

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYEISHEV : BUILDING A LIFE OF MORAL INTEGRITY

Cognitive Dissonance

The challenge of developing a sense of morality underpinned by deep personal integrity is a central theme in Parshat Vayeshev. At the heart of this challenge involves maintaining ideals without slipping into internal contradictions - yet simultaneously ensuring that the outcome remains morally correct.

Regarding the sale of Yosef, Yehudah acts to save his brother from being killed, suggesting that the brothers instead sell Yosef to a passing caravan. The wording of the verse, however, seems to indicate cold apathy that would be difficult to justify even in a hardened criminal: '*Mah betza ki naharog et achinu* – What monetary benefit would we gain by killing our brother' (37:26). Let us instead, argued Yehudah, sell him as a slave. Indeed, the Sages (Sanhedrin 6b) do not mince their words when criticising Yehudah's actions. Connecting the word *betza* (monetary gain) to the word *botze'a* in a verse in Tehillim (10:3) – *U'botze'a bereich ni'etz Hashem* – they teach that anyone who blesses Yehudah is considered to be cursing. But interestingly, this harsh judgement of Yehudah is not because of his seemingly cruel demeanour but because of his lost opportunity. Yehudah was respected as the leader among his brothers and one word from him would have been enough to persuade them to change their original intentions. If so, teach the Sages, Yehudah could have told them to desist altogether. Having failed to do so, instead of being the hero who prevented bloodshed, Yehudah is considered culpable as a ringleader in the sale of his brother.

It is clear that Yehudah was a well thought-through individual. The Seforno (d.1509)

explains Yehudah's logic as follows. The brothers had already decided, for whatever reason, that they had to neutralise Yosef. Yehudah argued that if their motivation was revenge, they would have to live with the terrible guilt over their actions for the rest of their lives, while if their motivation was to dissuade other people from following Yosef's path, that would also backfire, as they would anyway have to conceal what had happened. Yehudah's conclusion, therefore, was that their best option would be to sell Yosef.

Here, Yehudah appears to have been avoiding what social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) called cognitive dissonance – the idea that people generally reshape their attitudes to stay internally consistent. In one experiment built to test this theory, Festinger observed that smokers who learned more about the dangers of cigarettes often downplayed the risks or emphasized how much they enjoyed smoking to ease the conflict between their habits and the health information. This self-justification reduced their discomfort without requiring them to change their behaviour. Yehudah had effectively built a sound logical argument to justify an action that was fundamentally immoral.

Trajectory of Integrity

With this understanding, we gain a powerful perspective into the next episode described in the parshah, that of Yehudah and Tamar. Tamar was Yehudah's daughter-in-law, and when her husband died without children, she desired, correctly, to enter into a levirate marriage with another member of her husband's family to perpetuate his memory. Yehudah, however, had grounds which made him reluctant to allow this. Seeing that there



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was little hope for her, she dressed as a harlot and managed to seduce Yehudah himself, taking from him, in lieu of payment, some of his personal artefacts. Eventually, her pregnancy was discovered and, being brought before Yehudah for judgement, Yehudah sentenced her to be burned to death. This was never carried out, though, because she then revealed the items that she had taken from Yehudah, who admitted his involvement, and Tamar went on to give birth to twin boys who are considered the ancestors of the Davidic line and Mashiach.

The capital punishment described here – burning – is unusual. In the Torah, this form of sentence is found, but it is considered exceptionally severe and it requires a very specific set of circumstances which were not present in this case. The Ramban (d.1270) suggests, therefore, that Yehudah was considered a significant authority; he was a chieftain and answerable to no one but his own conscience. Here, then, he used his discretion, passing a harsher punishment than usual because of the disgrace that Tamar had brought upon him. It is clear that Yehudah's word was final – no one would have been able to object to him carrying out the sentence. Yet, with all of that, Yehudah immediately admitted to his own misdoings as soon as he realised what had really happened. According to the Ramban, this involved more than an admission of guilt – he publicly declared that, 'she (Tamar) is more righteous than I am' (38:26).

In light of our previous insight, this is a remarkable trajectory of self-growth. When selling Yosef, Yehudah reacted in a way that resolved his cognitive dissonance, presenting an argument to rationalise an action that he should not have allowed. Here, there is no trace of self-justification. However easy

it would have been for Yehudah to conceal his actions and vindicate his sentence of Tamar, he refrained and acted with full moral integrity.

The Morality of the Moment

The final episode that we will examine is that of Yosef and Potiphar's wife. Yosef, handsome and successful, but alone and estranged from his family, faced a significant test from the advances of his master's wife. The Sages teach (Sotah 36b) that what held him back was a vision of his father's face at the window, warning him of the consequences of his actions. If he would sin, the vision told Yosef, he would forever forfeit his position as one of the *Shevatim* (tribes). In this teaching of the Gemara, the imagery of the window is crucial. The window represents the outside world, a sense that there is more at stake than the dilemma immediately faced by Yosef. At this crucial moment in Yosef's moral development, explains Rav Soloveitchik, the vision of his father at the window stirred within him a sense of his father's authority and the values that Yosef was meant to stand for, together with the potential that he knew he held. This is what gave Yosef the strength to withstand temptation.

Fascinatingly, Rav Soloveitchik found this teaching so inspiring that he included it as the epigraph to his famous work, *Halakhic Man* (1944), evoking the influence of his own father and his illustrious line of descent. Rav Soloveitchik felt that as he forged his approach in a new world, it was the inspiration of his past together with his vision of the future that allowed him to stay steadfast in the present.

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