BS”D

*Parshas Miketz*

We all have weaknesses. We all have experienced failures. If we recognize them and acknowledge them, we have a chance to redeem ourselves

**Reuven and Yehuda in the Moments of Crisis**

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There are three questions one can ask on this Parsha:

When Yosef’s brothers were accused of being spies and told that they must bring their youngest brother Binyamin to Egypt, they did some soul-searching. They said to one another that they were being punished for what they had done to Yosef, for ignoring his pleas for mercy.

The oldest brother Reuven rebuked his brothers: “Didn’t I tell you ‘Do not sin against the boy’? But you paid no heed…” (Breishis 42:22)

But is that in fact what Reuven had said? If we look back (ibid 37:18-22), we find a different story. The brothers conspired to kill Yosef. Reuven urged them to not kill him directly but rather to cast him into a pit where presumably he would die on his own in due time. The brothers *did* listen to Reuven and threw Yosef into a pit. Later, when Reuven was not present, they decided to sell him to Ishmaelites.

Now, to be sure, Reuven did want to save Yosef, as the Torah attests that his intention was to take Yosef out of the pit when the brothers were not looking.

But there is no mention that Reuven said to his brothers not to harm Yosef. He merely succeeded in delaying his death. How could he say, “You paid no heed?” when they did heed him; they did not kill their brother.

Now, several commentaries maintain that Reuven meant to tell his brothers that Yosef should not be harmed at all. They heeded what Reuven said, but they did not heed what he really meant.

I find this approach difficult to accept. How can Reuven rebuke his brothers for something that he never actually said? Furthermore, it would cast Reuven in a very unfavorable light. He failed to speak up to save Yosef, and now he is blaming his brothers for not saving Yosef! He should be blaming himself for remaining silent!

My second question is about when the brothers retell their encounter with the viceroy of Egypt, i.e., Yosef, to their father. They reported that Yosef had said if they proved they weren’t spies by bringing their youngest brother Binyamin, they would be freed and could do business in the land. Business! Who cares about business?!? We’re talking about life and death, being accused of spying or being exonerated. Why bring up business? To be sure, the Ramban says they could do business to sell merchandise and be able to procure food with the money they made. But that seems like a trivial detail. Besides, they appeared to always have money to buy the food, both the first time they came and when they came the second time.

If we follow Rashi’s interpretation, this question can be easily answered:

Rashi translates *tis’charu*, not as you shall do business, but as “you shall move about [freely].” The root of the word S’CH’R’ means to go around. It is associated with business since the original business people were traveling merchants who went around selling their wares. But here the meaning is like the original root. You were accused of being spies, of going around looking at Egypt’s weaknesses. When you will be exonerated, you will be free of suspicion. You will be able to go around as you please since you will no longer be thought of as spies.

My third question has to do with Reuven’s plea to his father to let them take Binyamin. Reuven guaranteed Binyamin’s safe return: “You may kill my two sons if I don’t bring him back” (42:37). Reuven promised. But Yaakov refused. “My son will not go down with you,” he declared.

Yet later as the famine progressed, Yehuda asked his father to send Binyamin down with them. Yehuda, too, guaranteed bringing Binyamin back: “I myself will be the surety…. If I don’t bring him back, I will stand guilty before you forever” (43:9).

Yaakov does accept this offer, albeit grudgingly, and sends Binyamin.

Why was Yehuda’s offer better than Reuven’s?

The Ramban says indeed, the offer was not better. It was merely the timing. Both brothers accepted full responsibility, but Yehuda waited until they were out of food and were desperate. It’s *when* he made the promise that was different.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that in the plain meaning of the story, Yehuda’s offer was more acceptable than Reuven’s. But why? Both brothers were in fact pledging their all to return Binyamin.

Let’s go back to the first question: How could Reuven say, “Didn’t I tell you ‘Do not sin against the boy?’”

I propose that Reuven actually did directly say those words to his brothers. In Breishis 37:18, the Torah says, “They saw him [Yosef] from afar and conspired to kill him. I suggest that as the brothers saw Yosef approaching, they held a meeting, a kind of trial or *beis din*, as to what to do with him. Reuven suggested to let him be; after all, his sin against them was due to his immaturity; he was but a boy.

But the other brothers decided against Reuven. They sentenced Yosef to death. At that point, Reuven came up with a compromise. Let’s not kill him directly. Let’s throw him into the pit, and he will die on his own. To this the brothers agreed.

Now Yehuda stepped in and said he had a better solution than letting him die in the pit. Sell Yosef to the Ishmaelites. That way we get rid of Yosef without committing direct or indirect murder.

Now Reuven felt entirely guiltless in this matter. After all, he had advocated letting Yosef go.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Yehuda felt terrible guilt over what had been done. When he saw the unending grief of his father Yaakov who was inconsolable after Yosef’s “death,” he realized that he could have and should have convinced the brothers to spare Yosef. He had saved Yosef from death, but not from slavery. He was guilty for his father’s pain.

Yehuda then goes through some pain of his own. He loses two of his sons. He loses his wife. When his daughter-in-law Tamar becomes pregnant and is sentenced to death, she gives Yehuda the chance to admit that she is pregnant by him. Yehuda has learned his lesson. He accepts embarrassment and even humiliation by admitting he is the father of Tamar’s unborn children. Yehuda is the true *ba’al teshuva*. He takes responsibility for his sin and becomes a better man for it.

Now back to Question Three: Why is Reuven’s pledge to bring back Binyamin not accepted by Yaakov while Yehuda’s is?

Reuven, although he is a good man, is somewhat self-righteous, as we see when he blames his brothers for the sale of Yosef. Indeed, he pledges to bring Binyamin back, but it seems to me that later in Egypt, when Yosef trumps up charges against Binyamin and wants to take him as a slave, Reuven would have been incapable of offering himself instead. Sure, he would have tried his best to free Binyamin, but he would not have been willing to be a slave in his place. In his mind he had done nothing wrong. Why should he give up his freedom, he, a good and innocent man? He did not deserve that; he would not have conceived of making that offer.

But Yehuda *did* offer himself in place of Binyamin. He knew that he was flawed. He did wrong in the sale of Yosef. He was willing to expiate that sin. He did deserve to become a slave to save Binyamin. And he did make the offer passionately and eloquently.

Of course, Yaakov didn’t know the “back story” of what had happened to Yosef and of the role of Reuven and Yehuda. But somehow he sensed the truth, that Reuven would not be able to sacrifice his all to save Binyamin. And Yehuda would be able to.

It’s also interesting to note that Reuven says you can kill my sons. It’s not Reuven; it’s someone else. Yehuda, in contrast, knows it’s all about himself. He said, “I, myself, will be the surety…. If I do not bring him back to you… I shall stand guilty before you forever.” The only way for Yehuda to not be “guilty forever,” not only for not bringing Binyamin back, but for selling Yosef, was to accept full responsibility and to forfeit his very self if need be.

We all have weaknesses. We all have experienced failures. If we recognize them and acknowledge them, we have a chance to redeem ourselves, to fix what we broke, to rebuild what we destroyed. If we feel we’ve made no mistakes, we were always good, we were always right, we will never change and never truly grow.

“G-d is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth” (Tehillim 145:18). G-d is indeed near to those who call. But there is one condition. It must be with truth.