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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

Yehuda vs. Tamar as Background to Yehuda vs. Yosef
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Most readers would agree that our parasha witnesses the climax of the story of Yosef and his brothers. When Yehuda stands before Yosef, attempting to persuade the viceroy to allow Binyamin to return to his father, he is revealed as a figure of outstanding character.

We cannot know with certainty whether Yehuda believed his younger brother's claim that he had not stolen the goblet. On the one hand, the goblet had been found in Binyamin's sack - seemingly ample evidence that Binyamin had taken it. On the other hand, Yosef had previously hidden something in the brothers' provisions: their money, payment for the grain that they had purchased. On the two occasions of the brothers' descent to Egypt, Yosef had returned their payment to them. The first time we are told: "And Yosef commanded that their vessels be filled with grain, and that each man's money be returned to his sack" (42:25). This money was discovered by the brothers when they stopped at their lodging place (42:27-28). Yosef repeated this strange ritual and hid their money once again on their second descent to Egypt: "Fill the sacks of these men with food, as much as they can carry, and place each man's money at the mouth of his sack" (44:1). No further mention is made of this second concealment of money, and it is difficult to understand what Yosef hoped to achieve by repeating this tactic a second time.

In truth, we may question his motive for hiding the money even on the first occasion, but there at least we learn of the brothers' fear upon discovering the money hidden in their sacks. In other words, the tactic serves, to some degree, to further the plot. When Yosef invites the brothers to his house, they are reminded once again of the money hidden in their sacks, and they fear that they are about to be punished on account of it (43:18).

But we hear nothing after the second concealment, not even any mention of the brothers discovering the money. What, then, is the significance of Yosef hiding their money the second time?

It should be noted that the concealment of the money is particularly emphasized in the case of Binyamin's sack: "And my goblet, the silver goblet, shall you place in the mouth of the sack of the youngest one, with the money for his corn" (44:2). This instruction is given immediately after the previous one - "and place each man's money at the mouth of his sack," such that it is already clear that Binyamin's money will be returned to him. Nevertheless, Yosef repeats the command to conceal the money

together with the goblet in Binyamin's sack, thereby giving special emphasis to it.

The question of when the brothers discovered that their money had been returned to them seems to have a fairly simple answer. When "the man who oversaw Yosef's house" reaches the brothers and challenges them with his claim that they have stolen the goblet, the search through their belongings begins. Here the text emphasizes that the man searched in all of the sacks, for he began with that of the eldest (Reuven) and proceeded, brother after brother, until he reached Binyamin: "And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest, and he found the goblet in Binyamin's sack" (44:12). Rashi (quoting Bereishit Rabba, 92) explains: "So that they would not know that he knew all along where to find it."

In addition to this reason, we may also mention the significance of this examination as it relates to the hidden money. We may reasonably assume that the search for the goblet was not restricted to a cursory inspection of the men's clothing and food, but rather included a thorough search of every corner of their sacks. At this stage, it seems, the brothers must have noticed that their money had been returned to them. To their surprise, the Egyptian makes no comment. But in Binyamin's sack, together with the money, he finds the goblet.

Ramban (44:1) understands from this fact that, on this occasion, Yosef returned their money to them openly, even notifying them of it:

"'And place each man's money at the mouth of his sack' - with their knowledge, for [the servant] said to them: 'My master knows that he treated you unjustly the first time, and wants to make it up to you.' For if he had done as the first time, [returning their money] without their knowledge, they would have had an excuse concerning the goblet - that the same thing had happened in that instance as had happened concerning their money. But [this time] it was with their knowledge, and they were aware of the money just as they were aware of their load, for they recognized that he had given them as much as they could carry."

To Ramban's view, if the money had been hidden without the brothers' knowledge again on the second occasion, they would have had a claim in their defense against the Egyptian viceroy: it was not they who were responsible for the theft, but rather someone else who had slipped something into their sacks without their knowledge, like the hidden money. Ramban himself, further on, discusses the opposite view and explains why we may nevertheless posit that the money was hidden without their knowledge. In my humble opinion, the text seems to suggest that the money was hidden without their knowledge. After all, Yosef commands "the man who oversaw his house" to conceal the money, and he does not declare it to the brothers.

This, then, appears to represent the function of the concealed money. Yosef want to confuse the brothers. On the one hand, he

presents Binyamin as a thief; on the other hand, he "arms" the brothers with the understanding and feeling that Binyamin may well be innocent. Just as their money suddenly turned up in their sacks, so could the goblet have been planted there.

Our original question - whether Yehuda believed that Binyamin was innocent - remains difficult to answer. The goblet was indeed found in his sack, but the money had been found there too - as well as in the sacks of Yehuda and all the other brothers!

We shall return to the issue of the returned money later on. Let us now turn our attention to Yehuda's speech, his attempt to convince Yosef that he, Yehuda, should be detained in Egypt instead of Binyamin.

Actually, Yehuda played a main role at the very earliest stages of the brothers' campaign against Yosef. It was he who suggested that Yosef be sold as a slave to Egypt (rather than killing him, or leaving him to his fate in the pit, as Reuven suggested); it was he who succeeded in convincing Yaakov to allow Binyamin to go down to Egypt together with his brothers (unlike Reuven, who could not convince their father). And so it is he who now stands before Yosef, with tremendous self-sacrifice offering himself as a servant instead of Binyamin.

At the same time, there is another story which, to my mind, appears to make a more important contribution to our understanding of Yehuda's actions in this situation. I refer here to the story of Yehuda and Tamar (chapter 38).

The significance of this story in the continuum of the saga of Yosef and his brothers has often been questioned, as has its timing: why does the Torah record this story immediately after the sale of Yosef? It is reasonable to assume that the story of Yehuda and Tamar is presented as a sort of reaction to what preceded it, namely, the sale of Yosef. Chazal already noted the literary similarity between the two narratives: "Please recognize," the brothers declare, presenting Yosef's blood-drenched coat to Yaakov, and "Please recognize," declares Tamar, presenting Yehuda with the items that he had left in her safekeeping. However, the story of Yehuda and Tamar also serves as background to the encounter between Yehuda and Yosef in our parasha. More precisely, two stories serve as background to this encounter: Yehuda and Tamar, and Yosef's experiences in Egypt.

This idea arises from an analysis of the general structure of the story of Yosef and his brothers. We are used to seeking and analyzing the structure of a limited literary unit, but sometimes the Torah weaves a string of stories into a single unified structure, such that each of the component narratives must be read in light of its place in the general structure. Thus, the story of Yosef and his brothers follows a chiastic form:

- a. Yaakov with all his sons in Eretz Kena'an (17 years)
 - b. chapter 38: Yehuda and Tamar / chapters 39-41: Yosef in Potifar's house, in prison, and in the royal palace
 - c. First descent of the brothers to Egypt

- C(i). Second descent of the brothers to Egypt
B(i). Yehuda "approaches" Yosef and causes him to reveal his identity
A(i). Yaakov with all his sons in Egypt (17 years)

The beginning and conclusion of the story (the "framework" - a. and A(i)) each describe a period of 17 years during which Yosef lives with his family and with his father - first (a) in Eretz Kena'an, and ultimately (A(i)) in Egypt. At the heart of this literary structure (c. and C(i)), we read of two descents by Yosef's brothers to Egypt. There are many points of comparison between these two descents, and the second should be read against the backdrop of the first, so as to appreciate the development that takes place among Yosef's brothers. Obviously, all of this lies beyond the scope of our present discussion.

The structure outlined above has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the story of Yosef and his brothers, as well as of the structure of the family (especially the complex relationship that exists between the two 'first-borns,' each of whom aspires to leadership). But we shall focus here only on the somewhat surprising middle parallel - b. and B(i).

In b., the two central figures - Yehuda and Yosef - take center stage separately: there is Yehuda's grappling with the story of Tamar, and Yosef's grappling with his situation in Egypt. The way in which these two brothers address the challenges that face them teaches us much about their respective characters. Yehuda, in the story of Tamar, first falls and then mends his ways, in contrast to Yosef, who does not fall. Yehuda's failure lies in his fear of allowing his youngest son to marry Tamar, and in his insensitive treatment of her: "Remain a widow in your father's house" (38:11). Needless to say, this ruling is merely a preparation for the second ruling issued by Yehuda concerning Tamar in this story: "Bring her out and let her be burned!" (38:24). However, Tamar - in her wisdom - causes Yehuda to retract this decree and to mend his ways: "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shela my son" (38:26).

From this perspective, Yehuda takes the stage as a penitent, a "ba'al teshuva," a characterization used by Chazal in connection with Yehuda's descendant, King David (Mo'ed Katan 16b; Avoda Zara 5a). In complete contrast, Yosef - while admittedly also engaged in repairing his relationship with his brothers - does not fail when tempted by Potifar's wife. Yosef is not the prototype of the penitent, but rather of the righteous person (tzaddik) who does not fail.

The process which each of these figures undergoes individually climaxes in their encounter with each other. The structure of the story presents Yehuda's process of teshuva as the backdrop to his self-sacrifice when standing before Yosef, and the trials and tribulations experienced by Yosef in Egypt as the backdrop to his posture before his brothers - a posture that has changed dramatically. Far from the boy who would report his brothers to his father, Yosef has become a figure who perceives even his brothers' terrible act of selling him as a slave as being part of

the Divine plan concerning their family, and as playing a part in the unfolding of history as guided by God's hand.

The other party in this encounter - Yehuda - has also undergone an important process of development from the beginning of his story, with the death of his wife Bat Shua and the death of his two sons (Er and Onan), to its conclusion, when he "receives" a new wife (Tamar) and two sons (Peretz and Zerach); from his original insensitivity to Tamar's plight to his open declaration, "She has been more righteous than I."

This story, then, is presented as a literary backdrop to the encounter between Yehuda and Yosef, not only because of the chiasmic structure outlined above, but also because of the perfect analogy between the two images.

In the story of Yehuda and Tamar, Yehuda refrains from giving his third son, Shela, to Tamar, out of fear that he too will die, like his brothers, and he will have no children left from his wife, Bat Shua. In the encounter between Yehuda and Yosef, Yehuda describes an identical situation in relation to Yaakov, his father:

"And your servant, my father, said to us: You know that my wife bore me two sons. One went out from me, and I said, 'He has surely been torn apart.' And I never saw him since. If you take this one, too, from me and some calamity befalls him, you shall bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol."
(44:27-29)

Yaakov, too, fears for the life of his youngest son, lest he die like his elder brother, and therefore he resists handing him over to his brothers when they are ready to return to Egypt. It should be kept in mind that Yaakov himself describes Binyamin as the third son who is to be taken from him: "You have bereaved me of my children: Yosef is gone, and Shimon is gone, and you will take Binyamin - all of this has befallen me" (42:36). In exactly the same way, Yehuda felt that Er was gone, Onan was gone, and therefore he had to be especially careful with his third son.

In fact, since Yaakov's words are uttered here by Yehuda, we are almost justified in positing that Yehuda's outcry: "If you take this one, too, from me and some calamity befalls him," also describes his own situation, in his long-distant deliberation as to whether to allow Shela to marry Tamar.

In other words, the identification of Yehuda with his father, Yaakov, is complete. Yehuda himself has experienced the feelings of Yaakov, fearing for the life of his youngest son. It is specifically Yehuda who, by the end of the story of Tamar, realizes his mistake, recovers and repairs his ways, and so it is he who musters the necessary courage and resourcefulness before his father and persuades him to allow Binyamin to go with him to Egypt.

In this context, we reach the literary motif that is common to both images, Yehuda vs. Tamar on the one hand, and Yehuda vs. Yosef on the other. In both cases, Yehuda gives a pledge. In his encounter with Tamar, he gives her his staff, his signet, and his

cord. This pledge eventually remains with Tamar, and it is only by means of it that she is able to convince Yehuda of his mistake in judging her so hastily. In his speech to Yosef, again, Yehuda emphasizes his pledge: "For your servant WAS SURETY for the boy to my father, saying: If I fail to bring him to you, I will have sinned to my father forever" (44:32).

In the story of Tamar, Yehuda gives her his personal effects, demonstrating his personal pledge and commitment. In the story of the descent to Egypt, Yehuda makes himself a surety for Binyamin - again, obviously, the surety represents his personal commitment to his brother's safety.

At the same time, though, if we follow the events surrounding the surety in both these stories, we discover an important difference between them. In the story of Yehuda and Tamar, we expect that Yehuda will assume responsibility for Tamar's fate and nullify the impossible situation created by his previous decree: "Remain a widow in your father's house." Tamar's loneliness bothers Yehuda's conscience, for he - as the head of the family - has driven her into this difficult situation by his refusal to let her marry Shela.

Moreover, even if Yehuda could technically have remained silent while Tamar was taken out to be burned - for she did not publicly advertise his responsibility for her pregnancy, but rather "sent to her father-in-law" his pledge, we still expect Yehuda to act morally and to assume responsibility for the situation that has arisen on his account. Indeed, this is what Yehuda does: "She has been more righteous than I..."

In contrast, in his readiness to serve as surety for Binyamin and in his self-sacrifice in proposing himself as a slave in Egypt in his brother's place, Yehuda is acting in a manner beyond what is expected of him. Here he could easily declare, with a clear conscience, that the responsibility for the fate of Binyamin - who appears doomed to a terribly lonely future in Egypt - rests with the younger brother who stole the goblet. Here Yehuda could stand silently and watch while Binyamin was led away into slavery; I am not convinced that we could accuse him of any wrongdoing.

But this is not what Yehuda chooses to do. Out of remarkable filial sensitivity, knowing that his father would prefer his brother's return to his own, he suggests that Binyamin's servitude be exchanged for his own.

Now let us return to the matter of the money returned in the brothers' sacks. In both instances, there is a problem of payment for something, but they are the opposite of one another. Yehuda, we remember, sends by the hand of his Adulammite neighbor a kid goat as payment for the "prostitute on the road," but the man cannot find her, and in fact it turns out that Yehuda never pays anything at all to Tamar whom he "considered a prostitute, for she had covered her face" (38:15).

Again, in Yehuda's encounter with Yosef, there is a problem surrounding payment, but - as mentioned - in the opposite sense.

The brothers are not succeeding in paying Yosef - whom they believe to be the Egyptian viceroy - for the grain that they receive from him. Their money is returned to them time after time. Thus, the two characters who "hide" from Yehuda - Tamar and Yosef - both resist accepting payment for their service to him (and the brothers). The implication of this situation is that, as a result, something of much greater importance - the "surety" - is slated to remain in their hands: Yehuda's personal effects remain with Tamar, and now Yehuda himself is about to remain as a slave to the Egyptian viceroy.

I believe that it is the lack of acceptance of payment by the two characters "hiding" from Yehuda that ultimately leads him to realize his important inner strengths. It is as though Tamar and Yosef hint to him: You cannot solve the conflict that faces you with money. Beneath the surface here lies a more significant conflict, and you are required to demonstrate self-sacrifice in order to solve it. Indeed, in both cases Yehuda does display great inner strength, declaring in one case, "She has been more righteous than I," and in the other - "Let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my master."

Thus, the story of Yehuda and Tamar stands as a double background to Yehuda's speech to Yosef in our parasha. On the one hand, it highlights Yehuda's identification with Yaakov, the identification of fathers who have lost children and who fear for the fate of their remaining son. On the other hand, it also highlights Yehuda's special quality of putting himself on the line for others: correcting the wrong that he did to Tamar, and illuminating the darkness of Egypt with his great selflessness on behalf of his younger brother.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)