

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(office@etzion.org.il)

Yaakov and Yehuda

By Rav Ezra Bick

A.

It is a commonplace to see the opening verse of next week's parasha as the introduction of Yehuda as the leader of the shevatim - Yaakov's sons. But actually, this status of Yehuda is clearly indicated at the end of our parasha, and not merely because Yehuda assumes the role of spokesman (44:16) and, earlier, the role of Binyamin's guardian (43:8-9). Even more striking is the verse describing the return of the brothers to Yosef's house after the discovery of the goblet in Binyamin's pouch: "Yehuda and his brothers came to Yosef's house; and he was still there, and they fell to the ground before him" (44:14). Since when is this group called "Yehuda and his brothers?" Until now, they have always been called, when the reference is to the entire group, simply "the men," including in this very episode (44:3-4). This name for the group clearly indicates not only that Yehuda is the spokesman, or the most persuasive, but that he is the titular leader. The group has the name, "Yehuda's group."

Since in the beginning of the parasha - and clearly in the previous parasha (the story of Tamar begins with the phrase, "Yehuda went down from his brothers") - this is not the case, the question we have to face is: what specifically gives Yehuda this status? The answer to this question will also give us a key to understanding the trait of leadership in general, and why the tribe of Yehuda is the tribe of kingship.

I think there is general agreement as to the place in the Torah narrative where Yehuda begins to become the leader and assumes leadership qualities. This is when he convinces his father to send Binyamin with him to Egypt (43:8-10). Previously, Reuven, the actual firstborn, had tried and failed to do the same (42:37-8). Yehuda accepts personal responsibility for Binyamin, which of course leads to his subsequent initiative at the end of this week's parasha and the beginning of the next, and this assumption of responsibility is quite correctly seen as the mark which distinguished him and led to his selection for the leadership role.

In light of last week's shiur by Rav Moshe Lichtenstein, which demonstrated Yehuda's lack of PERSONAL (as opposed to practical, pragmatic) concern and responsibility in the Tamar episode and the sale of Yosef, this point becomes all the more significant. Yehuda's attitude toward Binyamin is the opposite of what he showed toward Yosef, and therefore we are at a turning point in the development of his personality.

So why is Yehuda not already the leader of the brothers, from the time that they set out for Egypt? Only later do we find the phrase "Yehuda and his brothers." On the way down, and as long as they are still in Yosef's house, we find the brothers only under generic terms, without any one of them distinguished from the others. The answer to this question, I

think, is also to be found in last week's shiur. Yehuda's assumption of responsibility for Binyamin while speaking to Yaakov was not personal; it did not derive from concern for Binyamin, but only from the need to convince Yaakov to let Binyamin go. The concern was pragmatic, arising from hunger and the need to find a solution to the food problem. Since Binyamin's welfare and Yaakov's concern for it stood in the way of the solution, Yehuda found a way to achieve his real goal - getting food - by assuaging YAAKOV's concern. If the real issue here is not political leadership skills - finding solutions to problems, being persuasive - but moral qualities of leadership, Yehuda will not be anointed leader until the end of the parasha, where he risks himself in order to save Binyamin.

However, I think it is correct to assume that the earlier assumption of responsibility leads to the later personal care. Since Yehuda, out of pragmatic concern, has accepted responsibility for Binyamin, he subsequently discovers in himself the moral strength to carry out his responsibility. It is possible that previously, had Binyamin been in trouble, Yehuda might have "seen the affliction of his soul, when he pleaded with him, and not paid attention" (42:21), but now, when circumstances have led him to explicitly accept responsibility for Binyamin, he rises to the occasion and true moral responsibility appears.

This relationship between Yehuda's pragmatic acceptance of responsibility for Binyamin and his subsequent moral development is reflective of one of the major themes of the Yosef narrative - how individuals who are wrapped up in their own problems and appear to playing small, self-centered roles discover within themselves moral qualities of the first order and develop into actors on the grand scale worthy of founding the Jewish people. Yosef himself is the clearest example of this.

B.

I think, however, that there is an additional quality of leadership first exhibited in the story where Yehuda argues with his father about sending Binyamin, one which is disclosed not in its own narrative but in its reflection in another. We may perceive Yehuda's ascent to greatness in the effect his personality has on Yaakov.

Consider the following summary of the contest of wills between Yaakov and the brothers after their initial return from Egypt:

They came to their father Yaakov to the land of Canaan....

And as they were emptying their sacks ... and they saw the bundles of their money, they and their father, and they were afraid.

And Yaakov their father said to them: You have bereaved me...

Reuven said to his father: You may kill my two sons...

And when they finished eating the food which they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them...

And Yehuda said to him...

And YISRAEL said: Why have you hurt me, by telling the man that you have another brother?...

And Yehuda said to his father Yisrael: Send the boy with me and we will get up and go, and we will live and not die ... I will guarantee him, from my hands shall you seek him...

Yisrael their father said to them: If so, do this - take from the good of the land... (42:29 - 43:11).

There is a dramatic turning point in this story, dramatic but so subtle that I feared you wouldn't notice and therefore took the liberty of highlighting it. All of a sudden, in the middle of the conversation, Yaakov changes into Yisrael. This is the first time that Yaakov is called Yisrael since he sent Yosef to meet his brothers (37:13). What has caused this sudden change?

The next time that Yaakov is called Yisrael gives a clear indication of what the use of this name says about Yaakov - if this is not obvious from the meaning of the name itself.

When the brothers return for the last time to Canaan with the news that Yosef is alive, we find that:

They came up from Egypt and came to the land of Canaan, to Yaakov their father. They told him, saying: Yosef is still alive, and he rules over all of the land of Egypt; and his heart was faint, for he believed them not ... He saw the wagons which Yosef had sent to carry him - and the spirit of Yaakov their father was revived. And YISRAEL SAID: It is much, my son Yosef is yet alive; I shall go and see him before I die. (45:25-8)

In this context, the use of the name Yisrael clearly exemplifies what the previous verse said about Yaakov - that he has begun to live again, that he is returning to his powers, his vitality, his sense of initiative, of hope, of redemption. Of course, this is what the name Yisrael means - "for you have struggled with (angels of) God and with men, and have prevailed." The name Yaakov was given to him when he came in second to Eisav, trailing along behind him. The name Yisrael was given when he overpowered the angel (of Eisav) and forced him to bless him.

In next week's parasha, the sudden switch from Yaakov to Yisrael is clearly a result of the news about Yosef being alive. Until then, Yaakov's spirit had not been "alive." Yaakov was depressed, both psychologically and spiritually (Chazal point out that Yaakov was apparently not granted "ruach ha-kodesh" during this period, or else he would have known about Yosef). The news from Egypt arouses Yaakov, and he switches to being Yisrael - in fact, this name becomes the common one for Yaakov from then on. (The name Yaakov continues to appear; the Netziv, among others, comments on each use of one of the names in the final parshiot of Bereishit). Our problem is to understand the parallel change in the middle of the conversation between Yaakov and the sons. Why do the

brothers tell "their father" that they must go to Egypt for food, but all of a sudden it is "Yisrael" who answers them, after an absence of 21 years?

It seems clear that the cause of the sudden appearance of "Yisrael" in our story is what happens immediately previously - the request by Yehuda that he send Binyamin with them to Egypt. "Their father" (no name at all!) speaks to "them" (no personal identity) and tells them to go to Egypt; Yehuda requests Binyamin; Yisrael answers him (43:2-6). This of course merely moves the question up one notch - what was it about Yehuda's request that inspired the ascent of Yaakov to the status of Yisrael?

Two sons of Yaakov attempt to convince him to send Binyamin with them to Egypt, Reuven and Yehuda. The first fails, the second succeeds. What is the difference?

C.

It is most tempting to see the difference between them in the way that they each sought to guarantee the return of Binyamin and soothe Yaakov's apprehension. Reuven said: "If I bring him not back, you may kill my two sons; give him to me and I will return him to you" (42:37). Yehuda said: "I will guarantee him, from my hands you shall seek him; if I do not bring him to you and present him before you, I shall bear the blame before you forever" (43:9). Reuven's guarantee is indeed shocking. What comfort would it be to Yaakov to kill two of his grandsons if his son not return? Rashi immediately comments on Yaakov's refusal to listen to Reuven: "He did not accept the words of Reuven. He said: This is a foolish firstborn! He suggests killing his sons - are they his sons and not mine?!?"

Rashi implies that the "foolishness" of Reuven's suggestion was the reason that Yaakov did not accept it. It must be noted, however, that the midrash Rashi is quoting does not say that. It merely notes that Reuven was "foolish." Rashi is attributing that comment of the midrash to Yaakov in order to explain his refusal. The Ramban disagrees:

Reuven took an oath to return Binyamin to his father by saying, "kill my two sons - as your punishment will fall on me - if I do not return him." This is the same idea as what Yehuda said, "I shall bear the blame before you forever" ... And Yaakov did not trust in Reuven, for Yehuda was the most powerful of the brothers, and also for Reuven had already sinned against his father, so he did not trust him. In general, Yehuda's plan was right, to leave the old one be until there would be no food in the house, for then he would listen.

Basically, the Ramban is saying that there is no real difference between Reuven's offer and Yehuda's, though Reuven's PHRASING indicates that he is "a foolish son," which would not in itself be a reason to reject the offer. In the final analysis, says the Ramban, the difference is in the timing - by the time Yehuda comes forward, Yaakov's back is to the wall, for there is no food left.

I think there is another difference here, but it is not in the argument or the phrasing of the guarantee. As we saw before, Yaakov turns into Yisrael while speaking to Yehuda. But this takes place not after Yehuda guarantees Binyamin's safety, but BEFORE, after Yehuda's first speech.

Yehuda said to him: The man has warned us strongly, saying: You shall not see my face if your brother is not with you.

If you agree to send out brother with us, we will go down and gather food for you.

But if you do not send, we shall not go, for the man has said to us: You shall not see my face if your brother is not with you.

And Yisrael said: Why have you done evil to me, to tell the man that you have another brother? (43:3-6)

Yehuda's speech here can only be described as "chutzpa." His father has said: "Go bring us some food;" and Yehuda basically answers: "We will not go." He is delivering an ultimatum to his father.

What was the state of Yaakov before this speech, the state characterized by the title "their father Yaakov," or simply "their father?" Before I called it a state of depression. Its main symptom, if we examine these verses, is one of lethargy, of inaction, or at best, of passive reaction to the forces about him. This is what I think is hinted at by the term the midrash (quoted by the Ramban above) puts into Yehuda's mouth - "to leave THE OLD ONE be until there would be no food in the house, for then he would listen." His sons try to figure out ways to maneuver the old one, Yaakov who is tired of life, whose "spirit" is not alive, by letting him get hungry enough until his resistance to their plan will be dissipated. Yaakov's only reaction to the story of their visit to Egypt, including the incarceration of Shimon, was to cry out in bitter despair, "You have bereaved me - Yosef is gone, and Shimon is gone, and now you will take Binyamin; everything is upon me!" (42:36). Months later, when hunger again is at the door, he turns to his sons and sends them to Egypt, ignoring the facts that they have explained to him. He does not attempt to devise a plan how to handle the situation.

Yehuda does not merely explain the facts to him. Yehuda demands that Yaakov CHOOSE. It is not enough to complain that life is unfair, and blame his sons. This is the first sign of Yehuda's leadership - the demand for initiative, for facing hard choices, for seizing the bull by the horns. Yaakov-Yisrael is roused by this contact with Yehuda's leadership. His first reaction is yet negative - he turns and asks why the sons have caused this problem by talking too much in Egypt. The Torah, by using for the first time after so many years the name Yisrael, is telling us that this reaction was the first spark. Yehuda's bluntness has roused Yaakov to seek the cause of the problem. By blaming Yaakov for what will happen if he does not send Binyamin, Yehuda causes Yaakov (Yisrael) to blame him and his brothers. This is the first step. Yehuda continues (after the BROTHERS - note the plural verb in 33:7 - explain how the existence of Binyamin came to "the man's" attention):

Yehuda said to YISRAEL his father, send the lad with me and we will get up and go, and we shall live and not die, us, and also you, and also our children.

I will guarantee him, from my hands you shall seek him; if I do not bring him to you and present him before you, I shall bear the blame before you forever.

For if we had not delayed, we would have by now come back twice. (43:8-10).

This speech is even more blunt and "chutzpadik" than the first. Yehuda is saying: enough, we are all dying, and it is all just a waste of time. Once again, the bluntness of the last sentence is mirrored in Yaakov's arousal.

Yisrael their father said to them: If so, do this - take from the fruit of the land in your bags and bring the man a gift, some myrrh, some honey ... And your brother take, and get up and go back to the man. May Kel Shakkai grant you mercy before the man, and he will send you with your other brother and with Binyamin. (43:11-14).

Yaakov is no longer passively reacting to events. In response to Yehuda's demand, he no longer merely agrees to Yehuda's plan, but devises one of his own. Yehuda's guarantee is no longer enough; to ensure the success of the mission, Yaakov adds some details of his own, details he knows that his "hotheaded" sons might not think of. Yaakov was always a better diplomat than his sons.

It is true that this "Yisrael" speech ends with a note of despair: "And as for me, as I have been bereaved, I will be bereaved." Yaakov has not become Yisrael. This will take place only later, when the brothers return with the news of Yosef. Yisrael sinks back into Yaakov for a little longer.

This analysis of Yaakov-Yisrael, though, serves to crystallize our understanding of Yehuda's leadership. The moral points which become predominant in Yehuda's behavior at the end of the parasha, when Binyamin is about to be enslaved, are indeed the factors which create the conditions for him to be declared by the Torah to be the leader - "Yehuda and his brothers" (44:14). Without those qualities, the Torah would never have given him that role, no matter how brave, full of initiative, or charismatic he is. But morality alone is not leadership, or else Reuven, who is depicted from the beginning as the most personally concerned with Yosef (37:22; 29-30; and especially 42:22), would have been the leader. Even if Reuven's offer to kill his two sons is "foolish," it surely shows no less personal care and commitment for the safety of Binyamin than Yehuda's offer - perhaps even more. Yehuda, in his conversation with his father, evinces true leadership, by insisting on an answer, a choice, by forcing himself and his father to face up and grapple with their destiny and not passively let it overcome them. We know this to be true, because the most immediate reaction to Yehuda was his father becoming, even if only temporarily, Yisrael - he who struggles and is a prince among God and men. In the presence of Yehuda, Yaakov becomes again the man who wrestled with the angel all night and forced a blessing for Jewish destiny out of him. Having fought "the man" ("and a man wrestled with him until the dawn"), Yaakov will now fight the ruler of Egypt, who is always, like the angel of Vayishlach, called "the man." Yisrael means "prince of God." If the name returns in the presence of Yehuda, it is because Yehuda is the prince, the anointed of God. The quality of grappling, wrestling, fighting to establish our destiny and not accepting what seems to be given, is first evinced by Yehuda in this conversation, and it immediately calls forth the source of that quality in Judaism, the name Yisrael.

This is the man who will stand alone before Yosef and force him to face his destiny, as one of the sons of Yisrael and not the ruler of Egypt.

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