan to see Joseph, God had appeared to him in a vision:
Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes.
Gen. 46:3-4
This was, in other words, the start of the long exile which God had told Abraham would be the fate of his children (a vision the Torah describes as accompanied by "a deep and dreadful darkness" – Gen. 15:12). The other thing Jacob knew was his grandsons' names, Manasseh and Ephraim. The combination of these two facts was enough.
When Joseph finally emerged from prison to become Prime Minister of Egypt, he married and had two sons. This is how the Torah describes their birth:
Before the years of the famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh, saying, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim, saying, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."
Gen. 41:50-52
With the utmost brevity the Torah intimates an experience of exile that was to be repeated many times across the centuries. At first, Joseph felt relief. The years as a slave, then a prisoner, were over. He had risen to greatness. In Canaan, he had been the youngest of eleven brothers in a nomadic family of shepherds. Now, in Egypt, he was at the centre of the greatest civilisation of the ancient world, second only to Pharaoh in rank and power. No one reminded him of his background. With his royal robes and ring and chariot, he was an Egyptian prince (as Moses was later to be). The past was a bitter memory he sought to remove from his mind. Manasseh means "forgetting."
But as time passed, Joseph began to feel quite different emotions. Yes, he had arrived. But this people was not his; nor was its culture. To be sure, his family was, in any worldly terms, undistinguished, unsophisticated. Yet they remained his family. They were the matrix of who he was. Though they were no more than shepherds (a class the Egyptians despised), they had been spoken to by God – not the gods of the sun, the river, and death, the Egyptian pantheon – but God, the creator of heaven and earth, who did not make His home in temples and pyramids and panoplies of power, but who spoke in the human heart as a voice, lifting a simple family to moral greatness. By the time his second son was born, Joseph had undergone a profound change of heart. To be sure, he had all the trappings of earthly success – "God has made me fruitful" – but Egypt had become "the land of my affliction." Why? Because it was exile.
There is a sociological observation about immigrant groups, known as Hansen's Law: "The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget." Joseph went through this transformation very quickly. It was already complete by the time his second son was born. By calling him Ephraim, he was remembering what, when Manasseh was born, he was trying to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.
Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh had nothing to do with their ages and everything to do with their names. Knowing that these were the first two children of his family to be born in exile, knowing too that the exile would be prolonged and at times difficult and dark, Jacob sought to signal to all future generations that there would be a constant tension between the desire to forget (to assimilate, acculturate, anaesthetise the hope of a return) and the promptings of memory (the knowledge that this is "exile," that we are part of another story, that ultimate home is somewhere else). The child of forgetting (Manasseh) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part.

Bikur Cholim II
By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff
Question #1: Only visiting?
Is bikur cholim fulfilled simply by visiting the sick?
Question #2: How often?
How many times a day can one perform bikur cholim?
Question #3: Focus!
Do I need to focus that I am doing the mitzvah in order to fulfill it?
Foreword
In a previous article, we studied the laws of bikur cholim. We learned there that the original meaning of "bikur" is "examining" or "checking" and that the primary responsibility of the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to check and see what the ill person needs and to do whatever one can to meet those needs (Toras Ha'adam of the Ramban).
Many people err to think that the mitzvah of bikur cholim is simply to visit the ill and cheer them up, but do not realize that the mitzvah includes attending to the ill person's needs and praying on their behalf.

The previous article also taught that mitzvos tzerichos kavanah, performing a mitzvah requires being aware that what I am doing is something that Hashem commanded. Therefore, when I focus that this action fulfills a mitzvah, I gain reward that I do not receive if I do not pay attention that what I am doing is a mitzvah. It is also true that I can accomplish bikur cholim even if I am paid to perform the mitzvah. For this reason, a medical professional gains much merit by being aware that he is performing a mitzvah each and every time that he inquires about someone ill and assists in their care. One who does these same activities as a job, without considering that he is carrying out Hashem's mitzvah, loses the opportunity to fulfill it and to receive reward.

The previous article noted that there are several allusions in the Torah to the mitzvah of bikur cholim. It also discussed the dispute whether bikur cholim is counted separately as one of the 613 mitzvos or is subsumed under the mitzvah of following in Hashem's ways. To quote the Gemara (Sotah 14a): Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said: "How are we to understand the words of the Torah, 'You should follow Hashem, your G-d' (Devarim 13:5)? How is it possible for a human being to follow the Holy One, blessed is He, when the verse states that 'Hashem, your G-d, is a consuming fire? (Devarim 4:24; 9:3)' Rather, it means that we are to emulate Hashem's attributes – just as he dresses the unclothed… takes care of the sick… so should we!"

Similarly, the Torah teaches, "You must clarify to them [your children] the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the pathways in which they are to walk and the deeds that they are to perform" (Shemos 18:20), which the Gemara (Bava Kama 100a) explains includes gemillas chessed, bikur cholim and other, similar, acts of kindness.

The Toras Ha'adam writes, "It is a great mitzvah to visit the ill, since this causes the visitor to pray on the sick person's behalf, which revitalizes him. Furthermore, since the visitor sees the ill person, the visitor checks to see what the ill person needs" (also see Beis Yosef, Yoreh Deah 335). We see that praying for the ill is an even greater part of the mitzvah than attending to his needs, since the Ramban first mentions praying and then refers to attending to the other needs of the ill as "Furthermore."

When praying in the presence of the individual, one can pray for his recovery in any language and does not need to mention their name. By the way, wishing the patient a refuah sheleimah is considered praying for the individual. The authorities note that someone who visits a sick person without praying for his recovery has not fulfilled all the requirements of the mitzvah (Toras Ha'adam, based on Nedarim 40a; Rema, Yoreh Deah 335:4). Therefore, medical professionals should accustom themselves to pray for their sick patients, in order to fulfill the complete mitzvah of bikur cholim.

When praying for someone ill, always include a request that the rest of the Jewish ill also recover (Shabbos 12b).

The Gesher Hachayim recommends reciting the following pesukim as an introductory prayer for the patient: The pasuk that begins with the words Veheisir Hashem mi'mecha kol choli (Devarim 7:15), the pasuk Im shamoa…kol hamachalah asher samti bemitzrayim lo asim alecha ki ani Hashem rofe'echa (Shemos 15:26) and Borei niv sefasayim… amar Hashem urefasiv (Yeshayahu 57:19).

Changing the name

Based on a passage in the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16b), the Rema suggests changing the patient's name (Yoreh Deah 335:10), a practice usually followed only when the patient is facing a very serious situation. When "changing" the patient's name, the common practice is to add a name, such as Chayim, Chayah or Refael, at the beginning of the patient's name. The Gesher Hachayim (Volume 1, 1:3:5) advises that the new name should always be added at the beginning – if the patient's name had been Moshe ben Sarah, the new name is Refael Moshe ben Sarah, and if it was Rivkah bas Leah, the new name is Chayah Rivkah bas Leah.

If the patient improves even slightly and survives for thirty days after their name has been changed, this new name should be considered their name permanently and is also used when children are called up for an aliyah, when making a mishebeirach or other tefillah purposes. If the patient shows no improvement after the name is changed or passes away within thirty days of the name change, we ignore the changing of the name, both for the ill, now deceased, person and for their progeny.

For clarification, I will use two actual examples. During my mother's final illness, she contracted a different, very severe condition, and the name Chayah was added at the beginning of her name, Shterna Baila. She recovered from this condition, although her primary illness took her life a little more than a year later. Her name remains Chaya Shterna Baila.

When my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, the name Chayim was added before his name. Although he lived another three months, there was no improvement during this time, and therefore his name is Menachem Nachum, without the additional Chayim at the beginning.

How to change?

Some siddurim and the Gesher Hachayim suggest procedures to be followed for the name changing. Gesher Hachayim suggests that a quorum recite eighteen chapters of Tehillim (see page 31 of Volume I of his work for the list of chapters that he recommends), then selections from Chapter 119 of Tehillim, and then a special tefillah. If a minyan is present, he advises to then recite the 13 attributes of mercy of Hashem (Shemos 34:6, 7).

Small patient

One of the greatest acts of chesed is to stay overnight with a choleh (Aruch Hashulchan, Yoreh Deah 335:3; Shu't Tzitz Eliezer, Volume 5, Ramat Rachel, #4; Yalkut Yosef, Volume 7, page 27). A similar act of pure bikur cholim and true chesed is to stay overnight with a hospitalized child, which, in addition to fulfilling all aspects of bikur cholim enables the overburdened parents to get some proper sleep and attempt to keep their family's life in order at a very stressful time.

The Gemara (Nedarim 39b) states that the mitzvah of bikur cholim has no limit. The concluding interpretation of that Gemara is that this means that a person can fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim even a hundred times a day. If one frequently pops one's head into a sick child's bedroom to see how the child is doing, or periodically drops in to visit a shut-in, one fulfills a separate mitzvah each time, so long as it does not become burdensome to the choleh. As I mentioned in the previous article, a nurse fulfills the mitzvah of bikur cholim each time he/she checks on a patient.

Every community should have an organization devoted to the needs of the sick, and it is a tremendous merit to be involved in organizing and participating in such a wonderful chesed project (Ahavas Chesed 3:3).

The Gemara (Nedarim 40a) reports that when one of Rabbi Akiva's disciples was ill, no one came to check the patient's welfare. Rabbi Akiva entered the uncared-for dwelling, cleaned it and sprinkled water on the dirt floor (to prevent dust from rising). The student proclaimed, "Rabbi Akiva, you have brought me back to life!" After this experience, Rabbi Akiva taught that someone who visits the ill is considered as if he saved the person's life!

The Gemara states that someone who fulfills the mitzvah of bikur cholim is saved from the judgments of Gehenna (Nedarim 40a).

Taking care of needs

In addition to raising the sick person's spirits by showing one's concern, the visitor should also ascertain that the physical, financial, and medical needs are properly cared for, as well as other logistical concerns that may be troubling the patient. The mitzvah is to identify what the ill person needs to have taken care of and attend to that. If he needs to have household jobs attended to, getting kids to school, or financial help while the breadwinner is ill, these are all aspects of fulfilling the mitzvah of bikur cholim. Often, well-meaning people make the effort to visit the sick, but fail to fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim fully, because they fail to check if the choleh needs something (Gesher Hachayim).

When to visit

The Gemara (Nedarim 40a) says that one should not visit a choleh at the beginning of the day or at the end. This ruling is cited by the Toras Ha'adam and many other early halachic authorities. Despite the above, the custom is to visit the ill person, regardless of the time of the day. Why is this so? The Aruch Hashulchan (Yoreh Deah 335:8) explains

that the Gemara's visiting times are advisory rather than obligatory. The Gemara is saying that one should visit the ill person at the time most beneficial for his care, which is usually the afternoon, either because this does not interfere with medical care or because it is the best time to detect the patient's medical status. However, this is only advice and can be tempered by other practical concerns.

How to visit

The Gemara states that the shechinah rests above the head of a sick person (Shabbos 12b; Nedarim 40a). For this reason, it states that someone who visits a sick person should not sit on a bed, a stool or a chair, but on the floor. Alternatively, he can remain standing during his visit.

However, the Ran (Nedarim 40a) and the Rema (Yoreh Deah 335:3) rule that when the Gemara prohibits sitting on a bed, a stool or a chair when visiting someone ill, it is referring to a situation where the patient is lying on the floor – in such a situation, one should not sit higher than the shechinah. When the ill person is in a bed, one can sit on a chair that is no taller than the bed (see Yalkut Yosef, page 28, quoting Rav Eliezer Yehudah Valdenberg).

Based on a Zohar (parshas Pinchas), some contend that one should not sit near the head or the foot of the ill person, but alongside him (Beis Hillel and Shiyurei Beracha, Yoreh Deah 335:3). This ruling is alluded to also in the She'iltos.

Incidentally, since the Shechinah is in the choleh's presence (Shabbos 12b), visitors should act in a dignified manner (Shela"h). This includes both their behavior and their mode of dress.

Visiting on Shabbos

The Gemara quotes a dispute between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel whether it is permitted to visit someone ill on Shabbos (Shabbos 12a). Beis Shammai rules that one should not. Among the reasons suggested for Beis Shammai's opinion is that this may cause the visitor to become sad on Shabbos upon seeing the suffering of the ill (Rashi), that this violates the mitzvah of oneg Shabbos (She'iltos), or that this might cause someone to pray on Shabbos for a personal request, which is prohibited (Shevet Yehudah, Yoreh Deah 335:6). Even according to Beis Hillel, who permit doing bikur cholim on Shabbos, the Gemara says that bikoshi hitiru, this was permitted only with difficulty. Based on this, the Magen Avraham (287) disapproves of those who perform bikur cholim only on Shabbos, noting that although permitted, it is preferred that bikur cholim be performed on weekdays. The Sha'arei Teshuvah and the Biur Halacha note that someone who does not have time except for Shabbos may go, and certainly so if he thereby provides encouragement and creates smiles on people's faces.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 287:1) concludes that it is permitted to perform bikur cholim on Shabbos, like Beis Hillel, but emphasizes that one should not bless the ill person with the same refuah sheleimah wishes that are said on weekdays. This is presumably because wishing refuah sheleimah is actually a prayer on the ill person's behalf, and Chazal prohibited reciting personal requests on Shabbos. The Gemara quotes several opinions concerning exactly what you should say to the ill person on Shabbos. The last two opinions mentioned are those of Rabbi Yosi and of Shevna (or Shachna) of Yerushalayim. Rabbi Yosi cites a simple text, Hamakom yeracheim alecha besoch cholei Yisrael, "Hashem should have mercy on you among the other ill people of Israel." Shevna's text is: Shabbos hi miliz'ok urefuah kerovah lavo verachamav merubin vishivsu beshalom, "Shabbos is here; therefore one should not cry out in pain. Healing comes quickly; Hashem's mercy is great; Dwell in peace!" This means that it is prohibited to scream out in prayer on Shabbos, but the curtailed prayer I am currently reciting should be viewed by Hashem as if I indeed recited a very intense prayer on behalf of the ill and the cure should arrive soon. Some authorities follow Rabbi Yosi's opinion (Toras Ha'adam; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:6) whereas the Shulchan Aruch itself, in Orach Chayim, cites Shevna's text. The Rema writes that the custom is not to add the extra words of Shevna's prayer, but to say simply Shabbos hi miliz'ok urefuah kerovah lavo.

Yom Tov

May one wish a person refuah sheleimah on Yom Tov, or does it have the same halacha as Shabbos. In general, Ashkenazic practice is to be more lenient regarding the laws of personal prayers on Yom Tov than on Shabbos. For this reason, we recite the 13 middos of Hakadosh Boruch Hu when we take out the sefer Torah on Yom Tov, followed by a personal prayer. Yom Tov is more lenient than Shabbos regarding the prohibition of reciting a personal prayer because each Yom Tov is a day of judgment for something, as the Mishnah states in Rosh Hashanah (16a): On Pesach, we are judged for grain; on Shavuos, for fruit; and on Sukkos, for water.

As a result of this discussion, there is a dispute between the Mekor Chayim and the Aderes whether it is permitted to wish a choleh refuah sheleimah on Yom Tov, the Mekor Chayim ruling that one should use the same version used on Shabbos, and the Aderes permitting wishing refuah sheleimah, which is not usually permitted on Shabbos.

Beracha

If bikur cholim is such an important mitzvah, why do we not recite a beracha prior to performing it? This question is raised by the rishonim, who provide several answers:

1. One recites a beracha only prior to a mitzvah that I am certain that I will be able to perform. The patient may not want to be visited or may not want other people to take care of matters for him, in which case there is no mitzvah of bikur cholim (Shu"t Harashba #18).

Not uniquely Jewish

2. Some authorities explain that we do not recite a beracha on this mitzvah because the text of birchos hamitzvos is Asher kideshanu bemitzvosav -- Hashem sanctified us with His mitzvos. These authorities contend that we recite a beracha only when a mitzvah is uniquely Jewish (Rokei'ach, quoted in Encyclopedia Talmudis, Volume IV, column 525). Since non-Jews also take care of the ill, this mitzvah does not reflect anything special about the relationship of Hashem to the Jewish people.

3. Yet another reason cited why we do not recite a beracha on bikur cholim is because reciting a beracha prior to observing this mitzvah sounds like we want the situation to exist (Ra'avad, quoted by Yalkut Yosef, page 24). We certainly would prefer that there be no ill people in the world.

4. Some rishonim note that all mitzvos upon which we recite berochos are those bound by time – meaning that there are times when we are obligated to observe the mitzvah and times when no obligation exists (Or Zarua, Birchas Hamotzi #140). Bikur cholim can be fulfilled at any time.

Conclusion

People who fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim are promised tremendous reward in Olam Haba, in addition to many rewards in this world (Shabbos 127a). The Kli Yakar (Bamidbar 16:29) suggests an additional reason for fulfilling bikur cholim -- to benefit the visitor -- because seeing someone who is ill influences the visitor to do teshuvah. This provides extra merit for the sick person, since he caused someone else to do teshuvah, even if it was unintentional. May Hashem send a speedy recovery to all the ill!

Parshat Vayechi: Why We Bless Our Sons Like 'Ephraim and Menashe'

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin

"And he blessed them on that day, saying, 'Through you shall Israel be blessed, saying, May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe' and he placed Ephraim before Menashe." (Genesis 48:20)

For many parents, the highlight of the Friday evening home celebration and meal, indeed the highlight of the entire week, is the moment when they bless their children. However, even this could be tension inducing if your son suddenly wants to know why his sister is blessed to grow up like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, while he has to settle for Ephraim and Menashe, Joseph's Egyptian born sons, instead of the patriarchs. Is it possible that boys are finally getting the short end of the blessing?

I believe the reason can be found if we study the book of Genesis from the perspective of family psychology. Sibling rivalry constantly surfaces

as a powerful motif indicating love-hate relationships that end up more bitter than sweet. Right from the opening pages in the Bible, Cain is jealous of Abel, whose offering to God was found more pleasing than his own. Before we know it, Abel is dead, killed by his own brother – the Torah's first recorded murder.

Of course, this takes place in the early stages of recorded time, but how much has really changed by the time we get to Abraham? His two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, cannot live under the same roof. Sent into the desert with his mother Hagar, who watches helplessly as he nearly dies from thirst and hunger, Ishmael's fate is doomed if not for the deus ex machina appearance of the angel. True, Isaac cannot be legally charged with Ishmael's suffering, but Ishmael and his mother are driven away only because of Sarah's concern that Ishmael will have a negative influence on Isaac, destined carrier of the torch of Israel.

In the next generation, things get worse. Jacob spends twenty-two years away from home because he's afraid Esau wants to kill him. Upon returning from his long exile, richer, wiser, head of a large household, he makes all kinds of preparations to appease his brother, and if that should fail, he devises a defense strategy should Esau's army of four hundred men attack. All of this hatred came about as a result of Jacob's having deceived his father, at the behest of his mother, in order to wrest the birthright and blessings away from his less deserving brother.

Jacob's own sons live through aspects of their father's sibling experiences; since Jacob felt unloved by his father, he lavished excessive favoritism upon his beloved son Joseph. As a result of the bitter jealousy the brothers harbor toward Joseph, they take the radical step of slow but inevitable death by casting their defenseless brother into a dangerous pit. Had Judah's last-minute advice to sell the boy to a caravan of Ishmaelites been ignored, Joseph would have been torn to death by some wild animal, or at the very least – died in the pit from starvation.

When the Torah commands "…do not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev. 19:17), it could have easily used the word 'friend' or 'neighbor.' The word 'brother' is deliberate; the people we are most likely to hate are the ones closest to us. If the natural affection between brothers backfires, the very same potential for closeness turns into the potential for distance. No silence is more piercing than brothers who refuse to speak to each other because of a dispute over an inheritance. Unlike a feud between strangers, family members do not bury the past – they live with it, and all too often, continue to fight over it. There is even a custom, retained by some old Jerusalem families, that children should not attend their parent's funeral. The esoteric reason which is given by the more mystical commentaries is that the illegitimate children of the parents – the spirits born of the father's seminal emissions – will fight with the legitimate biological children over the inheritance. All too often we find the legitimate children fighting over the inheritance at the grave site.

There is one remarkable exception to the pervasive theme of sibling hatred in Genesis. In contrast to their ancestors, Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe, do not fight when Jacob favors the younger brother, Ephraim, with the birthright blessing. Joseph even tries to stop Jacob. "That's not the way it should be done, Father…the other one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head" (Gen. 48:18). But Jacob knows exactly what he is doing. "The older one will also become a nation…but his younger brother will become even greater…" (Gen. 48:19).

As a result of this seeming favoritism of the younger Ephraim, one might expect a furious reaction from Menashe, lashing out like Cain. But Menashe overcomes personal feelings. Unlike his forebears, there is no biblical hint of sibling rivalry between these two sons of Joseph, despite what could well be seen as unfair favoritism. Since we each want our children to be there for each other no matter what – and indeed, this is chiefly what my wife prays for as she lights the Sabbath candles each week – every parent blesses his sons that they have as harmonious a relationship as Ephraim and Menashe.

There still remains, however, a nagging question. Why did Jacob bestow the birthright upon the younger Ephraim? What lies substantively behind the words – and order – of this particular blessing?

As usual, the Midrash fills in the missing pieces. When the brothers first meet the Grand Vizier in their attempt to purchase food, the Bible tells us that the Egyptian provider appeared not to understand Hebrew, "there was an interpreter between them" (Gen. 42:23). The Midrash identifies this interpreter as Menashe, apparently a PhD in languages and diplomacy from the University of the Nile. Menashe seems to have been his father's trusted aide in all important affairs of state. Ephraim, on the other hand, was studious, devoting his time to learning Torah with his old and other-worldly grandfather Jacob. In fact, when we read in our Torah portion of how Joseph is brought news of his father's illness, the text does not reveal the messenger's name but the Midrash identifies him as Ephraim, returning from Goshen where he had been studying with his grandfather.

Perhaps Menashe, the symbol of secular wisdom, does not object when his younger brother – expert in and dedicated to the wisdom of family tradition – receives the greater honor. From this perspective Jacob is expressing in his blessing the deepest value of Judaism: secular and worldly wisdom is significant and represents a giant achievement, but Torah must take preference and emerge as the highest priority. From the prism of the Midrash, we bless our children to excel in worldly knowledge, wisdom and Torah together, but with Torah receiving the greater accolade.

The capacity to submerge one's abilities and gifts to those of another, especially to a sibling who is younger, shows true commitment to the direction of the divine, an overriding concern for the welfare of the nation as a whole, and a profound maturity. This is precisely the character displayed by Joseph when he gratefully accepted his double portion (blessing), but conceded the true sovereign, international and ultimately, redemptive leadership to his brother Judah (as expressed in Jacob's final blessings, [Genesis 49:8–10, 22–26]).

In a much later period (eighth century BCE), Jeroboam of the tribe of Ephraim, whom King Solomon had appointed over the taxation of both tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, waged a revolution on behalf of the ten Northern Tribes against the tribe of Judah, against Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon and grandson of King David, and against the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Our Talmudic Sages, who respected Jeroboam's administrative abilities and cultural accomplishments, predicate the following conversation in the name of Raba:

"The Holy One Blessed Be He grabbed the garment of Jeroboam and told him, 'Repent, and I and you and the son of Jesse [David, King of Israel and progenitor of the Messiah] will join together, for our travels in Paradise.' Said [Jeroboam], 'Who will take the lead?' Said [the Almighty] 'the son of Jesse.' [Said Jeroboam] 'If that is the case, I am not interested.'" (Sanhedrin 102a)

Apparently, the descendants of Joseph were not gifted with the largesse of their ancestor – and herein lies the tragedy of the split between Jerusalem-Judea and Ephraim-Northern Israel, as well as between Torah study and secular wisdom.

Thankfully, our Ephraim and Menashe were different. And the importance of this filial ability to overlook favoritism and remain together takes on added significance when we come to the book of Exodus, the saga of the birth of our nation. Before the nation of Israel could be molded, a family had to emerge in which a profound harmony reigned. The heroic relationship between Menashe and Ephraim paved the way for a similar harmony between Aaron and Moses, where the younger brother served as the great leader, while the elder remained his loyal spokesman and interpreter to the people. These represent a crucial beacon of possibility, especially since our nation still in formation – from the rebellion of Korah to the Knesset inter- and intra-party eruptions – has constantly been plagued by sibling strife.

When parents bless their daughters to be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, what is being evoked is the very bedrock of Jewish existence, our matriarchs. When they bless their sons to be like Menashe and Ephraim, the blessing evokes the long slow process of Genesis which

finally bears fruit with the sons of Joseph, the only brothers who overcome sibling rivalry and achieve an incredible unity, with wordly wisdom merging with Torah traditions to bring the promise of redemption to a strife-torn world.
Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi YY Jacobson

[CS – Late breaking post:

What a True Leader Looks Like Reuben and Judah: A Psychological Profile

Summary of essay: Each of us is called to lead, in one shape or another. We are leaders in our families, companies, and communities; some of us are given an opportunity to influence scores of people. What is leadership? What does it mean to be a leader? What should leaders demand of themselves?

A most fascinating journey through the lives of two individuals in Genesis demonstrates how the few vignettes shared about them hold the key to a rich portrait of two people who, through their downfalls and triumphs, teach us about our duties as leaders in a challenging world.

The Final Conversation

This week's Torah portion (Vayechi) tells the story of Jacob's final conversation with his children. In astonishing candidness, moving prose, and profound vision, Jacob speaks to each of his sons, heart-to-heart, just moments before he is about to pass on to the next world.

"Come and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel," Jacob begins the fateful encounter[1]. Then he addresses Reuben, his oldest son, with razor-sharp words:

"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my power and the beginning of my might, foremost in rank and foremost in power. Water-like impetuosity -- you will not be preeminent, for you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it."

Reuben the firstborn, the rabbis explain[2], should have been entitled to the priesthood ("foremost in rank") and kingship ("foremost in power"). The Jewish priests and kings should have emerged from Reuben. But Reuben forfeited these privileges and they went instead to his brothers Levi and Judah, respectively (Aaron's family of priests came from Levi; the Davidic dynasty of kings came from Judah). Reuben remained the firstborn, "my firstborn," with many of the privileges conferred by Jewish law on a firstborn[3], but he lost the priesthood and kingship.

Reuben's Error

What was Jacob referring to when he spoke of Reuben ascending on his bed? The midrashic tradition[4] offers two interpretations.

This first takes us back to a disturbing scene that transpired after Rachel's death, some 47 years earlier[5].

"So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. Over her tomb, Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb. Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.

"While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went and lay with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it[6]."

Rashi[7], following Talmudic tradition[8], illuminates the backdrop behind this incident. When Rachel died, Jacob, who usually resided in her tent, moved his bed to the tent of Bilhah, her handmaid. For Reuben, Leah's oldest son, this was an unbearable provocation and a slap in his sensitive mother's face. It was bad enough that Jacob preferred Rachel to her sister Leah, but intolerable that he should prefer a handmaid to his mother. He thus removed Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's.

Almost a jubilee later, in his final moments, Jacob reminds Reuben of this episode and attributes his firstborn's loss of potential greatness to it. "Water-like impetuosity," Jacob declares, "you will not be preeminent, for you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it."

Reuben's Mandrakes

The midrash presents yet another meaning to Jacob's words, "For you went up onto your father's bed; onto my couch and defiled it." It takes us back to another dramatic incident that occurred around 10 years before the one just discussed.

"During wheat harvest," the Bible relates[9], "Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah (the commentators explain[10] that mandrakes were considered both an aphrodisiac and fertility drug). Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?' Rachel said, 'Therefore, he shall lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'" Indeed, Jacob spent the night with Leah instead of Rachel. Reuben, in other words, was the indirect cause for the relocation of his father's bed for one night.

The Sensitivity of a Child

What is fascinating about both of these tales is that they sketch a portrait of a remarkably sensitive and noble child. Reuben's heart goes out to his mother's plight. As the firstborn son of Leah, he seems to carry alone the burden of his mother's relative lack of appeal in Jacob's eyes. In fact, his very name, Reuben, meaning, "see, a son," was bestowed upon him by his mother, "because G-d has discerned my humiliation, for now, my husband will love me [11]".

In the earlier episode, Reuben, as a young lad out in the field, is thinking of his mother's anguish and hoping that, with the aid of the mandrakes, Leah will be able to win Jacob's complete affection. In the latter episode following Rachel's death, Reuben can't bear the pain caused to his mother by Jacob's placing his bed in Bilaha's tent.

It is, indeed, true that in both of these instances, Reuben's hastiness and impetuosity had negative consequences. In the incident with the mandrakes, had he waited until Rachel left Leah's tent, his gift to Leah might have prevented the bitter row that erupted between the two sisters, the only feud between them recorded in the Bible, and would have not created confusion in Jacob's sleeping arrangements. In the second instance, too, had Reuben broached the issue directly with his father or with Bilhah, instead of taking the matter into his own hands and moving his father's bed, the issue may have been resolved in a more dignified manner.

Still, it is clear that the motivation -- in contrast to the end result -- of both of these actions was pure and reflected profound moral concern. Why did he deserve to forfeit the priesthood and royalty?

Judah the King

Our dilemma becomes more disturbing upon considering who, of the 11 other sons of Jacob, received the gift of royalty in lieu of Reuben. It was the fourth son, Judah.

Here are Jacob's final words to Judah[12]:

"A lion cub is Judah; from the prey, my son, you elevated yourself. He [Judah] crouches, lies down like a lion, like an awesome lion, who will dare rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah…Nations will submit to him until the final tranquility comes."

The message is clear. Just as the lion is the "king of the jungle[13]," Judah is destined to be the king of the civilized world. Indeed, Judah became the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David. Since David, royalty among the Jewish people belonged to Judah's tribe[14]. The messiah himself, we are told, will be a descendent of Judah[15]. Even our very name, "Jews" or, in Hebrew Yehudim, or in Yiddish, Yidden, is derived from the name Judah, or Yehudah. It was Judah who conferred his identity on the people[16].

Why Judah? Jacob presents the reason in eight words: "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Judah was potentially a man of prey, a lion, a devourer; yet he succeeded in elevating himself from this terrible characteristic. Judah transformed himself. Why did Jacob view Judah as a potential man of prey? Rashi, quoting the midrashic tradition, focuses our attention on two rather unforgettable incidents about Judah that transpired nearly four decades earlier[17].

The Joseph Drama

The first, of course, is the moment when Joseph, on the instruction of his father, pays a visit to his brothers, who are shepherding Jacob's flock in the city of Shechem (Nablus).

The brothers, who despised Joseph deeply, see him approaching from afar. They realize that with no one to see them, they can kill Joseph and concoct a tale that will be impossible to refute. Only Reuben protests.

The biblical text states[18]: "Reuben heard and saved him [Joseph] from their hands. He said, 'Let's not take his life'. Reuben said to them: 'Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him' -- intending to rescue Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to his father."

It is interesting to note that the Torah rarely described people's inner drives. In this instance, however, the Torah makes an exception, revealing to us Reuben's true motivations: He wished to save Joseph.

As the story continues, the brothers agree to Reuben's suggestion. They throw Joseph into an empty well and they sit down to eat a meal. In the midst of the meal, they see an Arab caravan traveling to Egypt. Here, for the first time, we encounter Judah's voice[19]:

"Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands. After all -- he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'" The brothers' consent. Joseph is sold and brought to Egypt as a slave, where, 13 years later, he will rise to become the viceroy of Egypt.

Reuben's Fasting

Reuben was not present during the sale. "When Reuben returned to the cistern," the Torah relates[20], "and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! And I, where can I go?'" The brothers dipped Joseph's tunic in blood, and presented the tunic to Jacob, who exclaimed: "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph has surely been torn to bits!"

Where was Reuben during the sale of Joseph? The text is obscure, but it does offer a glimpse: The brothers sold Joseph while in the midst of a meal. The Torah, perhaps, shared with us this irrelevant detail in order to hint to us the reason for Reuben's absence. Reuben left the scene because he could not eat with his brothers. Why?

Rashi, again quoting the midrashic tradition, says[21] that Reuben had been dressing himself in sackcloth and fasting ever since he rearranged his father's beds after Rachel's death. Although the incident with the bed occurred nine years earlier, Reuben was still seeking ways to repent. Therefore, he did not join his brothers in their meal and was not present during Joseph's sale.

A Tale of Two Personas

Now, we come to understand Jacob's final words to Judah: "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Rashi explains, that when Jacob stated, upon discovering Joseph's blood-drenched tunic decades earlier, "A savage beast devoured him [Joseph]," Jacob was hinting to Judah that on his deathbed he would compare him to a lion." Jacob suspected that Joseph fell prey to Judah's hands. When Jacob learned the truth, that instead of letting Joseph die in the well Judah actually persuaded his brothers to sell him into slavery, Jacob, in appreciation, conferred upon Judah the crown of royalty, assuming the position taken from Reuben.

This is a deeply disturbing comment. Reuben is the only older brother of Joseph who attempts to save him and return him to his father. The Torah, as mentioned above, is unusually clear about Reuben's virtuous intentions. "His plan," states the Torah, "was to rescue Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to his father." Judah, in stark contrast, merely substitutes Joseph's death from starvation with a life sentence of slavery. Judah does not even consider liberating Joseph!

The powerful moral contrast between Reuben and Judah is even more striking when we reflect on the wording employed by Judah to persuade his brothers to sell Joseph. "Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands. After all -- he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'"

This, let's face it, is a speech of apparent monstrous callousness. There is no word about the evil of murder, merely pragmatic calculation ("what will we gain"). At the very moment he calls Joseph "our own flesh and blood" he is proposing selling him as a slave!

The moral paradox embodied by Jacob in his final moments, as he moves the gift of kingship from Reuben to Judah, is nothing less than astonishing. In the very episode for which Judah is rewarded with the gift of royalty (because he "elevated himself from prey"), Reuben stands head and shoulders above Judah in his nobility, compassion, and sensitivity. Yet it is Reuben who loses the crown to Judah!

The Tamar Drama

As we recall, in addition to the Joseph drama, the midrash and Rashi[17] present a second meaning in Jacob's final words to Judah, "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." According to this interpretation, Jacob was alluding to the event that took place between Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar.

Tamar, we recall[22], had married Judah's two elder sons, both of whom had died, leaving her a childless widow. Judah, fearing that his third son would share their fate, withheld him from her, thus leaving her unable to remarry and have children, since the levirate laws of marriage at the time held that when a husband died and left a childless widow, she was bound in marriage to either her brother-in-law or her father-in-law[23].

Once she understands her situation, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute. Judah encounters her and they are intimate with each other. She becomes pregnant. Judah, unaware of the disguise, concludes that she must have had a forbidden relationship and orders her to be put to death by burning. At this point, Tamar, who, while disguised, had taken Judah's seal, cord, and staff as a pledge, sends them to Judah with a message: "The father of my child is the man to whom these belong." Judah now understands the whole story. Not only has he placed Tamar in an impossible situation of living widowhood, and not only is he the father of her child, but he also realizes that she has behaved with extraordinary discretion in revealing the truth without shaming him. (It is from this act of Tamar's that we derive the rule[24] that "one should rather throw oneself into a fiery furnace than shame someone else in public.")

Judah admits he was wrong. "She is right!" he exclaims. "It is from me [that she has become pregnant]." Tamar's life, of course, is spared. She soon gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerach, the former becoming the ancestor of King David.

This, then, explains the meaning behind Jacob's words, "From the prey, my son, you elevated yourself." Judah was a "man of prey" who sentenced Tamar to death. Yet at the last moment, he confessed his guilt and rescued Tamar and her fetuses from death. Because of this, he was conferred with the power of kingship.

One Moment Vs. Nine Years

This interpretation, too, is disturbing. Both Reuben and Judah commit serious wrongdoings. Reuben intervenes in his father's intimacy; Judah sentences an innocent pregnant woman to death. Both confess their guilt and take full responsibility for their wrong actions. But in this instance again, it is Reuben who surpasses Judah on two counts.

Firstly, Judah almost caused three innocent lives to die, while Reuben merely relocated intimate furniture. Secondly, Judah admitted his guilt and that was it. Reuben, on the other hand, for at least nine years after his sin, was fasting every day in repentance!

We encounter here what appears as cruel cynicism at its finest. The act for which Judah receives the endowment of royalty -- his readiness to confront his wrongdoing and acknowledge his guilt -- is performed by his brother Reuben with far more depth and diligence. Yet it is Reuben who loses his potential greatness to Judah.

Furthermore, if Reuben has been fasting and repenting all this time for his mistake in tampering with his father's bed, why did this not suffice in having the royalty restored to his bosom?

Jacob’s Response

There is one more vignette in Genesis which allows us a glimpse into the above riddle. Genesis chapters 42-43 finds Joseph, now the Prime Minister of Egypt, treating his brothers (who have come to buy grain in Egypt) very harshly. He accuses them of espionage, imprisons one of his brothers (the Rabbis identify him as Shimon), and stipulates his release with the other nine brothers bringing his youngest brother Benjamin down to Egypt. When Jacob hears of this condition, he is terribly distressed. He has lost two sons, Joseph and Shimon, and now he might lose Benjamin. Jacob refuses to let them take Benjamin, the last surviving child of his beloved wife Rachel.

It is here where Reuben steps in. "And Reuben spoke to his father, saying, ‘You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring him (Benjamin) to you. Put him into my hand[s] and I will return him to you."

But Jacob refuses. "My son shall not go down with you, because his brother is dead, and he alone is left, and if misfortune befalls him on the way you are going, you will bring down my gray head in sorrow to the grave."

Yet the famine lingered and the starvation persisted. It is Judah who steps up to the plate. He tells his father these words: "Send the lad with me, and we will get up and go, and we will live and not die, both we and you and also our young children. I will guarantee him; from my hand, you can demand him. If I do not bring him to you and stand him up before you, I will have sinned against you forever."

Jacob relents. He sends Benjamin with the brothers. It is during this visit that Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and the first Jewish family is reunited. Jacob relocates to Egypt and meets his son Joseph after a 22-year separation.

Here we wonder yet once again, why did Jacob refuse Reuben’s promise and embrace Judah’s pledge? They both promised to return Benjamin to Jacob. Reuben, we have discovered, seemed to be far more virtuous than Judah. Yet Jacob would respond only to Judah. The unfairness seems to repeat itself. The sincere Reuben who is ready to sacrifice both of his children is repelled.

Reuben's Profile

Upon deeper reflection, it is precisely in this entire complex tale that we may encounter Judaism's perspective on the function and meaning of the crown of royalty and the art of leadership.

Reuben, throughout Genesis, displays moral dignity, sensitivity, and gracefulness that surpass Judah. Reuben, obviously, is a person who works on himself. He challenges his instincts, habits, and emotions. He seems to possess a frail ego. We do not notice a tinge of pompousness or arrogance in this person. He is always thinking about somebody else. When he is in the field, his thoughts are with his mother and her plight. When Rachel dies, his thoughts, again, are with his mother. When Joseph is kidnapped, his heart is with his younger brother and father. Finally, for nine years he fasts and dons sackcloth in order to cleanse his ego, his sins, his faults.

Yet, Reuben's greatness is also his flaw.

If we examine every single episode recorded about Reuben we discover an astonishing commonality: In each of them, his noble intentions come across in delightful splendor; his sensitivity to injustice is nothing short of remarkable; his willingness to work on himself and his faults is legendary. Yet in all of them, the other person -- the outsider, the victim -- never ends up actually benefitting from Reuben's kind intentions.

Leah, instead of enjoying her mandrakes, ends up in a bitter row with her sister. In the story with Jacob's bed, instead of creating a more affectionate ambiance between Jacob and Leah, Reuben ends up offending his father deeply and not helping his mother's situation in the slightest. In the Joseph story, Reuben's actions have Joseph placed in an empty well, where he can easily die from starvation or venomous serpents.

The astonishing pattern continues: Reuben's fasting and repenting for nine years is what actually causes him to be absent while his brothers sell Joseph into Egyptian slavery. While Joseph lay helpless in a well, Reuben went off to pray, meditate and repent. Had he remained, he might have actually rescued Joseph before he was sold.

In promising to return Benjamin to Jacob, Reuben talks first about how forfeiting on his pledge will affect him and only afterward about the necessary action itself. "And Reuben spoke to his father, saying, ‘You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring him (Benjamin) to you. Put him into my hand[s] and I will return him to you." What is more, Reuben gives a condition that is purely fanciful. What would Jacob gain by killing Reuben’s two sons if Benjamin were not to return? After all, they are his own grandchildren!

The Contrast

At last, a pattern emerges. Reuben is consumed with his personal daily battle for moral truth and spiritual transcendence. Reuben is a great man, but he is not a leader. He is a spiritual giant, but he is not a Rebbe, a king, or a shepherd to his people. Reuben ought to remain the firstborn son, with all the status involved, since he might be morally superior to his brothers. But he has not proven worthy of becoming a genuine leader.

Now, let us draw the contrast to Judah's profile.

In both episodes -- the sale of Joseph and the relationship with Tamar -- Judah does not display the dignity or sincerity of his brother Reuben. Judah's actions leave him wanting, but they produce concrete and tangible benefits to the victims in need of help. As a result of Judah's words to his brothers, Joseph is not allowed to die in the well and is left to live as a slave. As a consequence of Judah's confession, Tamar and her fetuses are saved from death. Judah does not reside in the richness of his own inner space; he is present in the flames of the outsider. Reuben's intentions were greater, but Judah made a real impact on people's lives.

Finally, let us note the words Judah employs to persuade his father Jacob that he can send Benjamin with him. "I will guarantee him; from my hand, you can demand him. If I do not bring him to you and stand him up before you, I will have sinned against you forever." Unlike Reuben, he begins by articulating definitely the necessary action and does it in unwavering terms. "I will guarantee him." Unlike Reuben, he does not make a completely impractical condition that Jacob may kill his sons; rather he states, "I will have sinned against you forever." These are words of a born leader.

Of course, Judah must learn from his errors and grow to become a deeper and finer human being, which he does. Years later, when Joseph's younger brother Benjamin is about to be taken as a slave, Judah offers himself instead. "And now if I come to your servant, my father, and the lad [Benjamin] is not with us, and his soul is so bound up with his soul, when he will see that the lad is gone, he will die. And your servants will have brought down the hoariness of your servant our father in sorrow to the grave. Because your servant [Judah] took responsibility for the lad [Benjamin] from my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him to you, then I will have sinned to my father, for all time.’ Now, please let your servant [Judah] remain in the place of the lad as a servant to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers…"

Twenty-two years earlier, the same Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother [Joseph] and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands." Now, when Joseph's younger brother Benjamin is about to be taken as a slave, Judah offers himself instead. A metamorphosis has occurred. Judah is a changed man.

Reuben too learns from his errors, making amends, and discovering greater horizons of truth. But at the end of the equation, Reuben is a great, moral spirit; Judah is a king. The difference? Reuben sees his spiritual work as the epicenter of his universe; Judah knows that the bottom line of life is not who you are, but how your decisions and behavior affect the fate of other people. For Reuben, even at his highest moments, the zenith of life consists of man's confrontation with his own tension and darkness. Judah, in contrast, even at his lowest moments, knows that life in its ultimate expression is about touching and embracing the pulse of the other.

And that is what it means to be a leader.

(This essay is based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, presented on Shabbas Parshas Vayechi 5730, December 27, 1969 [25]).

[1] Genesis chapter 49. [2] Rashi to Genesis 49:3-4. [3] Midrash Tanchumah (Buber edition) Vayeizei 13; Agadas Bereishis section 48. Cf. Rashi to Genesis 35:23; 29:32. This does not contradict Chronicles 1 5:1, see Rashi ibid. and Likkutei Sichos vol. 15 p. 444 and references noted there. Other sources are of the opinion that Reuben also forfeited his firstborn status, see Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:4; 99:6; Tanchumah Vayechi 9; Targum Einkelus, Targum Yonason and Targum Yonoson Ben Uzeiel to Genesis 49:3-4; Agads Bereishis section 82. [4] Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:4. [5] Rachel died when Jacob was approximately

100 years old (see Seder Hadoros year 2008 for the exact calculations). At this point, Jacob was 147 years of age. [6] Genesis 35:19-22. [7] Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, or Rashi, was the outstanding Biblical commentator of the Middle Ages. He was born in Troyes, France, and lived from 1040 to 1105, surviving the massacres of the First Crusade through Europe. His impact on Jewish scholarship and learning remains singularly unique. 11th-century French Jewish sage, is considered the greatest biblical commentator. [8] Talmud Shabbas 55b. [9] Genesis 30: 14-16. [10] See The Living Torah (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan) in footnote to Genesis 30:14 for a detailed commentary and references on the subject. [11] Genesis 29:32. [12] Genesis 49: 9-10. [13] Talmud Chagigah 13b. [14] See Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:1; Hilchos Melcahim 1:7-8. Cf. Ramban's fascinating commentary to Genesis ibid. [15] Rambam Hilchos Melachim 11:4. [16] See Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:6. [17] Rashi to Genesis ibid. from Midrash Rabah Bereishis 98:7. [18] Genesis 37:21-22. [19] Ibid. 26:27. [20] Ibid. 29-33. [21] Ibid. 29, from Midrash Rabah ibid. 84:19. [22] Genesis chapter 38. [23] See Ramban to Genesis ibid. 38:8. [24] Talmud Soteh 10b; quoted in Rashi to Genesis 38: 25. [25] Published in Sichos Kodesh 5730 vol. 1 pp. 322-332; Likkutei Sichos vol. 15 pp. 439-446. A number of the ideas and rendition of biblical narratives presented in this essay were culled from Covenant and Conversation, Vayigash 5763 and Vayeishev 5764, by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (www.chiefrabbi.com).]

Rabbi Yissocher Frand
Parshas Vayechi
Did Yosef Need to be Warned After Yaakov Died?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1363 – Lesser of Two Evils: Being Buried in Non-Jewish Cemetery vs. Cremation – Which Is It? Good Shabbos!

The pasuk says "Yosef returned to Egypt – he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father – after he buried his father. And Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, and they said, 'Perhaps Yosef will nurse hatred against us and then he will surely repay us all the evil that we did him.'" (Bereshis 50:14-15). The brothers returned from the burial of Yaakov in Eretz Canaan and suddenly panicked because maybe now that their father is dead, Yosef will take his just revenge upon them. Therefore, they send a message to Yosef: "They commanded that Yosef be told, 'Your father commanded before his death saying: Thus, shall you say to Yosef 'Please forgive the spiteful deed of your brothers and their sin for they have done you evil'; so now, please forgive the spiteful deed of the servants of your father's G-d." And Yosef wept when they spoke to him." (Bereshis 50:16-17)

Rashi comments that the messengers who the brothers sent to deliver this message were none other than the bnei (sons of Bilhah), who were accustomed to interacting with Yosef. We know from Parshas Vayeshev that as a young boy, Yosef used to interact with the bnei Bilhah. The sons of the handmaidens (Bilhah and Zilpah) were the "second-class citizens" of the family. They were mistreated by Leah's sons and for that reason, Yosef befriended them. Therefore, now, after Yaakov's burial, the brothers figured these would be the best family representatives to make the appeal to Yosef on behalf of all of the brothers.

Yosef responded to them: "Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good: in order to accomplish – it is as clear as this day – that a vast people be kept alive." (Bereshis 50:19-20). The simple reading of these pesukim is that Yosef is saying "You may have had evil thoughts against me, but look at the Divine will that emerged from your actions. He had good thoughts regarding the matter for it led to the saving of a vast people."

A fascinating Targum Yonosan ben Uziel, however, adds significant content to these pesukim to fill in the details of what was happening over here. Previously, they already had this emotional embrace. They kissed and made up long ago. Now, when they get back from their father's levaya, they are suddenly worried that Yosef will begin to mistreat them. What prompted that?

Targum Yonosan ben Uziel explains what prompted the brothers to think that now Yosef was suddenly going to treat them badly and take revenge against them. He explains that their concern did not materialize out of thin air. They had good reason to believe that Yosef had it in for them. Based on a Medrash, Targum Yonosan ben Uziel writes that up until now, throughout the 17 years that Yaakov was alive in Mitzraim, Yosef ate together with the family. Now that Yaakov died, guess what? Lunch is over! No more lunches together!

If you have been eating together with someone for seventeen years and suddenly the invitation is withdrawn, it is certainly raglayim l'davar (circumstantial evidence) to believe "Hey! Something has happened over here." That is what prompted the brothers to think that Yosef was about to take revenge on them, now that their father was out of the picture. This was not paranoia. This was a very legitimate suspicion based on the facts they encountered.

Targum Yonosan ben Uziel further analyzes: Why in fact did Yosef stop inviting them? It was because Yosef had a dilemma. He did not want to sit at the head of the table. His father had proclaimed that Yehuda would be the melech (king). Furthermore, Reuven was the firstborn of the family. Yosef could not see himself sitting at the head of the family table. However, Yaakov – during his lifetime – insisted: Yosef, you must sit at the head of the table. You are the equivalent of the king of Mitzrayim – the "Mishneh L'melech." Therefore, you need to sit at the head of the table. For 17 years, as long as Yaakov was alive, Yosef sat there, in discomfort, at the head of the family table.

Now that Yaakov was no longer here, now that Yaakov was no longer telling Yosef "You need to sit there," Yosef faced a dilemma: What am I going to do? Do I keep on inviting them and keep on sitting at the head of the table? I don't want to do that. To avoid that situation, Yosef decided "There will be no more joint lunches." That is how the Targum Yonosan ben Uziel translates this pasuk: Yosef said "Do not fear, for am I under Elokim? You thought evil about me." In other words, you thought the reason I stopped inviting you for lunch is because I have it in for you. "Elokim chashava l'tova" – The Ribono shel Olam knew what my real intention was. It was for the best! My intention was that I didn't want to insult Yehudah or Reuven. When our father was alive, I had to do that, but now that he is no longer here, I am sorry but I am just not going to do that anymore.

This is the context of what is happening in these pesukim, according to Targum Yonosan ben Uziel.

I saw a very interesting observation from Rav Elya Svei: After 17 years, a person can get used to anything. For 17 years, Yosef had been sitting at the head of the table. Maybe he was uncomfortable for the first week. Maybe for the first month. Maybe he was uncomfortable for the first year. But after 17 years, he was still uncomfortable? Could it be that so many years later he was still thinking "I really don't belong here. This is Yehuda's rightful place?" Come on! People get used to kavod!

The way this hits me personally is as follows: When I first became a Rebbi in Ner Yisrael, I did not initially change my seat in the Beis Medrash. I did not sit by the mizrach vant (eastern wall). After several years of being a Rebbi, the Rosh Yeshiva told me that I should be sitting with the other faculty members by the mizrach vant. When I first moved my seat there, I must admit, I was extremely uncomfortable. I was extremely self-conscious. These feelings of "not being in the right place" persisted for perhaps six months or a year at most. Now, after sitting on the mizrach vant for over forty years, I don't give it a second thought. This is my place! So what if Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky is sitting next to me on the mizrach vant and he is old enough to be my father and he is the gadol hador. This is my place so I don't think about it. You can get used to anything.

However, after 17 years, Yosef is still thinking "I really don't belong here." He takes advantage of his first opportunity to get out of the situation, "Sorry, no more lunch because I refuse to continue insulting Yehudah or Reuven." This speaks to the incredible sensitivity of Yosef Hatzadik and the Shivtei Kah.

When we learn these parshios at the end of Sefer Bereshis and we learn about jealousy and sibling rivalry, we think "Yeah. Typical human

emotions, just like you and me." However, these people were not just in a different league from us. They were on a different planet. After 17 years, who of us thinks "What am I still doing here?"

"I Remember the Kindness of Your Youth"

I saw the following insight from the current Tolna Rebbe of Yerushalayim (Rabbi Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg). He asks a very interesting question:

Earlier, I mentioned the Rashi that the brothers sent the bnei Bilhah (who interacted with Yosef in their youth) as their delegation to Yosef. The question is the following: Who out of all the brothers would be the best candidate to go into Yosef to plead the brothers' case? Out of all the other brothers, the most logical candidate would be Reuven. Reuven did not participate in the sale of Yosef. Yehudah might be a second choice because he argued that Yosef should not be killed, but only sold instead. But the bnei Bilhah participated in the sale. The language of the Medrash is that when the brothers were about the throw Yosef into the pit and then to sell him, Yosef begged by the feet of each of his brothers. He got down on his knees and begged each and every brother: "Please, don't do this!" The bnei Bilhah told him "Sorry. You are not such a tzadik! You went and tattled on us to our father!" Clearly the bnei Bilhah are as guilty as anyone else in the crimes committed against Yosef.

And yet, the brothers picked the bnei Bilhah to plead their case. Why was that?

The Tolner Rebbe cites an interesting insight from Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l (1906-1980), about a totally unrelated matter. Rav Hutner once said that the first masechta he ever learned was Bava Kamma. He stated that he remembers Bava Kamma better than any other masechta. It was his "girsa d'yankesa" (knowledge acquired in youth) because it was the first masechta he ever learned as a young boy! Rav Hutner was quick to add that his 'havanah' (understanding) of Bava Kamma was "a kindereshe havana" (a childish understanding). It was superficial comprehension, but nothing stuck to his bones like Maseches Bava Kamma, because that was his first exposure to Talmud.

Rav Hutner, k'darko b'kodesh, said that this is why Chazal say that when a child first begins to speak, his father should teach him "Torah and Krias Shma." The reason that as soon as a child can speak the father teaches him to say "Shma Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad" is that we want this testimony of the unity of Hashem to be in the marrow of his bones. Rav Hutner continues: The child asks his father "Daddy, what do these words mean?" The father answers, "It means that Hashem is one." The father doesn't explain to his child about the deep philosophical nature of Hashem's existence. One is one. Therefore, when the child grows up and goes through life, he knows one thing: One is one. I don't need any of the writings of the Jewish philosophers: There is one G-d and that's it! That is the way we want it. This is part of his basic identity as a Jew because that is what he heard in the crib. We want that emunah peshuta (simple faith). No sophistication or philosophy are necessary or even desirable. Hashem echad. This is a childish grasp but that is good, at least for Shma Yisrael.

What is the upshot of all this? The upshot is that what we absorb as children sticks with us. There was a lot of water under the bridge since the days that Yosef and the bnei Bilhah played together, but they played together as kids. Granted, there was much ill feeling in the interim years. Yes, Yosef did tattle on them and yes Yosef did beg for forgiveness and they said no. But, "I remember you when we played together." That love from those initial years remains. It may be covered with layers of who knows what, but it is still there.

We see that in families. Sometimes families get into terrible fights. Sometimes it is years before they talk. But they still remember – we played baseball together. And when that bully came and started beating me up, you came to my rescue. That never leaves a person.

Therefore, when the brothers needed someone to convince Yosef "please forgive the sins of your brethren," they didn't send any of the other brothers. They sent the sandbox mates, the kids Yosef used to build sand castles with. That love of the early years remains with people for the rest of their lives and therefore the appeal was sent to Yosef Hatzadik through them.

What Pushing In Your Chair Says About You

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

My children know one of my little pet peeves is not a big offence, not something worthy of public rebuke, but a small thing I see everywhere: when a person gets up from a table and does not push the chair back in. You see it in shul and a beis medrash, around the Shabbos table, in a boardroom or a restaurant. Just a chair left askew. It is easy to dismiss it as trivial, and yet it represents something more.

We often underestimate the power of small acts. Throughout shas, our rabbis refer to the head of the Jewish community as Reish Sidra, the head of order. He attains that position specifically because he is attentive to the importance of small acts. He knows that seder, order, is the scaffolding of a disciplined life.

In his Daas Torah, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz zt"l writes about how the Alter of Kelm was famed for his rigorous emphasis on seder, mussar, and disciplined excellence. He writes, "I was educated in Kelm, a place where they were extremely meticulous about order. The Alter of Kelm, of blessed memory, would become upset if someone did not put their chair back precisely in its place, as though they had committed an act equivalent to desecrating Shabbos."

The Alter did not view order as an aesthetic. He saw it as a religious imperative. Put another way, chaos is spiritual drift and order is spiritual anchoring.

The Alter taught that seder is like the string in a pearl necklace. The pearls are what we treasure, the Torah, mitzvos, kindness, family, community. But without the string, the pearls scatter, beautiful yet valueless. Rav Yeruchem inherited a garment the Alter wore for 30 years and it was taken care of so meticulously, it was left after his death as if it was brand new. It was not because the Alter was particular for its own sake, but because care and respect for the world around him were reflections of inner order. When he put on his hat, it was not tilted to the right or left or sitting casually on the back of his head. It was perfectly aligned. This was not compulsive behavior. This was a deeply felt spiritual discipline.

And now, what Torah always knew, science is beginning to affirm. A recent study reports that people who push their chair in tend to exhibit what researchers call social mindfulness and self- control. These acts reflect awareness of others, consideration, discipline, and responsibility even when no one is watching.

The article explains that a person who pushes in their chair is:

• Attentive to their surroundings.
• Conscious of how their actions affect others.
• Habitually considerate, acting with kindness without needing to think about it.
• Naturally disciplined, showing care through consistent small behaviors.
• Respectful, recognizing shared spaces and the people who use them.
• Unselfish, leaving things better for the next person.
• Mindful, living with awareness rather than carelessness.

In other words, this tiny gesture reflects a broader pattern of character. The way a person treats a chair is often how they treat the world.

A simple pause before leaving a table, placing the chair neatly, says: I see the world as something sacred, worthy of care. It reveals a person who thinks not just about self but about others who will come after.

And here is the deeper lesson: discipline begets freedom. A person who masters small actions gains mastery over larger ones. When you manage your time with order, you find you have more time. When you manage money with discipline, you find you have more resources. When you bring seder to your Torah learning and mitzvah observance, you unlock deeper growth and fulfillment.

This is not about perfectionism. It is about intentionality. The discipline to sit down and learn consistently. The discipline to serve Hashem when it is hard. The discipline to be reliable and present for another human being.

This is why I often tell my children that when they begin to think about dating and building a life with someone, they should not only look at grand gestures, eloquent words, or impressive résumés. They should watch the small things. Does this person say thank you? Do they notice when someone is uncomfortable? Do they treat waiters, teachers, siblings, and strangers with quiet respect? And yes — do they push in their chair. Not because the chair matters, but because derech eretz matters. Because the way a person handles the unimportant is often the truest window into how they will handle what is important. A home is not built on dramatic moments alone; it is built on thousands of tiny acts of consideration, patience, and care. Choosing a life partner is ultimately choosing the character you want to live with, grow with, and be shaped by. And character is most honestly revealed not in what is proclaimed, but in what is practiced when no one is watching.

So the next time you rise from the table, do not rush out. Pause for just a second. Turn back. Push your chair in. Let that act be a microcosm of your life: careful, considerate, and connected to something greater than yourself.

Rav Kook Torah

Vayechi: When Great Souls Err

Shortly before his death, Jacob blessed his sons. Some of these blessings, however, were more like reprimands:

"Reuben, you are my firstborn... first in rank and first in power. [But since you were] unstable as water, you will no longer be first, for you moved your father's beds." (Gen. 49:3-4)

According to some opinions, Reuben did not actually interfere with his father's sleeping arrangements.[1] He intended to do so, indignant at what he saw as a slight to his mother's honor and her position in the household. But at the last minute, Reuben restrained himself.

How did Reuben succeed in overcoming his intense feelings of injustice and dishonor?

Reuben's Fear of Punishment

One scholar inferred the method Reuben used to master his anger by reversing the letters of the word 'פחז' ("unstable") to 'זחפ' and reading it as an acronym:

זָכַרְתָּ — You reminded yourself of the punishment for this act;

חָלִיתָ — you made yourself ill over it; and

פָּרַשְׁתָּ — you avoided sin" (Shabbat 55b).

This explanation is surprising. Was Reuben motivated by the lowest form of yirat Shamayim (awe of Heaven) — the fear of punishment? Was this the only way the tzaddik could prevent himself from wrongdoing? Could such a great individual not take advantage of more lofty incentives, evoking his natural love and awe of God in order to avoid sin?

The Achilles' Heel of Great Souls

Some people are blessed with such nobility of soul that their traits are naturally virtuous and good. Yet even these tzaddikim need to recognize their limitations as fallible human beings. They too may be misguided. Precisely because they rely so heavily on their innate integrity, they may more easily fall into the trap of deluding themselves and making terrible mistakes, inflicting great harm on themselves and those around them.

Truly great souls will avoid this mistake. They carefully examine the source of their moral outrage. Further examination may indeed reveal that their zealous response comes from a sense of true injustice. But if they have any doubts as to the source for their powerful emotions, they can adopt a different approach. Instead of examining the matter in terms of ideals and lofty visions of the future, they will take into account more commonplace moral considerations. Such unpretentious calculations are sometimes more effective than nobler considerations.

Reuben reminded himself that he would be held accountable for disrupting the delicate balance in the family and temporarily usurping his father's position. The simple reminder of the personal price to be paid helped Reuben clear his mind. He was then able to analyze more accurately his true motivations and arrive at the correct moral decision.

The resulting inner turmoil was tremendous. Reuben was accustomed to following the dictates of his innate integrity. The conflict between his sense of injustice and his awareness of the correct response was so great that he felt ill — emotionally, and even physically: "You made yourself ill over it."

This too indicates greatness of soul: the ability to acquiesce to moral imperatives. Truly great individuals are able, like Reuben, to rein in all of the soul's powers when necessary. They recognize the absolute justice of the Eternal Judge, before Whom there are no excuses and no exceptions. They follow the dictum that even if the entire world — your entire inner world — tells you that you are righteous, still consider yourself fallible (see Niddah 30b).

Much good can result from recalling the punishment for wrongdoing, even if this motivation may appear beneath one's spiritual stature. This simple reminder can overcome all the sophisticated calculations — calculations which may mislead even the noblest souls. In this fashion, Reuben succeeded in avoiding sin and retained his moral integrity.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 48-49)

[1] After Rachel's death, Jacob moved his bed to the tent of Rachel's handmaid. Reuben, deeply disturbed by what he saw as an affront to his mother's honor, moved his father's bed to Leah's tent (Shabbat 55a).

Refua Sheleima שלום יהודה הלוי בן חנה חדוה

לע״נ

יוחנן בן יקותיאל יודא ע״ה

שרה משא בת ר׳ יעקב אליעזר ע״ה

ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע״ה

אנא מלכה בת ישראל