



TORAH ACADEMY
of Bergen County

קול תורה

Parashat VaYeishev

Kislev 24 5777

December 24, 2016

Vol. 25 No. 14

Dedication & Responsibility: Yosef's Greatest Quality?

by *Rabbi Shaya First*

Near the beginning of Parashat VaYeishev, Ya'akov calls over Yosef and asks him to travel to Shechem to check on the well-being of Yosef's brothers and their sheep. Yosef acquiesces, and sets out on his mission (BeReishit 37:13-14).

But Yosef has a tough journey. Along the way, not only does Yosef fail to locate his brothers in Shechem – as they had by that point moved on to Dotan – but he also gets lost in the fields, as the Pasuk states, “VeHineih To'eh BaSadeh,” “And behold, he was straying in the field” (37:15). He needs a stranger (who Rashi identifies as the angel Gavriel) to guide him along the way, and only after much searching does he finally manage to locate his brothers and fulfill his father's mission. He sees his brothers in Dotan and sees them from afar before they spot him.

Why does the Torah tell us all these details about Yosef's journey? Why it is so critical that we know about all of Yosef's challenges along the road and the bumps along the way? Would it not have sufficed just to skip straight from his father's instructions and Yosef's departure right to the encounter with the brothers?

Ramban (37:15 s.v. VaYimtza'eihu Ish VeHinei To'eh BaSadeh) suggests that Yosef's journey is taught in detail to highlight how the descent of the Shevatim to Egypt was divinely orchestrated, as God directed Yosef into the hands of his brothers in spite of Yosef's original struggle to find them. However, many other Meforshim, including Rashbam, Seforno and Ramban himself earlier on in his comments, add another dimension to the purpose of this segment of the story: Yosef's journey highlights his incredible commitment to fulfilling the mission laid out for him by his father. Even though he had many excuses to give up along the way, he persevered. His brothers were not in the town they were supposed to be in; nonetheless, he continued searching. He got lost, but he didn't turn around. He finally sees them, no doubt with murderous looks on their faces, but nevertheless approaches them to fulfill his mission. It was his journey, and he did not give up until he had finally succeeded. He felt responsible to see his mission through to its end.

As we are first introduced to Yosef, the Torah goes out of its way to emphasize his dedication and commitment to fulfilling his responsibilities, as this was perhaps Yosef's most striking quality. It is one that comes up over and over again throughout his story. In fact, Yosef's dedication and commitment to fulfilling his responsibilities can be seen in a very striking way later in our Parashah, in his reaction to the advances of Potifar's wife. Yosef refused her advances – but why? Precisely what aspect of her seduction repelled him? Was it the gravity of the sin of adultery?

Believe it or not, a close look at Yosef's comments to her indicates that this may not have been the travesty at the forefront of Yosef's mind at the time (or at the very least, not the one that Yosef focused on in speaking to her). “And he refused, telling his master's wife: Behold! My master trusts me with everything in his house, and all that is in his possession he has placed in my hand. There is no one in this house ranked above me, and my master has not withheld anything from me – so how could I do this evil thing, and thereby sin to God!” (BeReishit 39:8-9). Yosef seems much more focused on the *betrayal of his responsibilities* as the head of Potifar's household than on the specific sin of adultery. Potifar gave me my job, he made me in charge of everything he owns – how could I possibly betray his trust? How could I shirk my own responsibilities of taking care of his possessions by violating his most sacred boundary? Yosef saw himself responsible for taking care of Potifar's household and would never dream of betraying this trust.

Yosef's propensity to fulfill his responsibilities may also explain the answer to perhaps the most perplexing question of these coming Parashiyot: why Yosef never “phoned home” while stuck in Egypt, why he never tried getting in touch with his beloved father to rescue him. Many of the Meforshim explain that Yosef saw himself as responsible for fulfilling the dreams he had dreamt of as a child, and went to tremendous lengths – as we will read about over the next few weeks – to ensure that they came to fruition.

Yosef's dedication and commitment to fulfilling his responsibilities and reaching his goals are exemplary. As we read through his story over the coming weeks, we should strive to consider how we can emulate his devotion in ourselves.

Kol Torah is a community wide publication which relies on the generous donations of our friends and family in the community for its continuous existence. To sponsor an issue in memory of a loved one, in honor of a joyous occasion, or for a Refuah Sheleimah, please contact: business@koltorah.org

YEHUDAH'S ACTIONS – RIGHTEOUS OR WICKED?

by *Moshe Davis ('17)*

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b) discusses different opinions of how to understand the phrase “Botzei'a Beireich Ni'eitz Hashem”

(Tehillim 10:3). Rabi Meir states that this phrase refers to Yehudah in this week's Parashah, when he says to his brothers while Yosef is in the pit: "Mah Betza Ki Naharog Et Achinu," "What profit will we gain from killing our brother?" (BeReishit 37:26). If Rabi Meir is correct, the implication of the phrase, "Botzei'a Beireich Ni'eitz Hashem" would be "anyone who blesses Yehudah for what he did, it's as if he cursed Hashem."

However, this understand of Rabi Meir is very troubling. The brothers threw Yosef in a deep pit in the desert so that he wouldn't be able to get out and there would be no one around to help him. The brothers were planning on leaving Yosef there to die, a terrible act of murder, on a brother no less. When Yehudah stepped in and told the brothers they shouldn't kill their brother in cold blood, it definitely seems like he was acting nobly to save Yosef's life; so why would the Gemara tell us that what Yehudah did was a terrible act and someone who applauds his behavior should be cursed?

There is a Midrash that states, "anyone who starts a Mitzvah but doesn't complete it is punished by having to bury his wife and children." And lo and behold, we see that this exact punishment falls upon Yehudah when his children, Eir and Onan, die (BeReishit 38). But this Midrash is even more perplexing than the Gemara! The other brothers didn't do anything at all to help the situation, they didn't perform even a partial Mitzvah, and we see no punishment meted out to them, especially not burying their children. So why was Yehudah punished so harshly? It would seem more appropriate for the other brothers to receive a harsh punishment!

Rav Yeruchum Levovitz gives an explanation to this difficult question. Yehudah was the leader of the brothers; therefore, he was responsible for all their actions. Being the leader, he could have stopped the evil plan in its entirety. However, he missed the opportunity to *really* save his brother and his father from all of their future misery.

Rav Yeruchum Levovitz also says that the brothers weren't punished because they never even attempted to save Yosef. Yehudah, on the other hand, began and then stopped. He started the Mitzvah, and then killed the life of the Mitzvah, and for that, he was punished with the death of his children.

The severity of the punishment that was meted out to Yehudah should serve as a lesson that we must learn from, that we must take Shemirat HaMitzvot very seriously. One should not carelessly perform acts, but rather should have focus and know what he is doing and why he is doing it. If we take this message to heart and are careful to complete all

our Mitzvot full-heartedly, we will, BeEzrat Hashem, not face any drastic punishments as Yehudah did.

THE AM KESHEI OREF: THE PERFECT NATION TO RECEIVE THE TORAH

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Over the years¹, Jews have been privileged to receive many appellations. Among the more famous (and positive) are "Chosen People," "People of the Book," "Eternal People," and "Light unto the Nations" (Am HaNivchar, Am HaSefer, Am HaNetzach, Or LaGoyim, respectively). In Parashat Ki Tisa, our people receiving yet another tag – one that for good reason evokes mixed feelings, yet in whose depth may lie the secret of our eternity.

The source of the appellation? Hashem himself – who relates the following to Moshe in the terrible Golden Calf aftermath (Shemot, 32:9-10):

I have seen [observed] this people, and behold they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone and My wrath will blaze against them and destroy them. I will then make you into a great nation.

There it is: Am Keshei Oref – a stiff-necked people. You might have heard of the term, one that evokes a particular uncomplimentary image, especially according to Rashi's simple explanation (ad loc. s.v. Keshei Oref): "So-called because they turn their stiff necks towards those who reprimand them and refuse to listen." A picture of a passive aggressive nation emerges, one that refuses to respond to reprimands while perhaps even ignoring the essential rebuke.

One chapter later, Hashem informs Moshe that He will now be sending a proxy angel to watch over Bnei Yisrael (instead of His direct stewardship). In explaining why, Hashem invokes this notion twice again (Shemot 33:3 and 5):

I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Cana'anites... [You will then] enter a land flowing with milk and honey... for I will not go up among you, for you are a stiff-necked people and I may destroy you along the way.... "Say to the Bnei Yisrael, 'You are a stiff-necked people. Were I to go up among you... I would destroy you.'"

In sum, one can reasonably assume that Keshei Oref is not the thing to be, the phrase connoting a noxious combination of impudence mixed with more than a dash of stubbornness.

¹ I thank Rav Asher Brander for allowing me to adapt and expand his article on this topic, published in his excellent work "Teachings."

The Problem

Here's the problem: In defending Am Yisrael, Moshe uses the very same Keshei Oref notion as the essential rationale for our salvation (Shemot, 34:9):

Moshe hastened, bowed to the ground... and said, "If I have found favor in Your eyes my Master, let my Master go among us [Ki Am Keshei Oref Hu] because it is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sins, and take us as Your own possession."

Keshei Oref as a reason for mercy does not sound like a winning argument. It almost seems that Moshe employs Keshei Oref as a desired state.

Four Classic Solutions – Ibn Janach, Ibn Ezra, Ramban and Midrash

Ibn Ezra presents two possible explanations of the text. First, he presents the opinion of Rav Mereinos (Rav Yonah Ibn Janach), who explains that the word "Ki" in our context of "Ki it is a stiff necked people" should be rendered as if to say, "even though it is a stiff necked people" (for the word "Ki" can also mean even though²).

Opting with the more standard usage of the word "Ki" as causative, Ibn Ezra offers a different approach, translating our phrase as "Because we are stiff necked" – because I admit that we have sinned, I admit that it is a stiff necked people and therefore you shall forgive.

Ibn Ezra's second notion runs like this: "Hashem, we don't attempt to redefine truth in light of our behavior, nor do we make a theology of our weaknesses – a tendency from which frail man often suffers." In classic Berditchever Rebbe style, Moshe turns to Hashem and says: "but at least we are honest."

A Third Approach, an Amalgam of Ramban, Zohar, Midrash and Basic Human Observation

In dealings with cell phone providers, credit card companies and the airlines, many invariably find themselves speaking to the manager. Moshe turns to God and says: "Hashem – Your people do not want an agent. They want the Divine Manager." Why? The words of the Zohar Chadash explain (Lech Lecha 41b):

For it is a stiff necked people and You shall forgive – for You are forgiving and we are stiff-necked (and therefore) You shall forgive. The Jews are obstinate and wearying and when they sin, the angel can do only judgment and not forgiveness, but You are merciful and gracious.

² Ibn Ezra to Shemot 13:17 cites Rav Moshe Ibn Jikatila who interprets the word "Ki" in this Pasuk to mean "even though." The word "Ki" in Yehoshua 17:18 and Tehillim 41:5 can be reasonably understood as meaning "even though" as well.

³ Moshe Rabbeinu's request of God can be understood as a commitment to transform our stubborn nature from the negative –

The message seems to be saying the following: a Malach is constricted; he has no leeway and must punish us! However, Hashem understands us in great depth and can find in our being Keshei Oref the very building blocks of forgiveness. How so? Ramban's beautiful words open the door:

And while in the time of anger it would have been better to send an angel because they are stiff necked ... in the time of Ratzon [favor], the Shechinah is better because they are stiff necked, for He will have more mercy on his servants [And Hashem assented to Moshe's request].

Remarkably, after Bnei Yisrael does its Teshuvah, the stiff necked nature of the Jewish people will coax Divine mercy. Ramban does not reveal the metaphysics of that equation; however, a beautiful Midrash does (Shemot Rabbah 42:9):

And, behold, it is a stiff necked people- Rabi Yakim said: Three are the undaunted: among beasts, it is the dog; among birds, it is the cock; and among the nations it is Israel. Rabi Yitzchak ben Redifa said in the name of Rabi Ammi: You think that this is said disparagingly, but it is really in their praise. Rabi Abin said: To this very day Israelites in the Diaspora are called the stiff necked people.

Keshei Oref per se is a trait, not a pejorative. By definition, a trait is willy-nilly, neither here nor there. The key with any trait is its manner of implementation³. A classic Kotzker story drives home the point: The Kotzker once taught that every emotion/thought has value. "Rebbe, of what value is heresy or doubt?" a cynical Chassid asked. The Kotzker thought for a moment and responded: "When a beggar knocks on your door, don't believe that that God shall provide. Take out your wallet and give him money."

Our stiff necked-ness has served us well; a key ingredient in what no less divergent personalities than Rav Ya'akov Emden and Mark Twain pointed out as one of the great enigmas and miracles of human civilization: the immortality of the Jew. Does anyone really doubt

the refusal to abide by the divine command – to the positive – to adhere to the divine command through thick and thin. This is an example of Chazal's teaching (Yoma 96b) that Teshuvah MeiAhavah, repentance motivated by love of God, transforms sins into merits, "Zedonot Na'asot KeZechuyot."

that by all standards of natural history, we ought to have been a relic of the past, an academic fascination for aspiring PhDs?

Dr. Yaffa Eliach presents an incredible story in her work *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (pages 101-105) which illustrates how our stubbornness translates into our immortality. Dr. Eliach tells of a Jewish labor battalion slaving under brutal Nazi control who refused to eat on Yom Kippur despite threat of execution for failure to comply. After the fast was completed, the Nazi commander approached the group and said:

“I know that you fasted today, but I am not going to invoke the death penalty you deserve according to the Law. Instead you are going to climb that mountain and slide down on your stomachs. Those among you who would like to repent may say they were wrong to disobey army regulations and fasting today. Those who wish to do so may raise their hands.”

Dr. Eliach continues and relates:

Not a single hand went up. And so, the tired, soaked, starving, the emaciated Jews climbed the wet, slippery mountain. When they reached the top, they were ordered to slide down on their stomachs. When they reached the bottom, they were ordered to line up again. They were asked if there were individuals who wished to repent and be spared the ordeal. Mud-covered figures with feverish eyes looked at the clean shaven German officer in silent defiance. And so ten times they repeated the humiliating performance, each time with more determination, each time with more strength, climbing and sliding from an unknown Polish mountain which on that soggy Yom Kippur night became a symbol of Jewish courage.

After the ordeal was over, a young German officer of low rank walked over to the group and said, “I don’t know who will win this war, but one thing I am sure of – people like you, a nation like yours, will never be defeated, never.”

Our Am Keshei Oref nature enabled us to persist and survive the most difficult challenges imposed upon us from the brutal and powerful atheist rule of the Soviet Union to the challenge of observing Shabbat in the United States at a time when a six day work week was the norm and Jewish workers were told “If you do not come to work on Saturday, do not bother coming to work on Monday⁴.”

⁴ I stand in awe of my grandfather (and namesake) Chaim Adler zt”l, who stood firm and was fired week and week for refusing to work on Shabbat, in grand Am Keshei Oref tradition. It took great courage and steadfast determination for my grandfather to do this at a time when his wife and five

Rav Hirsch - The Am Keshei Oref: The Perfect Nation to Receive the Torah

In a variation on the Midrash’s theme, Rav Hirsch (to Shemot 34:9) writes about “the natural innate obstinacy of the race, which made Israel the most suitable for the revelation of the Divinity of His Torah.” We can explain Rav Hirsch in light of the fact that the most contentious and argumentative (and highly intelligent) people accepted the divine origin of the Torah, which demonstrates that the Torah is indeed of divine origin. The stiff necked nation would never have accepted the Torah as being of divine origin had it not indeed been of divine origin. We can understand Moshe Rabbeinu as arguing to Hashem that He should forgive us since it is precisely the fact that we are the Am Keshei Oref that proves the authenticity of the claim that Hashem gave us the Torah.

Conclusion

Mark Twain wondered what the secret of the Jews’ immortality is. Part of the answer is our natural inclination to be the Am Keshei Oref. This proven prophecy resonates deeply within us as we understand how this stubborn nature has allowed us to persevere in our adherence to Torah observance in spite of manifold challenges in each and every generation throughout the millennia. Thoughtful individuals recognize that we are indeed the Am Keshei Oref and that this constitutes yet another reason to acknowledge the Torah to be of divine origin.

Editors-in-Chief: Hillel Koslowe, Yehuda Koslowe
Publication Editors: Moshe Davis, Tani Greengart, Shlomi Helfgot, Binyamin Jachter, Ned Krasnopolsky
Publishing Manager: Eitan Leff, Avi Roth
Staff: Shmuel Bak, Eli Englard, Nachum Freedman, Gabe Greenberg, Meir Lightman, Shai Rosalimsky, David Rothchild, Yehuda Saks
Rabbinic Advisor: Rabbi Chaim Jachter
Questions, comments? Contact us at:
Kol Torah
c/o Torah Academy of Bergen County
1600 Queen Anne Road
Teaneck, NJ 07666
Phone: (201) 837-7696
koltorah@koltorah.org

To subscribe to Kol Torah via email, message webmaster@koltorah.org

This publication contains Torah matter and should be treated accordingly.

small children depended on him for sustenance in those years (the 1920’s), when government welfare was not extended even to those in the most dire of circumstances.