

Yehuda's Plea and its Audiences

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

Like his grandfather Avraham who had pleaded with God, Yehuda approaches his master and pleads.

And Yehuda came near and said: Please my master, let your servant speak a word in my master's ears and please do not be angry. (44:18)

Just as Avraham "came near" (vayigash) (18:23), so too Yehuda comes near (vayigash) (44:18). Just as Avraham addressed his pleas and prayers to his master (18:27, 30-32), so too Yehuda speaks to his "master" (44:18-20). Finally, in another echo of Avraham's prayer, Yehuda prefaces his plea with the hope that his daring to speak will not arouse his master's anger (18:30, 32, 44:18).

Admittedly, the "Prayer of Avraham" (18:23-33) and the "Plea of Yehuda" (44:18-34) constitute fundamentally different events. In the former story, Avraham pleads with the Master of the Universe. In the latter story, Yehuda pleads with no more the master of the Egyptian granary. Yet at the same time, they are united by more than just the stylistic markers of servant-master prayer noted above. In both cases, the "prayer" involves pleading for the sparing of the condemned. Just as Avraham pleads for the sparing of Sodom, so too, Yehuda pleads for the sparing of Binyamin.

Moreover, the method is the same. Avraham's prayer tactic consists of defining a guiltless group, some number of righteous men in Sodom, and linking their fate to the fate of the guilty. By dint of God's mercy upon the innocent, the guilty should also be spared. Yehuda employs an identical method. He defines Yaakov as undeserving of death, which would result from Binyamin's slavery. Yaakov has already suffered enough. This is somehow supposed to lead to the sparing of Binyamin. A quick sketch of the highlights of Yehuda's plea should confirm this point.

Yehuda begins with a recap of the first conversation between the brothers and the Egyptian (44:18-23), in which he elaborates on the previously unmentioned death of Binyamin's brother, the death of Binyamin's mother and his father's unique love for Binyamin (44:20; see also 42:13). It turns out that the brothers had told the Egyptian viceroy that "the lad cannot leave his father: for if he should leave his father he would die" (44:22). Even if this "death" predicted by Yehuda in the recap of the original conversation refers to that of Binyamin (Rashi, Ramban), and not to the death of Yaakov (Rashbam), Yehuda has already made his point. Yaakov has suffered enough and deserves to suffer no more.

In the second section of his speech, his recounting of the conversation between Yaakov and his sons during their interlude in Canaan (44:24-29), Yehuda emphasizes Yaakov's suffering again. In addition, he warns of the certainty of Yaakov's death upon losing Binyamin. Yehuda has Yaakov refer to the fact that "his wife" bore him only two sons, and one has already been torn to death. If this last son will be taken, "You will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow," a clear reference to Yaakov's death (44:27-29).

Finally, in the last section of his plea, his summary and conclusion (44:30-34), Yehuda makes explicit what had previously been perhaps merely implicit. The soul of the father is tied up with the soul of the son (44:30). Consequently,

...When he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servant will have sent... our father in grief down to Sheol. (44:31)

In sum, in the case of Avraham, the guilty people of Sodom, and God, Avraham sought to introduce a fourth actor and thereby spare the guilty. So too Yehuda, in pleading with the Egyptian, seeks to introduce a fourth player, the innocent, long-suffering and ancient Yaakov. By linking the guilty Binyamin to the innocent Yaakov, he hopes to persuade the master to act with mercy.

In fact, we should realize that it is not just mercy that Yehuda seeks. He also seeks justice. Avraham's tactic allowed him to challenge God. He brazenly challenged God not to "slay the righteous with the wicked," for after all, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (18:25). So too, Yehuda implicitly presses

the Egyptian for justice. The Egyptian should not slay Yaakov the righteous as part of his quest to enslave the guilty.

The parallel to the prayer of Avraham, the tripartite structure of Yehuda's plea and the mercy-justice content outlined above should make us realize that part of Yehuda's plea seems not to belong. At the very end of his plea, deep into his conclusion, after warning of his father's death, Yehuda states the following.

For your servant has pledged himself for the lad (arav et ha-na'ar) from my father and said: If I do not bring him to you, then I shall have sinned to my father forever. (44:32)

Yehuda continues on to offer himself as slave in place of Binyamin (44:33) and concludes his speech with a confession of inability.

For how can I go up to my father and not have the lad with me? Lest I see the evil that shall come upon my father. (44:34)

Yehuda seems to segue from a servant-master plea for mercy and justice, involving the coupling of the fates of the innocent and guilty, to something else altogether. He offers a substitution of himself for Binyamin (44:33). This new approach is bracketed on either side by Yehuda's discussion of his personal relationship with his father (44:32, 34). He cannot sin to his father; he cannot bear to see his father's pain and suffering.

This problem of a sense of disjunction, of a shift in theme and approach, can be rephrased in far sharper fashion. The second plea of Yehuda, "Substitution and Confession" (44:32-34), appears unnecessary. If Yehuda has already carefully structured a classic mercy-justice linkage plea and has successfully made the case for the sparing of Binyamin for Yaakov's sake, why offer substitution? Why describe his promises to his father and his personal pain? At the very least he should wait for a "no" from the viceroy before trying a new tack. Moreover, the material connected to Yehuda and Yaakov's relationship seems wholly irrelevant. What possible interest could the Egyptian viceroy have in the promise Yehuda had made to his father, or in Yehuda's personal concern for his father's suffering?

Both Ramban and Abarbanel relate to the shift in Yehuda's plea noted above. According to Ramban (44:18-19), although Yehuda does embark on a systematic effort to arouse the mercy of the Egyptian viceroy, he never expects to achieve more than substitution. The offer of substitution is necessary, and the shift is not a shift.

Since Ramban does not comment extensively on the inclusion of the Yehuda's guarantee and anguish, which bracket the substitution offer, we must turn to Abarbanel to complete the picture.

On Abarbanel's account, Yehuda ends with his anguish as part and parcel of his effort to arouse the mercy of his audience. He portrays himself as well as his father as deserving of mercy. He includes mention of the guarantee he gave his father in order to explain why it is that he (as opposed to any of the other brothers) has stepped forward to plead. In sum, both the offer of substitution and the inclusion of the Yehuda-Yaakov relationship can be integrated into the general theme of a mercy-justice plea.

While this can be made to work, it nevertheless seems insufficient. The claim that Yehuda never expects to achieve anything more than substitution fails to give sufficient importance to the parallel of his plea with that of Avraham. The parallel seems to imply that linkage of the innocent and the guilty constitutes a valid argument.

Furthermore, the request for mercy and the offer of enslavement seem mutually contradictory. If Yehuda intends to capitalize on the sympathies of the viceroy for his commitment and relationship to his father, why offer to spend his life as a slave? Can he truly expect the viceroy to believe that enslaving the wrman constitutes an act of mercy?

More, as Ramban and Abarbanel themselves recognize, reading the text afresh always leaves us with a sense of surprise. Yehuda's offer of substitution strikes us as unplanned, a last minute addition, akin to the irrational flailing of a drowning man. It is not part of any premeditated plea for mercy and justice. On the contrary, it seems to be a spontaneous outburst, a desperate and almost illogical act of despair. Yehuda cannot bear to leave Binyamin behind. In light of the awful possibility, he is willing to try anything.

The language of the text seems to support this last point. In the first section of Yehuda's plea (44:18-23), the terms "master" (adon), "servant" (eved) and "father" (av) comprise a conceptual triangle, each appearing five times. This fits with the notion of a servant-master prayer, revolving around the fate of the innocent father. Yehuda's final words, the third section of his speech containing his offer of substitution and confession (44:30-34), also include a conceptual triangle delineated by three terms. But they are not the same terms. The term "youth" (na'ar) replaces the term "master," and along with "servant" (eved) and "father" (av) appears six times. This telegraphs that Yehuda's plea is no longer about arousing the master's mercy and sense of justice. Rather, everything is driven by this horrifying combination of the youth, slavery and his father, the terrible triangle that threatens to engulf Yehuda.

If so, we are left with two alternatives. We can adopt the approach of Ramban and Abarbanel and explain away the shift. Either their specific answers, or others, can be utilized to integrate Yehuda's closing words into the overarching structure of his plea. We can reject the premise of the problem. Alternatively, in a second approach hinted at above, we can accept the premise of the problem. Yehuda's speech does in fact undergo a mutation midway through. While he begins in purposeful and deliberate fashion, he ends in a crescendo of emotion, baring his despair to the Egyptian. He cannot bear the thought of returning to his father without the boy. Even a lifetime of slavery is preferable to letting down his father.

III

The analysis of Yehuda's plea presented above rests upon a simple and crucial premise. Everything assumes that Yehuda addresses Tsafnat Paneach, the Egyptian noble who serves as second-in-command of Egypt and governs the economy. Of course, Yehuda does in fact address the Egyptian viceroy. However, unbeknownst to Yehuda, he also addresses the man behind the Egyptian mask, his brother Yosef. His words penetrate beyond the persona, to the real person entombed within. A proper and complete analysis of Yehuda's talk must take into account not only the intended audience of the talk, the Egyptian, but also the unintended audience, the brother beneath.

Shifting to Yosef's perspective puts a highly different cast on the problematic section, "Substitution and Confession" (44:32-34), discussed above. It is immediately after Yehuda's offer of substitution and his expressions of personal responsibility and concern for his father that Yosef reveals himself. It is Yehuda's

final words, his cry of "How can I go up to my father and not have the lad with me?" and his lament of "Lest I see the evil that shall come upon my father" (44:34) that pave the way for Yosef's shocking revelation (45:1-3). While Yehuda might have intended to stir the soul and arouse the mercy of the Egyptian, his words have stirred an altogether different soul.

And Yosef could no longer restrain himself before all that stood by him; and he cried out, "Have everyone taken out from me." And no man stood by him when Yosef made himself known to his brethren. And Yosef wept aloud... (45:1-2)

No doubt, the intended, planned and "standard" portions of Yehuda's speech play a causal role in Yosef's revelation. Yehuda frames the story of the suffering father and his impending death to arouse the mercy even of a manipulative Egyptian governor. Surely the plea possesses the power to stir the heart of the very son whom the father pines for. But this is only part of the cause of Yosef's unmasking.

When Yosef hears Yehuda expressing concern for Yaakov and responsibility for Binyamin, he hears the words he didn't hear twenty years earlier. We can never know for certain whether Yosef overheard his brothers' plotting, upon Yehuda's suggestion, to sell him. Nevertheless, the quick textual progression from the stripping of the coat and the tossing of Yosef into the waterless pit (37:23-24), to the brothers' callous sitting down to share a meal and intra-dinner plotting (37:25-27), certainly implies geographic proximity. The brothers' later confession of guilt due to ignoring Yosef's pleading for mercy and begging for his life (42:21) further reinforces the assumption of proximity. Yosef's plaintive calls from the pit were met by nothing but the sounds of munching and money-making (37:25-28).

As pointed out previously, throughout the latter parts of his plea, Yehuda emphasizes the unique relationship of Yaakov with Rachel, as well as the privileged status of her children. When Yehuda quotes Yaakov, the latter refers to "my wife," a singular term, as if Rachel had been his only wife (44:27). Yaakov still pines for Yosef (44:28), possesses a bond of souls with Binyamin (44:30) and will certainly die if stripped of Binyamin (44:29, 31). Yehuda not only accepts and respects this situation, but out of love and duty feels obligated to mortgage his very freedom to maintain it.

To put all this together, when Yosef hears Yehuda's offer of substitution and confession, he hears the reversal of the exact family dynamic that had led to his slavery in Egypt. Instead of callous disregard and resentment of Yaakov's choice of favorites, Yosef hears respect, duty, caring and self-sacrifice. In place of hatred of Yosef, he finds brotherly regard for Binyamin and his role.

But even this is only partial. As I argued in discussing Parashat Miketz, by repeatedly returning his brothers their money and demanding Binyamin in return, Yosef recreated the circumstances of his own sale. When Yehuda refuses to leave Binyamin behind in Egypt in exchange for the grain and money, he refuses to repeat the sale of Yosef, the favored son of Rachel. In fact, when Yosef hears Yehuda's offer of substitution, he realizes that Yehuda is not just refraining from committing the same crime again, but is reversing the original situation. Whereas before, Yehuda had counseled to sell Yosef, a son of Rachel, into slavery (37:26-28), he now counsels selling himself into the very same slavery, instead of Rachel's son.

In sum, it is precisely Yehuda's offer of self-sacrifice and his expressions of responsibility, anguish and caring that complete the reversal of Yosef's youth. It is precisely the section of "Substitution and Confession" that shatters Yosef's Egyptian front and prompts his revelation. The section constitutes not a problematic digression from a carefully crafted servant-master plea for mercy and justice aimed at an Egyptian noble, but rather the exact words necessary to draw out the brother underneath.

But this seems problematic. Yehuda possesses no clue that the Egyptian and Yosef are one and the same. He is dumbstruck upon learning the real identity of the governor. How does he manage to say exactly the right thing?

We may be inclined to write this off to coincidence, the random interplay of the free will of human beings. Unable to control himself, to maintain the molded form of a defense attorney crafting a closing argument, Yehuda shifts from his mercy-justice plea to an offer of substitution and a baring of his soul. His outburst, the breaking of his mask, is met by an equal outburst, the breaking of Yosef's mask.

Alternatively, we may, and probably should, assign this all to divine providence. Right after revealing himself to his brothers, Yosef repeatedly states that it was really God who had sent him to Egypt, to eventually provide sustenance for his family (45:5, 7). He even goes so far as to claim that "...It was not you that

sent me here but God" (45:). This is not apologetics, but rather part of the mysterious mix of human free will and divine providence present throughout the story of Yosef and his brothers.

So too, the shift in Yehuda's speech. On the surface, Yehuda speaks to an Egyptian and either concludes as planned, or, as argued here, shifts to a new offer and almost unwillingly bares his soul. But at the subsurface strata, something altogether different is going on. Yosef constitutes the real audience and God plays a role in choosing Yehuda's words. In some mysterious fashion, God helps Yehuda to shift, to bare his soul and reveal the concealed. This is God's plan, and it helps Yosef to reveal the concealed. This divine intervention allows Yosef and his brothers to reconcile.

IV

Before closing, I would like to discuss a third audience present at Yehuda's plea. As Abarbanel hints at the end of his discussion of Yehuda's speech, the address is not only directed at both the Egyptian and Yosef, but also at the reader of the story, the critical viewer interested in the saga and character development of Yehuda. Abarbanel makes this point by claiming that Yehuda must offer himself up for enslavement, must offer substitution, in order to suffer measure-for-measure punishment, or perhaps atone, for recommending the sale of Yosef.

Earlier on, I claimed that the second audience, Yosef behind the mask, is already aware of Yehuda's culpability, the reversal and his repentance. Nevertheless, Abarbanel is fundamentally correct. Only the third audience, the reader, possesses all the pieces of the puzzle necessary to string together the story of Yehuda's character.

This can best be realized by noting that all of the key stories involving Yehuda throughout Vayeshev, Miketz and Vayigash are linked together by a series of terms and literary symbols.

Yehuda first rises to prominence in the story of the sale. He formulates the plan (37:26-27). Shortly afterwards, the brothers cover their tracks by tricking Yaakov. They dip Yosef's coat in blood and "send" the coat to their father (37:31-32). They ask him to "please acknowledge" (haker na), is this the coat of Yosef or not (37:32)? Yaakov indeed does recognize and

acknowledge (va-yakirah), concluding that Yosef has been torn to shreds (37:33). These very terms reappear in the next chapter, the story of Yehuda and Tamar. Just as Tamar is being taken out to be burnt she "sends" to her father-in-law and asks him to "please acknowledge" (haker na), to identify, to whom the stick, seal and cord belong (38:25). Like his father previously, Yehuda does indeed recognize and acknowledge (va-yaker), concluding that Tamar is more righteous than he (38:26).

Just as the first and second Yehuda stories are linguistically linked, so too the second Yehuda story connects with the remaining Yehuda stories. In making the deal with the prostitute, Yehuda transfers his staff, seal and cord as a pledge (eravon), a guarantee of future payment. This stem and symbol reappears in the two remaining Yehuda stories. In arguing for Yaakov to allow Binyamin to accompany the brothers to Egypt, Yehuda pledges his word and very self. He tells his father, "I will be guarantee (a'arvenu)" and "from my hand you may demand him" (43:9). Finally, this stem (A-R-V) surfaces one last time in the fourth Yehuda story, the narrative of Yehuda's plea. It constitutes the key term in Yehuda's offer of substitution. Yehuda opens his offer with the statement that he has pledged himself for the boy (arav et ha-na'ar, 44:32).

Mapping this out yields the following:

* Yehuda and Yosef (the sale of Yosef, 37:26-36) - "sending," "recognizing";

* Yehuda and Tamar (38:17-30) - "pledge-guarantee" and "sending," "recognizing";

* Yehuda and Yaakov (43:1-10) - "pledge-guarantee";

* Yehuda and Yosef (Yehuda's plea, 44:30-34) - "pledge-guarantee."

The resulting A-B-A-B-B literary pattern, which portrays the gradual move from "sending" and "recognizing" to the symbol of "pledge-guarantee" (signifying commitment and responsibility), constitutes far more than literary artistry. In fact, it seems to mark a crucial transformation in the character of Yehuda.

In suggesting and executing the sale of Yosef, Yehuda behaves in a highly inappropriate fashion. Since there is "no profit in killing our brother and covering his blood," he advises selling Yosef instead. After all, Yosef is their brother, their own flesh and blood (37:26-27). At this point, Yehuda possesses a very

poor sense of brotherhood and family responsibility. He acts cruelly, without regard for the suffering of Yosef or the feelings of his father. He is arrogant, wholly removed from the effects of his actions on the souls of others. His sphere of interest consists of no more than the twenty silver pieces received in exchange for his brother. The act of sending the coat to Yaakov and demanding that he recognize it captures and symbolizes the character and behavior of Yehuda.

In the Yehuda and Tamar story, Yehuda is subjected to a bit of his own medicine. Just as Yehuda once sent to his father Yosef's coat and demanded the Ya'akov's painful acknowledgement of Yosef's death, now he himself receives the objects and acknowledges. He engages in the undoubtedly painful acknowledgement of having consorted with a harlot, of having neglected his familial responsibility to his daughter-in-law, of the evil of his sons and of having arrogantly and presumptuously passed judgement upon his daughter-in-law. In sum, he moves from a realm of haughtiness, arrogance and neglect of responsibility to a realm of humility, caring and responsibility. To rephrase, he moves from the world of the symbols of his own "sending" and demanding "recognizing" to an existential world defined by his admission and marked by the symbols of "guarantee-pledge." The categories of humility, caring and responsibility now constitute the core of his character.

The last two stories confirm this point. Utilizing the transformed symbol of "guarantee-pledge," Yehuda offers his very self to his father and assumes responsibility for his family's survival, his brother's safety and his father's heart and life (43:8-10, 14). By no accident, the term is monetary. Yehuda mortgages himself, as he had once sold off Yosef.

By now the point should be obvious. The pattern reaches its crescendo in the final Yehuda story, in the final section of Yehuda's plea, what we have termed "Substitution and Confession." Yehuda's newfound character of humility, concern, caring and responsibility leads him to volunteer to substitute himself for Binyamin. It leads him to undo the crucial sin of his earlier self. Without concern for his self or his personal destiny, he accepts upon himself a lifetime of slavery.

If so, we have arrived at a third role for Yehuda's finale. The verses of "Substitution and Confession" are not just about persuading the Egyptian, or, through the mystery of divine providence, provoking Yosef's revelation. They are also aimed at the reader, reminding us who Yehuda has been and who he has now become.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Compare 44:19 and 42:9-13. Did Yosef in fact ask his brothers whether they had a father or brother? See Rashi and Rashbam to 44:19. What constitutes the difference of opinion? See 44:20-23. Do these verses settle the issue? If in fact there is no conflict between the texts, try to work out why the Torah presents different versions. Work with both the assumptions of Rashi and Rashbam as to the real events. Think about whether it would have helped Yehuda's case to mention the spying accusations at this point.
2. Review 42:7-9. In light of the discussion in the shiur above, how should we interpret Yosef's "recognition" of his brothers? Compare these verses to both 38:25-26 and 37:32-33. See Rashi to 42:8. How does he read this connection?
3. See 44:22. Who is going to die? See the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam and Ramban. Is Rashi and Ramban's position conceptually coherent? How might this work with Yehuda's overall st? See 44:20.
4. Read Rashi on 44:18-19. Look at Ramban's rejection of Rashi in the first part of his comments to 44:19. What is Ramban's reason for rejecting Rashi? Can we in fact reread Yehuda's speech as a justice-oriented demand for fair treatment? How does this approach fit with the parallel to Avraham's prayer sketched in the shiur above? Does this approach shed any new light on the conflict between 44:19-23 and 42:9-13?

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